

Merkley: Researchers have projected a dire future for Pacific Northwest's forests

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Among the witnesses was Forest Service Chief Vicki Christiansen.

Merkley took over as subcommittee chairman four months ago, when Democrats became the Senate's majority party with the tie-breaking vote of Vice President Kamala Harris. He sits on five other appropriations subcommittees, including agriculture.

"I took the chairmanship to make the case for much more substantial investments in forest management, to support and increase fire resilience and to have the best policies possible for the forests in fighting climate chaos," he said.

Funding priorities

Among his priorities are boosting spending on forest collaboratives and specific work to reduce wildfire threats, such as forest thinning and prescribed burning.

Merkley secured a doubling of spending authority, from \$40 million to \$80 million annually, in the 2018 farm bill for collaboratives. They draw together disparate interests — such as the timber industry and environmental groups — to find ways to restore forests. But the senator said his next goal is to get Congress to approve full funding for them in the federal budget for the coming year.

Merkley also said he wants to boost spending on forest management by \$1 billion annually through work, such as thinning and prescribed burning, to reduce the prospects of catastrophic wildfires. He said such work kept the Milli fire, a lightning-caused blaze that still consumed 24,000 acres in 2017, from reaching Sisters in central Oregon.

Oregon has more than 2 million acres ready for such work, he said, "yet we don't

have the money to actually do the treatment."

Under questioning by Merkley, Christiansen said it boiled down to the lack of money to pay for projects. Merkley said forest land close to cities — the so-called urban-wildland interface — could be identified for priority projects.

Merkley also said he would like to see President Joe Biden consider such work as vital infrastructure under Biden's proposed American Jobs Plan.

Merkley made two state-wide swings after the Labor Day wildfires. He said he senses a change in public attitudes toward prescribed burning.

'WE REALLY HAVE TO PAY ATTENTION TO FOREST MANAGEMENT.'

U.S. Sen. Jeff Merkley

"It used to be that people said make sure there aren't any prescribed fires burning, because we don't like the smoke coming down here," he said. "Now with the intensity of the fires we've had, the general sense has been that we are happy to tolerate a little bit of smoke now if that makes our town much safer and reduces the odds of smoke and bad fires come fire season."

'More of everything'

Asked whether he thinks federal agencies are prepared if there are similarly devastating wildfires this year — drought is prevalent in much of Oregon and the West — Merkley said there would never be enough help available if wildfires were that widespread.

"When we are having fires

burn because of similar conditions and similar storms starting fires in multiple states at once, I think we are always going to wish we had more tankers, more people, more of everything," he said.

He said the federal budget contains money for training of National Guard soldiers to serve as backup forest firefighters. The Guard played a similar role in the Labor Day wildfires.

"I want to make sure those teams are ready," he said. "Last year, they were short of experienced crew leaders. That was a challenge of too many fires at once across the country."

"When we're sending out teams to fight fires, we have to have experienced leaders in order to protect the lives of the crew."

Forest firefighting is divided between the Oregon Department of Forestry — which also protects public lands overseen by the federal Bureau of Land Management — and the Forest Service.

Merkley mentioned an unpublished federal study that projects a dire future for the Northwest's forests — that they will disappear by the end of this century — as they face a drier climate, longer fire seasons and insect infestations.

A study by the University of Washington in cooperation with federal agencies, published in 2020 before the devastating wildfires later in the year, did warn of serious consequences by midcentury. "Starting the process of adapting to those changes now will give us a better chance of protecting forest resources in the future," said David Peterson, a professor at the university's School of Environmental and Forest Sciences.

Merkley said: "We really have to pay attention to forest management."

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Park: Commissioners are hopeful

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The last significant project proposed for the business park was a data center and technology incubator in 2018, but a purchase agreement fell apart in 2019 after months of extensions.

Carnese said the county has received interest in the business park from companies involved with construction, telecom, food and beverage and e-commerce.

"I believe it's quite challenging in this climate where developers are very active focusing on low-hanging fruit, if you will," he said. "To the point, this property has some challenges."

Partners

County commissioners are hopeful.

"For those who have been listening to me rail against this North Coast Business Park as one of the least admirable actions

of former cohorts, I think that for the first time I have some hope," Commissioner Pamela Wev said. "Looks like we have a lot of smart people on our screen, and this is the first time I've ever thought we could maybe pull this off, with the advice of some creative people."

"This, as far as I'm concerned, never should have been bought and never should have ever been called a business park. But it looks to me like if we're careful about being very strategic about the investments that we've all known we had to somehow make to make these at all attractive industrial sites, I think this team maybe can do it."

Wev said she wants to see more information about infrastructure costs.

"The city of Warrenton has become very aggressive in getting developer fees for improvements," she said. "So we're likely

to have to really play nice with the city. And I think getting perhaps some Business Oregon type of money, and especially for the infrastructure bill that is slowly moving through Congress. I think maybe we could actually do it."

Commissioner Mark Kujala, the board's chairman, who represents Warrenton, shared a sense of hope. He said the outlook has changed over the years in regards to wetlands and other constraints on the property.

"It's a much bigger barrier now than it used to be," he said. "And I do think that the city of Warrenton certainly would like to see something happen here, so I think that they'll be very cooperative because they've been anxious to see development in Warrenton at the North Coast Business Park, as well."

"So I think they will be a very good partner."

Seaside: Staff, teachers appreciated

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The projected cost for summer programming for high schoolers is about \$250,000, and the cost for the kindergarten-through-eighth grade programs is about \$345,500. The school district is using grants from the Oregon Department of Education to cover a majority of expenses.

The state Legislature has backed \$250 million for summer educational and recreational programs for students statewide in response to the coronavirus pandemic.

The local contribution is 25%, while grant funding is covering the roughly \$171,000 allotted for wrap-around child care services that will be provided to local

families on a lottery basis. Students who participate in an activity will also receive bus transportation and a sack lunch each day of their session, Blakesley said.

Tutoring, credit recovery programs and the bookmobile will run from early July to late August. The bookmobile will visit Cannon Beach, Seaside, Gearhart and Cullaby Lake one day a week. Other programs will run through August.

At the elementary level, the school district is offering several enrichment camps, including: dramatic arts for first and second graders; outdoor education for second and third graders; art and science, technology, engineering and math activities for fourth and fifth graders; heritage camp for third through fifth graders;

and two different English language development camps for second-through-fifth graders.

"It's really kind of flipping the concept of summer school as remedial on its head and approaching summer school as a very positive place to be," Blakesley said.

She expressed appreciation for the school district's classified staff and teachers who are voluntarily leading the programs.

"One of the biggest obstacles many school districts are having right now is teacher burnout," Blakesley said. "I feel really blessed that we have a staff that's not burnt out, that's totally keen to teach this summer and serve our students. That's something we should be really grateful for."

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