

AGENDA ITEM FOR ADMINISTRATIVE MEETING

() Discussion only

(x) Action

FROM (DEPT/ DIVISION): Umatilla County

PROGRAM: Emergency Management

SUBJECT: Support Letter for Wildfire EPA

Umatilla County Emergency Management is requesting Board approval to submit a letter of support for the Post-Wildfire Environmental Emergency Assistance Act , a federal bill that would authorize debris removal and hazardous material cleanup after FMAG-eligible wildfires	() <u>ACTION REQUESTED:</u> Approval authorizing Umatilla County to submit a support letter for the Post-Wildfire Environmental Emergency Assistance Act, to be signed and released upon Board approval.
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ATTACHMENTS: Draft Support Letter

Date: (12/09/2025) Submitted By: (Sage DeLong)

*****For Internal Use Only*****

Checkoffs:

To be notified of Meeting:

() Dept. Head (copy)
() Human Resources (copy)
() Fiscal
()

) Legal (copy)
Needed at Meeting:

() (Other - List:)

Scheduled for meeting on: December 10, 2025

Action taken:

Follow-up:

Post-Wildfire Environmental Assistance Act

In June 2025, the Rowena Fire tore up the Historic Columbia River Highway and through the Columbia River Gorge National Scenic Area, destroying 56 homes in Wasco County, Oregon. While the fire was quickly granted approval for a Fire Management Assistance Grants (FMAG), the damage did not meet the threshold for a Major Disaster Declaration, which would have unlocked federal aid for the cleanup of hazardous material debris.

The **Post-Wildfire Environmental Assistance Act** would:

- Make it easier for communities to receive federal support for hazardous material clean up following a wildfire, and
- Allow the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) to provide relevant expertise and technical assistance to states and local governments for safe debris removal.

Across Oregon and the West, wildfires have increasingly caused widespread damage to properties and businesses. While rapid recovery is rightfully focused on lives, homes, and businesses—states and local governments can also be overwhelmed from navigating the recovery process when hazardous substances and materials are left behind, which can cause long term damage to human health and the environment when not remediated properly. This can include:

- Toxic exposure: Burned structures and vehicles can release harmful, cancer-causing chemicals—like asbestos and heavy metals—into the air, water, and soil.
- Contaminated wells and septic systems: Exposed wells and septic systems risk contamination from hazardous runoff and dangerous chemicals can leach into groundwater, threatening drinking water safety for the community.
- Soil erosion and water contamination: Wildfire can increase soil erosion, increasing the likelihood of hazardous runoff washing into rivers and waterways, harming our aquatic ecosystems and fisheries.
- Long term soil degradation: Burned debris and other chemical contaminants in the soil can impact future agricultural production and land use in rural areas.
- Vulnerability of at-risk populations: Older adults, individuals with pre-existing conditions, and children face heightened risks from long-term exposure to hazardous substances as well as ash and dust.

The EPA has the skills and expertise to support communities with this kind of clean up, but this kind of assistance is only authorized when the President makes a Major Disaster Declaration. Under this bill, the damage threshold is lowered to provide communities more support in the event of a wildfire.

Date: 12/10/2025

Senator Merkley United States Senate

RE: Support for the Post-Wildfire Environmental Emergency Assistance Act

Dear Senator Merkley,

Umatilla County Board of Commissioners supports the Post-Wildfire Environmental Emergency Assistance Act. This legislation directly addresses a longstanding gap in federal wildfire policy: communities struck by destructive fires that trigger Fire Management Assistance Grants (FMAGs) frequently face toxic debris, hazardous materials, and environmental contamination, yet are ineligible for assistance because they do not meet the threshold for a major disaster declaration.

As wildfires increasingly behave like industrial incidents—destroying housing stock, critical infrastructure, wells, septic systems, fuel sources, agricultural facilities, vehicles, and consumer hazardous goods—the consequences extend far beyond suppression. When burned debris and hazardous materials are left to local governments alone, the result is not just delayed recovery, but preventable risks to public health, groundwater systems, fisheries, agricultural land, and entire regional economies.

By authorizing debris removal and post-fire hazardous cleanup under the Stafford Act's FMAG authority, and by enabling the Environmental Protection Agency to provide technical assistance where it is most needed, this bill recognizes the modern realities of wildfire recovery. It strengthens the federal toolbox without creating new bureaucratic burden, and it enables local jurisdictions to act quickly, responsibly, and cost-effectively to protect residents and natural resources.

This legislation is a pragmatic and timely reform. It reflects the urgency communities face after FMAG-level fires and aligns federal resources with current wildfire impacts nationwide. It also offers a commonsense approach that protects rural and urban communities alike without expanding government programs or creating new mandates, making it a policy solution that is both environmentally responsible and fiscally conservative.

Umatilla County Board of Commissioners supports this measure and appreciates your leadership in modernizing recovery authorities so they better match current wildfire impacts across the United States.

Sincerely,