

# Oregon forest health and wildfire prevention efforts stand to gain

Money included in infrastructure bill

By **MONICA SAMAYOA**  
*Oregon Public Broadcasting*

Oregon is set to receive millions from the recently signed infrastructure package to improve forest health and reduce wildfire risks.

On Monday, U.S. Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack, U.S. Rep. Kurt Schrader, and Gov. Kate Brown held a virtual roundtable event to discuss the effects of climate change in Oregon. Over the past 20 months, Oregon has experienced wildfires that have collectively burned more than 1.8 million acres and more than 4,000 homes. The state also experienced record-breaking heat waves that killed 116 people, including at least three people on the job — all while also dealing with a historic drought.

The Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act, signed into law last month by President Joe Biden, will steer roughly \$5 billion into the state over the next five years. At least \$39 million is to support wildfire risk reduc-



Kristyna Wentz-Graff/Oregon Public Broadcasting

**Fire damage in Elkhorn after the Beachie Creek fire devastated the area in 2020.**

tion efforts that will include money for prescribed burning and forest thinning.

Debate continues to play out among forest scientists and the timber industry about whether prescribed burning or tree cutting are the most effective ways to restore forest health. But there is a growing consensus that forests have become tinderboxes of overgrown brush and dense-growing trees after decades of aggressive fire

suppression.

Overall, the package directs \$3.4 billion for nationwide wildfire risk reduction. Vilsack said the spending reflects a growing awareness of the risks of climate change.

From 2010 to 2020, Oregon has experienced 12 extreme weather events, costing the state up to \$5 billion in damages, according to a White House fact sheet.

Schrader, who was part of an effort to keep the infra-

structure bill on track when its fate was uncertain, said he expects the increased federal spending to be accompanied by closer coordination between the U.S. Forest Service and Oregon's state foresters, private landowners and the conservation community.

"We're actually going to be able to give Oregonians confidence that there's a plan to address firefighting," the Oregon Democrat said.

## Lawsuit critical of anti-terrorism center

Allegations of unlawful spying

By **MAXINE BERNSTEIN**  
*The Oregonian*

Several environmental, Indigenous and social justice advocates filed suit Tuesday against the Oregon Department of Justice, alleging the state's TITAN Fusion Center for intelligence gathering has unlawfully spied on peaceful demonstrators fighting the \$10 billion Jordan Cove pipeline.

It argues that the fusion center — one of about 80 across the country that were started in the wake of the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks — is operating without any state legislative authority.

Attorneys from the Policing Project at New York University School of Law filed the suit in Marion County Circuit Court on behalf of four plaintiffs using the novel legal argument in the first litigation initiated by the public safety research nonprofit.

The state has no law that recognizes or regulates the center, the suit says.

"Until the Oregon Legislature decides to authorize and set up appropriate guardrails, they shouldn't be allowed to operate at all," said Farhang Heydari, the Policing Project's executive director. "The lawsuit tells a story of a fusion center that operates largely in the dark with little oversight. Our focus is restoring checks and balances on this rogue spy-

ing agency."

Kristina Edmunson, a spokeswoman for the state Department of Justice and Attorney General Ellen Rosenblum, said the department is reviewing the lawsuit and will respond in court.

She said when the department learned of the concerns about improper surveillance of Jordan Cove protesters, "We followed up immediately and shortly thereafter placed the Fusion Center employee on administrative leave. After an internal investigation, we issued the employee a predismissal notice and he chose to resign."

She said the center works with federal, state and local law enforcement agencies to produce threat assessments, officer safety bulletins, reports of missing persons and general crime bulletins. It also provides training to law enforcement agencies, businesses and first responders about various public safety topics, including active shooters, cybersecurity and crime trends. It's supported by both federal grants and funding from the state Legislature, she said.

The suit contends the Fusion Center has overstepped its initial focus. The U.S. Department of Homeland Security created the centers for federal, state and local law enforcement agencies to share information on threats to help anticipate terrorist attacks.

While the centers were funded at first through federal grants, the cost of keeping them running has largely

fallen to states. Oregon's center is run through the state Department of Justice's Criminal Intelligence Division.

The suit alleges the center has coordinated intelligence operations on Jordan Cove with firms hired by the private company funding the project with the aim of suppressing public dissent. Calgary-based Pembina Pipeline Corp. proposed a liquefied natural gas export terminal in Coos Bay with a feeder pipeline, the Pacific Connector, stretching halfway across Oregon.

Emails obtained by the plaintiffs that were first reported by The Guardian show that law enforcement agencies, including the FBI, have monitored opponents of Jordan Cove and shared information on an email list that included a public relations company supporting the pipeline project.

In one Jan. 7, 2019, email shared by the plaintiffs with The Oregonian, a local Coos County deputy sheriff wrote to the FBI, Oregon State Police and a state employee with the Fusion Center that he was monitoring attendance for an upcoming protest against Jordan Cove but was "hesitant to push any information out to the task force due to the lack of a criminal nexus. This is for your information only."

He noted that 384 people showed an interest in attending and 98 people sent RSVPs for the protest, adding "most of the names are recognized as residents spread across the other three

pipeline counties."

In the spring of 2019, the Teneo public relations firm hired by Pembina sent an email to local law enforcement agencies in Coos County instructing them to label all information shared with the Fusion Center on Jordan Cove and other gas pipeline projects as "Critical Infrastructure information," so it could remain confidential.

On Dec. 1, the developers that had hoped to build the Pacific Connector Pipeline and Jordan Cove Energy Project told the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission they did not intend to move forward with the project.

Among the plaintiffs in the suit are Ka'ila Farrell-Smith, a member of the Klamath Tribes and a resident of Modoc Point who serves as a board member for environmental justice nonprofit Rogue Climate; Rowena Jackson, a member of the Klamath Tribes who lives in Klamath Falls; Sarah Westover, a community organizer and social justice advocate who lives in Phoenix; and Francis Eatherington, an environmental activist and president of the Oregon Women's Land Trust, a nonprofit based in southern Oregon. They've each helped organize opposition to Jordan Cove.

The plaintiffs want a judge to declare Oregon's TITAN Fusion Center unlawful, halt its operations and order the center to destroy or expunge all records on them and their organizations.

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