## Merkley touts forest improvement project

# \$1.8 million set aside for Union County project

BY ALEX WITTWER

EO Media Group

LA GRANDE — Oregon Sen. Jeff Merkley is setting his sights on fire protection and forest resilience in Eastern Oregon.

The Oregon Democrat previously promoted The Valley

West Joint
Chiefs project
in September
2021 as a way
to "ensure the
safety of our
communities, the resilience of our
forests, and the
conservation of



Merkley

our natural resources," according to a press release from Merkley's office. The project is a collaboration between the U.S. Department of Agriculture Natural Resources Conservation Service and the U.S. Forest Service.

"I am very happy to be able to announce that I was able to secure \$1.8 million for the La Grande Valley West Joint Chiefs project," he said during a one-on-one interview Wednesday, March 30. "We're talking about precommercial thinning, fuels reduction, prescribed burning (and) mowing, and all of it produces jobs in the woods, saw logs for the mill, and a more fire resilient forest, which I think is a triple-win."

### Forest resilience and response to drought

Last year's fire season was one of the most explosive ones yet in Oregon, though Eastern Oregon was largely spared from conflagrations and widespread damage like that seen in the southern parts of the state that were hit hard by the Bootleg Fire. Still, it's a matter of when, not if, a fire breaks out and threatens Eastern Oregon's landscape

landscape.

"It is essential to recognize that with the drought, the warmer temperatures and the longer season that we're going to see a lot of problems, and we need to prepare wherever we can," Merkley said. "Particularly we need to focus on areas close to towns because if that forest is treated, maybe we can stop the fire before it gets to a town or city."

Of those options, Merkley said he was working toward training National Guard members to assist fire chiefs, as well as fighting for better pay for fire teams to combat high turnover. Merkley also said that his team was trying to see if "fire teams can be hired to do forest management work when they're not fighting fires so they can have year-round work."

Closely related to the fire season is the ongoing drought. The senator said that the irrigation district's top goal has been to improve the efficiency of their distribution systems across Oregon.

"I have worked to get about \$130 million in Oregon for piping for irrigation systems," Merkley said. "Obviously, the task of piping is much larger than that, but that is still a huge effort of an unusual possibility for that much funding to help irrigation districts. (We've) really been focused on



Mike McMillan/United States Forest Service, Contributed Photo

Sun sets over a stand of burned trees from the Bootleg Fire in Oregon's Fremont-Winema National Forest in the summer of 2021.

that program."

Merkley also said that he was looking into agricultural research related to how to grow crops that are better in drier environments.

"The agricultural research station is doing a lot more work on how to conserve water in La Grande for our dry wheat farming, and what versions of wheat will do better in drier conditions," he said.

#### Access to internet and housing

Among those infrastructure projects are increased access to broadband internet in rural areas that have relied on satellite internet connections. An increasing number of companies are installing fiber-optic cables, but those solutions can be expensive and have a low return on investment for network providers if they lay a line to rural areas outside of a municipality. A proposed solution, Merkley said, could be in newly developed microwave repeater networks and technol-

ogy that keeps information signals terrestrial.

"Laying fiber becomes too expensive for just a couple of houses," Merkley said. "Many counties are designing their system using microwave relays, which unlike satellites, can carry a much higher bandwidth at lower cost."

He also touched on the growing housing crisis and how it impacts rural Oregonians who are getting priced out of the real estate market, or are facing homelessness as rents and real estate prices continue to increase. Those real estate changes have also hurt the economy as businesses struggle to attract workers in areas where housing costs have far outpaced wages.

"Almost every community is wrestling with many aspects of housing. From housing homeless individuals to services related to some kind of addiction or to mental health, or the fact that it's getting too expensive for middle-class Americans

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to buy homes, or there's just no homes built," Merkley said. "There's no easy solution. We need to provide a lot of sup-

#### **Build Back Better**

port for rural housing."

Noting the omnibus infrastructure spending plan approved by the Senate, the Build Back Better act, Merkley said he is fighting to get projects approved in rural areas of the state.

"The question is how many applications can we get in," he said. "I'm going to fight to get those applications funded, and we're hoping there will be projects throughout rural Oregon as a result of the infrastructure bill."

## Judge grants classaction status to COVIDsickened prisoners

PORTLAND (AP) — A federal judge has certified a class-action lawsuit in Oregon over state leaders' response to the COVID-19 pandemic inside its prisons.

A group of adults in custody who contracted COVID-19 first sued the state in April 2020, alleging culpability by Gov. Kate Brown, Corrections Department Director Colette Peters and Health Authority Director Patrick Allen, among other state officials. The lawsuit acknowledges Corrections has taken some measures but argues they have not been enough.

"This really is quite a groundbreaking order, and decision, and it could potentially be a model for advocates in other parts of the country where they're having similar problems," Corene Kendrick, deputy director of the American Civil Liberty Union's National Prison Project, told Oregon Public Broadcasting this week.

In Oregon, 45 people in the Department of Corrections custody have so far died after testing positive for COVID-19, and more than 5,000 people have tested positive for the virus while in custody.

Magistrate Judge Stacie

Beckerman signed off on a wrongful death class that will include the estates of 45 adults who died in the state's custody and "for whom COVID-19 caused or contributed to their death." The other is a damages class that would include anyone incarcerated after Feb. 1, 2020, who was diagnosed with COVID-19 at least 14 days after they were incarcerated.

The state could appeal
Beckerman's ruling, settle, or
take the cases to trial. Spokespersons for the governor's
office, the Oregon Department of Corrections and the
state's Department of Justice
declined to comment on the
pending litigation.

Attorneys bringing the lawsuit have already used it to secure vaccines for adults in custody in February 2021 before vaccines were widely available.

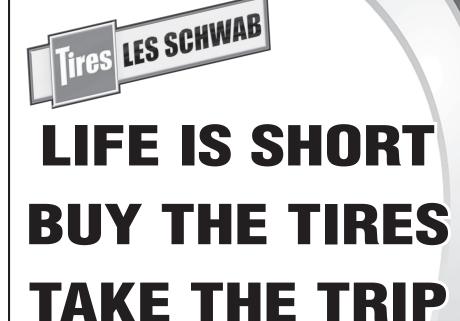
In her ruling, Beckerman said she found the theory of the case was sufficient to certify classes. Other questions, she wrote, could only be answered by a jury, should the cases go to trial. For example, Beckerman did not answer whether the state acted with deliberate indifference, or whether that indifference was the reason thousands were sickened with COVID-19.



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