



LIVING WITH FIRE IN THE WILDLAND URBAN INTERFACE:

Listening and Understanding Tour
of the Oregon Fire Service
January 2020



Endorsed by:



OREGON
Fire Marshals
ASSOCIATION

LEADING - SERVING - SUPPORTING



Final Report

LISTENING TO OREGON COMMUNITIES IMPACTED BY OREGON WILDFIRES:

Confronting the Wildland Urban Interface (WUI) Fire Problem in Oregon

The wildland urban interface (WUI) in Oregon is the space where structural improvements meet or intermingle with the undeveloped landscape. Structural fire agencies throughout the state respond to thousands of fires in the WUI each year. Recent summers have demonstrated an amplified risk to Oregonians due to large-scale fires on the landscape. As Oregon's population grows and expands into the WUI, the risks of wildland fire will continue to impact Oregon, increasing the risks to people, property, and the environment.

LISTENING AND UNDERSTANDING:

In 2019, the Oregon Office of State Fire Marshal (OSFM) embarked upon a statewide tour of meetings in 16 communities. Staff interacted with nearly 250 members of the structural fire service, tribal leaders, public safety officers, and other response and planning partners throughout the state. During these meetings, OSFM facilitated conversations about wildland fire prevention and response.

Each discussion included current local wildland fire prevention efforts and programs, lessons learned, barriers to success, and potential opportunities to minimize the impacts of wildland fire within the WUI. Participants also discussed their local values at risk and response capability. As the tour progressed, it became clear that while all communities are different, there are common threads.

A summary document of the first eight meetings can be found on OSFM's website. The locations for the first phase of meetings were chosen based on a report commissioned by the United States Forest Service to identify the communities most at risk from wildfire in the Pacific Northwest,¹ with the second phase of meetings serving to ensure all stakeholders had the opportunity to provide input. This report has been endorsed and supported by the Oregon Governor's Fire Service Policy Council, Oregon Fire Chiefs Association, and Oregon Fire Marshals Association.

History has shown that all communities in Oregon can be impacted by wildland fire; whether that impact is the threat to homes and structures, impacts to travel and recreational opportunities, or impacts to health and air quality. The WUI exists in all areas of the state and the negative impacts of wildland fire are shared by all people in Oregon regardless of socioeconomic status, race, or age.

¹ Scott, Joe H.; Gilbertson-Day, Julie; Stratton, Richard D. 2018. *Exposure of human communities to wildfire in the Pacific Northwest*. Briefing paper. 10 p. Available at: http://pyrologix.com/ftp/Public/Reports/RiskToCommunities_OR-WA_BriefingPaper.pdf.

EMERGING THEMES IN WUI FIRE PREVENTION:

Throughout the tour, three major themes outlining local fire service needs were identified early and continued to reverberate throughout each meeting. All three themes relate to capacity and the need for additional assistance to create and implement an Oregon solution to the wildland fire challenge.

Personnel Capacity:

- Personnel to invest time to aid local partners in understanding, adopting, and implementing WUI fire codes and standards
- Facilitation of fire prevention efforts among agencies, jurisdictions, and community groups
- Support and coordination of public education and outreach

Resource Capacity:

- Development of a coordinated, statewide WUI fire prevention plan
- Tools for public education addressing WUI risk and prevention
- Technology and data to support local planning and response

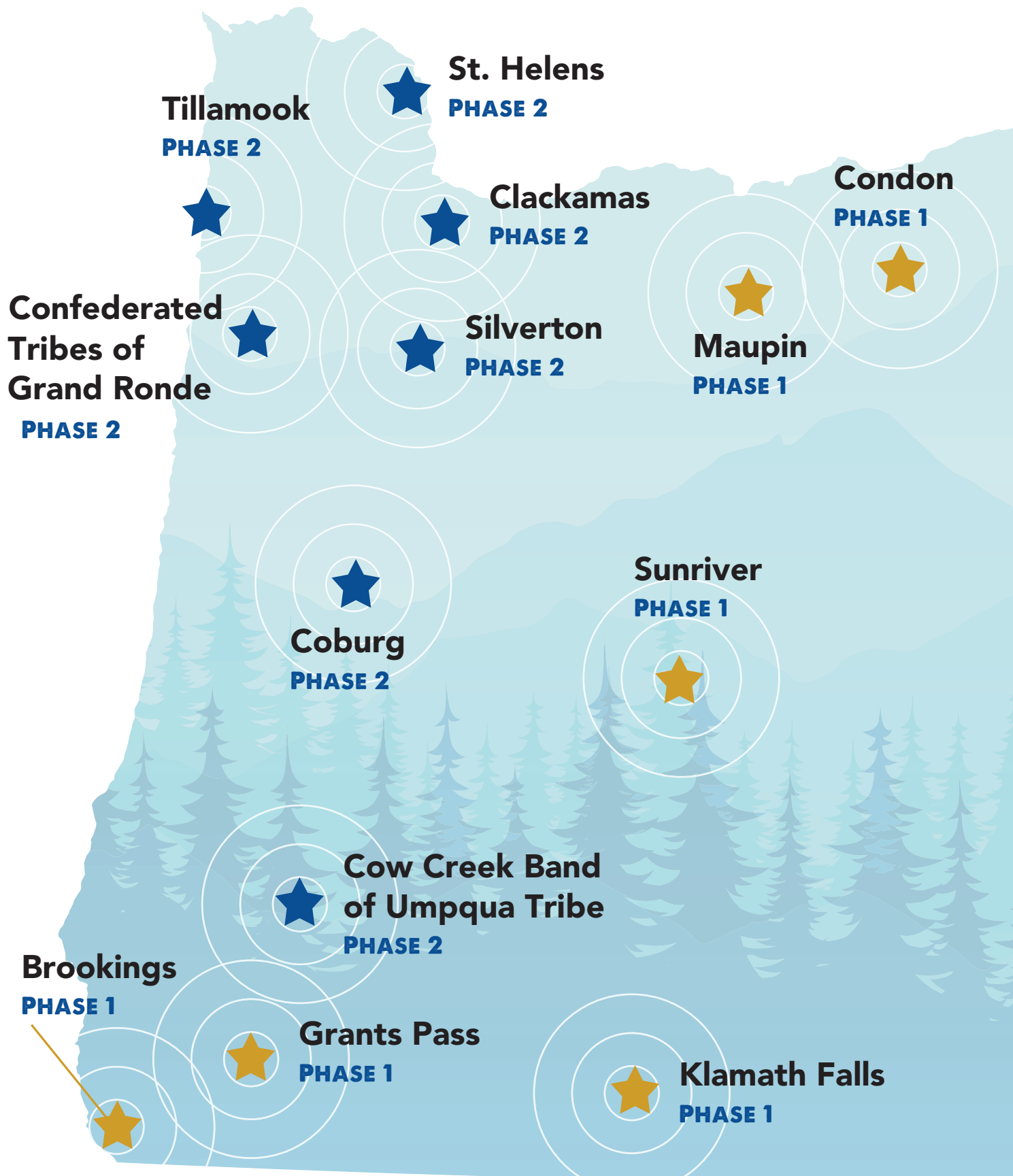
Funding Capacity:

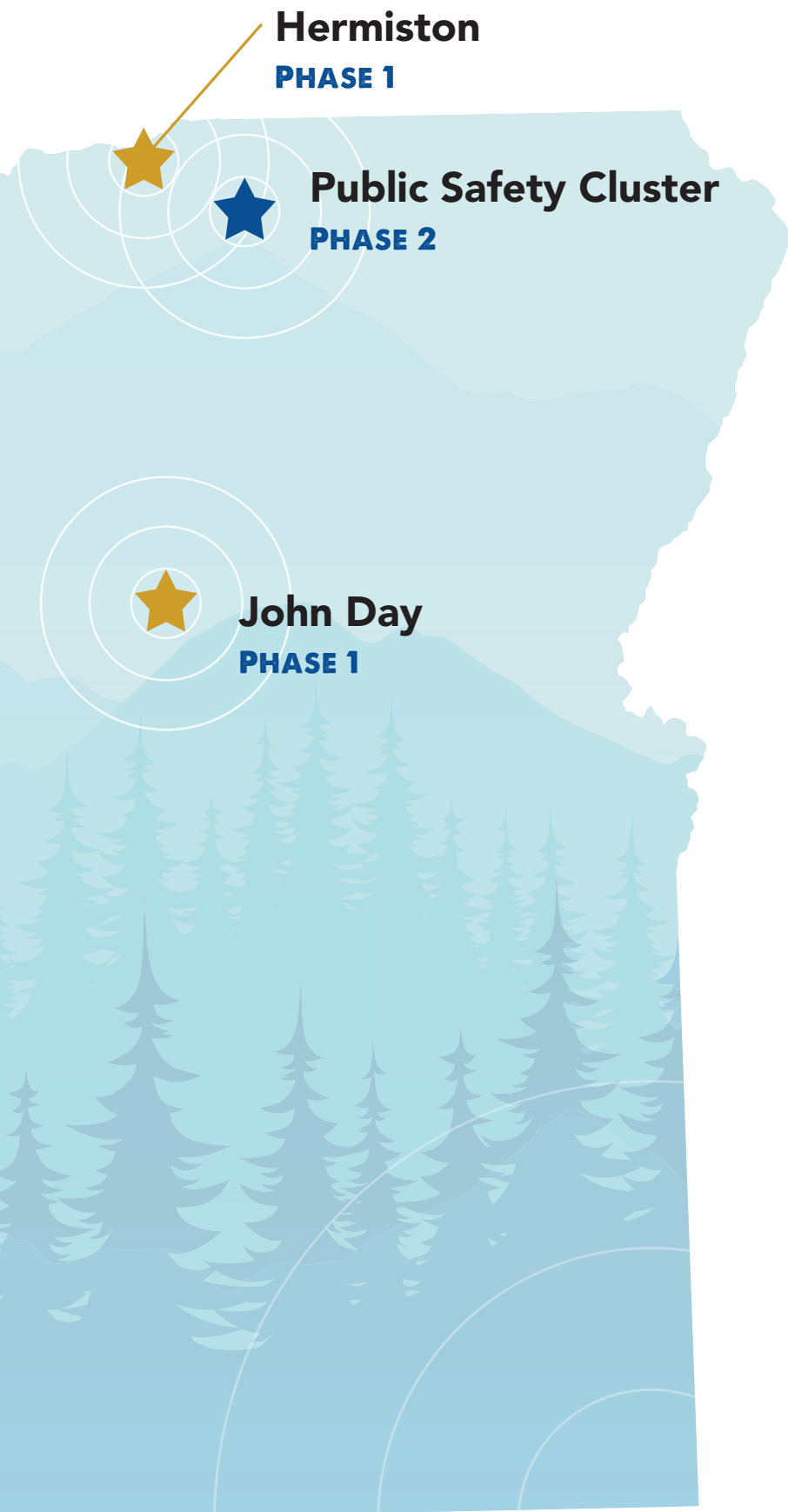
- Investment in WUI prevention and response with an eye on long-term solutions
- Fund local fire prevention programs to reduce the threats of wildland fire
- Investment in fire prevention activities to include planning, mitigation, education, and risk mapping

The conversations have shown that Oregon is currently a patchwork of local programs and investments, with no unified statewide approach to wildland fire prevention and mitigation. Some areas of the state have the capacity and funding to provide outreach campaigns while others are limited in their approach or focus solely on response. There is an opportunity to create a common statewide strategy to address the threat of wildland fire and minimize the disparities in the information shared and the level of prevention and mitigation work being done by the structural fire service. As partner agencies conduct prevention efforts, it is important that the structural fire service be given the necessary resources to be represented in these important conversations.

Time and again, we call upon the structural fire service to put their safety at risk to protect lives and structures threatened by wildland fire. By making the investment into wildland fire prevention up-front, we can increase safety for responders and the public to mitigate risk in the long-term.

LISTENING AND UNDERSTANDING TOUR LOCATIONS:





“ THE OVERLAP BETWEEN VARIOUS AGENCIES CAN CREATE CONFUSION. IF WE WERE TO FULLY COORDINATE OUR STRATEGY AND MESSAGING, THE RESPONSE TO THE WUI FIRE THREAT COULD BE MUCH MORE EFFICIENT. ”

**– STEVE WARDEN,
GRAND RONDE
TRIBAL EMERGENCY
MANAGER**

“ WE ALL HAVE GREAT IDEAS ABOUT HOW TO DO WUI PREVENTION BETTER, BUT IT'S ABOUT HAVING HORSEPOWER TO PULL THAT OFF. ”

**– KELLY NILES,
COLUMBIA RIVER FIRE
& RESCUE BOARD
MEMBER**

FROM REACTIVE TO PROACTIVE:

Wildland fire is a significant threat to Oregonians and our communities. Wildland fire impacts tourism, the economy, public health, and quality of life. Homes, fencing, outbuildings, and commercial structures can be quickly consumed by a fast-moving fire through a community, field, canyon, or forest. Wildland fire impacts the safety of first responders and all people in Oregon. Lives have been lost. By expanding the capacity of the structural fire service's prevention efforts, we can have a positive and long-lasting impact.

The true cost of wildland fire is not in suppression alone. There are mitigation and recovery costs in the aftermath of wildland fire such as socioeconomic impacts, consequences to physical and mental health, as well as long-term restoration work that

must be done. Oregon needs to invest now in order to limit wildfire's impact in the future.

The response model used in Oregon is effective and practiced. OSFM and the structural fire service continue to invest in maintaining the Oregon Fire Mutual Aid System. However, no amount of coordination or suppression personnel can be expected to effectively mitigate the impacts of all wildfire starts. It is vital that the Oregon fire service have the opportunity to increase capacity for prevention work, and OSFM believes that as a leader in the state, it is our responsibility to expand our reach into this important body of work and assist the fire service in planning, education, messaging, and consistency in wildland fire prevention and mitigation efforts.



THE WAY FORWARD:

The demands on Oregon's structural fire service will continue to increase. The conversations facilitated by OSFM have shown the fire service that there is a clear need for a data-driven, knowledge-based strategy to be planned and supported at the state level and implemented locally.

OSFM is uniquely positioned to aid the structural fire service in addressing the wildland fire situation. OSFM currently assists the fire service at the local and regional level in addressing needs related to health, safety, preparedness, mitigation, and response activities. While OSFM has a strong home fire prevention program, there are currently no positions within the agency dedicated to WUI issues or wildfire prevention, education, and mitigation.

The conversations during the tour highlighted the need for a coordinated, statewide strategy. This need can be addressed through increased capacity, additional prevention tools and resources, code creation and enforcement, the creation of defensible space, and committed funding to devote effort to the growing threat of wildland fires in and near Oregon's communities.

OSFM proposes to address the needs identified by the fire service through locally positioned staff dedicated to coordination and community risk reduction.

OSFM will begin to address the identified needs by seeking funding for regionally-based risk reduction specialists who can focus on the identified needs, working in and with at-risk communities around the state. OSFM's proposal includes regional personnel who will work with local, state, federal, and tribal partners.

These personnel will:

- Work to form and support strong local partnerships
- Create and distribute wildland fire prevention messaging and materials
- Provide technical expertise about wildfire protection and prevention
- Work with local agencies to apply for and administer grant funding
- Work with vulnerable populations and communities to ensure inclusion
- Collaborate with partners to improve structural resiliency to wildfire through the creation of defensible space and establishment and enforcement of codes and standards
- Provide inspections, outreach, advocacy, and education to local leaders and community members

Ultimately, these personnel will work to build and foster a science-driven, proactive, statewide approach to wildfire prevention and mitigation.


Photo Credits:
Cover photos, left to right:
Chad Minter, Vince Stafford, Gert Zoutendijk
Page 5: Josh Como



OREGON OFFICE OF STATE FIRE MARSHAL

PHONE: 503-378-3473 | FAX: 503-378-1825

oregon.gov/osp/sfm | oregon.sfm@osp.oregon.gov

 [fb.com/OregonStateFireMarshal](https://facebook.com/OregonStateFireMarshal)

 twitter.com/OSFM