

Wyden Calls for Coordinated Federal Response to Western Wildfires on Senate Floor

Says current forest policies are “misguided” and “out of date”

Oregon’s senior Senator Ron Wyden took to the Senate floor on Monday, September 14, 2020 and called for a new approach to forest management in western states, including the creation of a new Civilian Conservation Corps which would put youth to work in America’s forests.

“I want to be able to call this ‘the day the Senate got serious about Fire Prevention,’ said Wyden during his Senate remarks. “The day the Senate took a dilapidated and out of date fire policy and replaced it with a modern strategy appropriate for the real on-the-ground conditions we are seeing across the West right now.”

Wyden said managing our forests for wildfire resiliency can generate jobs, timber for mills, and improve recreation opportunities. “But it requires an investment that many have been simply unwilling to spend.”

Wyden spread around the blame for the current crisis. “The Congress cannot allow this pattern of negligence and inaction to go on any longer. This debate has been going on for too long, with misguided priorities on both sides. On one side, some in the timber industry skipped past active management to pursue the golden calf of the elimination of environmental laws. On the other side, misguided non-management priorities beat back every attempt to manage our forests based on science.”

Wyden named three specific strategies he would like to see implemented immediately to help protect against destructive wildfires:

- a 21st Century Civilian Conservation Corps Act which would use young Americans to help re-establish infrastructure and make sure people are able to vote this fall in devastated areas; work on soil stabilization projects this fall to prevent massive flooding in the spring; and deploy workers into forests and wildland/urban interface neighborhoods to reduce hazardous fuels
- create a program for prescribed fires during winter months
- called on Congress to make long-term budget investments in treatments and fire prevention

Wyden said Oregon has two million acres of projects that he termed “ready to go” – projects that have gone through the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) and other environmental reviews. “It is clear the Forest Service has the technical tools it needs to improve forest health and wildfire resiliency. That two million acre backlog shows the Forest Ser-

vice lacks the funding and the manpower to get it done.”

“By allowing that fire prevention backlog to build, the Congress racks up a dangerous debt. The devastation and the smoke in Oregon and across the West today is that debt coming due,” said Wyden.

While advocating for “boots-on-the-ground” strategies to address wildfire damage, Wyden also pointed to a larger issue – global climate change. “The American West is on fire. Entire neighborhoods, whole communities, are being destroyed. Our air quality has the dubious recognition as being the worst in the world. The climate crisis is happening now – to us, to our kids. America ignores this at our peril.”

In May of this year, months before the wildfire season began, Wyden addressed similar issues as part of COVID-19 economic stimulus when he introduced legislation that calls for major investments in public health, wildfire prevention, and rural jobs.

“The 21st Century Conservation Corps for Our Health and Our Jobs Act would specifically:

- increase the pace and scale of hazardous fuels reduction and thinning efforts, prioritizing projects that are shovel-ready and environmentally-reviewed
- help outfitters and guides who hold U.S. Forest Service and U.S. Department of the Interior special use permits – and their employees – stay afloat through the truncated recreation season
- increase job training and hiring specifically for jobs in the woods, helping to restore public lands and watersheds, while providing important public health related jobs in this time of need
- fund capital improvements and maintenance to put people to work reducing the maintenance backlog on National Forest System lands, including reforestation, and facilitate landscape restoration projects on state, private, and federal lands
- fund on-farm water conservation and habitat improvement projects

“This needs to be the day the Senate gets serious about fire prevention as part of a comprehensive effort to fight the climate crisis,” said Wyden in his Senate remarks in September. “These ideas ought to become law soon, and with broad bipartisan support. I’m talking about policies aimed at protecting our communities and the families who live in them. Protecting jobs. Protecting homes and businesses. These proposals cost money, but it’s a lot cheaper to prevent a fire than it is to rebuild a community out of the ashes.”

Salem Report: Unemployment Benefits

By Representative Brad Witt
House District 31



Oregon has now been approved for FEMA’s Low Wage Assistance program. This is a temporary emergency program that will give an extra \$300 per week for people who are out of work due to COVID-19 and are receiving unemployment benefits.

There is \$44 million in federal disaster relief funding that can be used for the Low Wage Assistance program. The length of the program will depend on how many states participate, and how many people qualify for the extra payments. If there is a natural disaster, the money may go instead to that FEMA disaster response, per the federal government.

Oregon has been approved for three weeks of payments which will be paid to Oregon workers who received unemployment benefits from July 26 through August 15. The Oregon Employment Department will be seeking additional weeks of the Low Income Assistance program as soon as they become available.

Oregonians receiving unemployment benefits from June 26 through August 15, 2020 will automatically qualify, but they must self-certify that they are unemployed or partially unemployed due to disruptions caused by COVID-19.

This additional self-certification requirement will apply to those people receiving Regular Unemployment Insurance benefits, Pandemic Emergency Unemployment Compensation, and Extended Benefits. People who are receiving Pandemic Unemployment Assistance payments have already been certified, so they do not need to take this additional step.

The Low Wage Assistance program is retroactive to eligible claimants beginning with the week ending August 1, 2020, but will only be sent for the weeks a person qualifies for unemployment benefits and meets the Low Wage Assistance program requirements. Low Wage Assistance payments are taxable under federal law, as are regular UI and PUA benefits. If taxes are withheld from other benefits they will also be withheld from this benefit.

My staff and I are continuing to work with constituents and state employment officials on a daily basis to resolve unemployment issues. If you are still having problems, we want to help and are willing and able to step up and do our best to help you obtain the benefits you are owed. If you would like our assistance, please reach out to me by email, supply your contact information and current address. We will then channel your requests to the appropriate person to best address your needs.

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