

our Nation, and we have already seen billions of dollars in economic losses and damage.

Despite what you might hear from our President, these disasters are not blue State issues. That kind of partisan sentiment is just unconscionable. We must take a nonpartisan approach to saving lives and protecting property from fires that know no partisan affiliation. It doesn't matter that these fires are in the State of California or in the State of Oregon or in the State of Washington or in the State of Idaho. These disasters are happening in our United States. These fires are impacting our communities, and in this time of crisis, we have a responsibility to really help one another—to help our communities and to help our friends and our neighbors.

People have died in these disasters, and some people are still missing. Over 30,000 courageous men and women are risking their lives to fight these fires and to save those families and save those properties. I am really proud to say that Nevada's firefighters have been deployed to assist in combating many of these disasters. I am so proud of them.

As a result of these fires, the air quality in some of our communities is so poor and so unhealthy that it is exceeding 20-year records. This toxic haze has already impacted air quality in my own State of Nevada, and it is not just in Western States. This harmful smoke is spreading. It has been measured as far away as the east coast—in places like New York City and right here in Washington, DC. These fires put our collective health—all of ours—in jeopardy, especially now, during the pandemic.

As I have said before, these fires impact every single one of us. Do you know why? It is because this is an environmental issue; this is an economic issue; this is a public health issue; and it is absolutely a climate issue.

The science speaks for itself. Climate change and increased temperatures directly correlate to the growing intensity of these wildfires, and the longer we fail to address climate change, the more costly and more dangerous and deadly the impact is going to be for our friends, our neighbors, our States, and our communities.

September is wildfire preparedness month, and make no mistake: We need to get a handle on these disasters. We need to provide resources to our local communities, to our firefighters, and to our land management agencies immediately. This is why I cosponsored my colleague Senator HARRIS' Wildfire Defense Act, which is legislation that would provide FEMA resources so that our local communities can develop wildfire defense plans and allow all of us to respond more effectively.

We also need to address climate change, and we need to be proactive and practical, which is why, earlier this year, I cosponsored Senator CARPER's climate change resolution. This

resolution recognizes that climate change is real, that human activity is the primary cause, and that Congress must take immediate action to address one of the most pressing issues of our time.

We need to act. Lives are on the line, and we need to act now. Nevada, the West, and Americans across the country are counting on all of us. So we need to get to work.

I yield the floor.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Oregon.

WILDFIRES

Mr. MERKLEY. Mr. President, apocalypse, fire, fueled by wind coming over the top of the Cascade Mountains, turning into a blowtorch that races down the western slopes of those mountains, incinerating the towns in its path—that is what is happening in my home State of Oregon.

Imagine suddenly waking up at 4:30 in the morning to a house filled with smoke. You realize you have to clear the area before the situation gets a lot worse. You and your partner race to pack up some essentials, load them and your pets into the car in your garage, and then you can't get the garage door open because there is no power. The power lines have been taken down by the winds and by the power poles being burned and falling over. So you open the garage door by hand, and just as you are about to lift it, you look out a little window, and you see an inferno engulfing your neighbor's home. So you make a desperate dash in the other direction and out the backdoor—the fire at your heels. You race toward the river at the bottom of the hill, hoping—praying—there will be some kind of safety.

It is a terrifying scenario, but it is not out of some movie. For Larry Tripoli and Fran Howe, of Gates, OR, it was a reality just a few nights ago when the Beachie Creek fire roared through Santiam Canyon, incinerating homes, businesses, and entire neighborhoods. They got to the river, and they waded knee deep in the water as the trees burned around them on both banks.

Fran recalled: "I thought we were going to die."

Fortunately, help arrived late that night, just before 12 midnight. The firefighters and emergency workers risked their lives and safety to come and rescue those who were fleeing the fire. Many folks worked to help their neighbors get noticed even as the fire was descending on the town.

At this moment, all across Oregon, people are facing similarly terrifying experiences as historic wildfires have burned more than a million acres—more than twice those burned in a normal year. They burned in a small period of time—most of them over this past week. There are 10 citizens who have lost their lives, and dozens are missing. We are afraid there will be more bad news to come.

It is hard to imagine. I mean, I have seen the results of a fire near John Day that came down a valley, and there were widely spaced homes in the forest on both sides of the river, and I have seen that those homes were burned. But I have never seen anything like this—neighborhood after neighborhood, the commercial district, the apartment complexes, the mobile home housing parks, completely scorched—every building you can see.

When I toured this last Friday, the only thing I could compare it to were pictures I had seen of Hiroshima after the bomb; cities in Europe that had been firebombed, like Dresden—massive devastation, incinerating everything.

This is what has just happened in my home State. In one town of Phoenix, OR—this is a picture from Phoenix. The mayor estimated that perhaps 1,000 residences had been burned between the mobile homes, the manufactured homes, the apartment complexes, and the standalone houses—several thousand people with nothing to return to.

You know, I met with folks last Friday and Saturday as Senator WYDEN and I started in the north part of the State and went all the way down south. I traveled 600 miles by car. I was driving. I never got out of the smoke. I remember fires where we passed 20 miles through the smoke, 30 miles through the smoke. I drove over 600 miles. I was never out of that smoke.

Parts of the State glowed like the aftereffects of a bomb. This is our State capital with that orange, fire-infused sky behind it in Salem, OR, the result of the Santiam fire that comes down toward the city of Salem.

That smoke doesn't just hover and stay in one place. As the wind starts to blow, it spreads across the country. So here we are. This is the September 15 fire chart. These purple areas—an index of over 500 parts per million—incredibly unhealthy to breathe, and you can see the State of Oregon covered, on through Idaho and Montana, right on across the country—California.

Everyone is dealing with the smoke. I just got off a Zoom call just a little while ago, and the first three people who spoke were talking about how uncomfortable they were because of their asthma or breathing conditions affected by the smoke. The air quality in Portland has ranked as the worst among the world's major cities for the last 5 days in a row, and in smaller towns across the State, it has been far worse.

People saw all kinds of dramatic, powerful scenes of the approaching fires, the approaching bank of clouds. It was a week ago Monday that I decided to drive up to the Columbia Gorge. I didn't get 20 miles from my house, and I saw this wall of smoke. So I got off the freeway and took the old scenic highway up to Crown Point—a lookout point high in the cliffs where you can see way to the east and way to

the west—just to see that. What is going on with this massive cloud? You could see how dramatic the approaching smoke cloud was from these fires.

As we think about these devastating fires, we have to think about them in terms of the individuals who have been so dramatically affected. Some have been injured by the fires; some have been killed by the fires.

So as Senator WYDEN and I proceeded from the northern border to the southern border to visit fire refugees in different centers that have been set up and to visit some coordinated care briefings and then to visit two towns—Phoenix and Talent—that had been incinerated, the most powerful moment was sitting down at a table with individuals along the way.

I took away this collective impression: individuals who had escaped and were just thinking, my goodness, how fortunate I am that I got out with my life; individuals who had escaped, but they didn't know the fate of their family members who may not have escaped. One father lost the grandmother in the family and his son, who died in a car with the family dog in the son's lap, and as he was going to search for his wife, he met a woman on the road. He said, "I am searching for my wife," and she responded, "I am your wife." Because she was so affected by the smoke and burned by the fire, he didn't recognize her.

I met folks who realized that they had escaped but also recognized that every single thing—a lifetime of records, photos, film, financial records, family heirlooms—all of it, everything, gone.

So the issues become even more complicated. Think about the children who were just starting school when these Labor Day fires descended. They lost their laptops; they lost their tablets after being coached on how to attend school electronically. The family has lost, perhaps, their funds, and now they are driving 40, 60 miles to family or to a friend's house. How do they sign up for school? How do they deal with the stress that is on them from what has happened and the remaining stress of the impact on the family and those they are still searching for?

And food—road closures stop the movement of food from getting to them, getting to stores and restaurants and communities. There are food shortages because they can't be resupplied.

Whether it is Breitenbush Hot Springs, one of our State's most beloved resorts, losing half of its buildings or Simple Machine Winery in Talent burning to the ground—this is an adjacent city, Phoenix and Talent. One woman told me: I not only lost everything, I lost my job because the business I work at has burned to the ground as well. This is on top of the pandemic, and this is on top of the economic implosion.

Many of the residences that burned were those that served lower income citizens—the mobile home parks, the

manufactured housing parks where the houses are closer together and the fireproofing of the walls is less than required in stick-built houses. Apartment complexes—I saw this whole field where you could see steel girders going up two stories and crossbeams at the top of the steel and then steel stairs and nothing else. They were almost like a sculpture standing in the middle of the field, and there was one after another, after another in the heart of these apartment complexes. The apartments were completely gone.

I also heard on this trip such appreciation for our local leaders and our first responders—the firefighters, the EMTs, the National Guard unit doing an incredible job of helping to rescue them, an incredible job of doing point defense or a lot more residences would have burned. They were risking their lives trying to get people out before that blowtorch of a fire descended on a town. They were building fire lines and clearing dead brush and trees from around houses, dropping water.

I saw orange splotches as I toured these two towns from when the retardant had been dropped. But then, as the smoke compiled, the planes couldn't fly—not to drop water, not to drop fire retardant.

These families are going to need everything we can possibly do to help them out. They are devastated and rebuilding their lives. Getting their feet on the ground is going to be really hard.

Friends will help, and family will help, and local government will help. But we, too, at the Federal level need to be there to help and make sure these FEMA programs are expeditiously conducted to assist the individuals with the individual assistance and then to assist the communities with the rebuilding—rebuilding of these towns. Local revenues? Those are gone. Property taxes? Those are gone. Revenues from the local businesses, the fees they pay? Those are gone. We are going to have to provide a lot of support.

I applaud the White House for quickly approving Governor Brown's request for an emergency declaration. Our whole legislative delegation was calling and requesting and saying: Pay attention to this; we need it quickly. And we got it. We got it quickly. That emergency declaration is really about food and shelter assistance.

Then we said that we really need the major disaster declaration, and we got that within about a day of its being submitted—again, prompt action by the White House.

Then we applied for a health emergency declaration, and we got that this morning—again, expeditiously.

Those are doors where you have to unlock the door to the resources, and those declarations are the keys that open that door. But now we need the supplies to come through that door to really start this long process of support for individuals and for our communities.

One of the things we encountered was the valuable help of our Oregon State National Guard. Three years ago I worked to start funding a training program for the National Guard so they could help fight these fires, and our Oregon portion of this was the training of 375 National Guard members put into three 125-member teams. It was great that they were trained and ready to go, but we ran into a problem, and that problem was we didn't have enough crew chiefs. The crew chiefs come from outside to conduct the team's work, and you need five or six crew chiefs for every team, for every group of 125. The crew chiefs are all tied up all around the country.

Then the Governor said: We need not only those 375; we need two more teams—another 250. The initial response was, no, the funds aren't available. But I checked and found out there were funds left, and they were approved quite quickly—again, a thank-you to the executive branch for approving them at that point.

We still needed crew chiefs, and I just got word a short period ago that there are crew chiefs now en route to Oregon. We have found some from around the country to go and enable those Oregon National Guard members to be able to be deployed. So that is another step forward.

We can't stop there. We have to look beyond the immediate crisis. We have to help the families rebuild the homes. We have to help the local businesses recover, rebuild.

We have to think about not just the fire damage but the smoke damage. I have introduced the Smoke-Ready Communities Act that would enable communities to prepare safe zones where you have filtered air in key buildings so those who have lung conditions and are affected by the smoke have somewhere safe to get to, to be able to breathe.

I think it is a pretty logical thing for us to do and a small-dollar investment in partnership with communities to create some highly filtered space of air for people with lung challenges.

I have written the Wildfire Smoke Emergency Declaration Act because in the past we thought only of the direct fire impact, but now we are seeing all this smoke that is having such a major impact. In the last major smoke episode, we saw our outdoor activities like the Shakespeare Festival close down. We saw furniture salesmen who couldn't sell the furniture because of smoke damage. We had a massive impact on our wine industry with smoke-tainted grapes. By the way, even though the buyers of those grapes turned them down, it turned out they were pretty good grapes, and the community came together and created an Oregon wine, a unity wine, and it was great wine and people loved it. So those grapes found a home and found a product. They came together to solve a problem. We had trouble with our hazelnuts with the smoke.

So a declaration act and the Smoke-Ready Communities Act but also action to help field workers. Think about the field workers—the agriculture workers working right now harvesting, and they are in that smoke—500 parts per million small particles damaging their lungs. We need to be set up to help the agricultural community. They are truly frontline workers whose health shouldn't be compromised in that manner.

And we need to make our forests more resistant to fires. Now, I know President Trump has said that is the whole key, and why can't Oregon and California get their act together. Well, let me point out that the majority of the forest we are talking about, those are Federal forests. It is Federal forest. It is Federal management that is so missing.

What I proposed in the Wildfire-Resilient Communities Act is that we spend \$1 billion. It should be \$1 billion dollars a year thinning these overgrown second-growth forests. What do you get out of that? You get jobs; you get saw logs for our mills, and you get a forest that is much more resistant to fire.

It isn't just the thinning. Then it is what they call the mowing to reduce the shrubs that have built up, and then it is the prescribed burn that goes back 2 or 3 years later. This is to avoid the pattern of the fire in the past we had which was to burn the shrubbery on the floor which grows back quickly and prevents that over-dense forest. So we should do that. We should pass the Wildfire-Resilient Communities Act, put the funding in, and create permanent authorization for our collaboratives.

What is a collaborative? To those outside the forest world, that probably isn't a familiar term. It is where you bring the environmental community and the timber community together, and they develop what they call a prescription for thinning the forest and mowing it and doing a prescribed burn. By working together and having a plan, they stay out of the courts because court paralysis has been a major obstacle. So let's take that collaborative model. Let's build on the success of the collaborative and stewardship agreements, which are very similar, but it takes resources and here has been the challenge.

Every time we seek the resources to do more on the front end to make the forest more fire-resilient, it is blocked by individuals who say: Hey, let's go back to the 1950s clearcuts. My friends, that doesn't work. When you clearcut and replant, you now create a new forest where the trees are too close together and they are all the same height and they are absolutely primed once again for fire. The thinning, the prescribed burns, the mowing, this has a big impact.

I went to a forest outside of Sisters, OR, where these measures have been used, and there was a fire that had

been bearing down on Sisters, OR. And when it met the section of the forest that had been thinned, it stopped because the fuel wasn't there to propagate itself forward, and because of the thinning, the fire crews could get through the forest to the frontline of the fire. So it worked very effectively that way.

Now there are situations of high winds when the forest fire becomes a blow torch. Nothing is going to stop it. But often fires move at a modest pace, and that is where the thinning and mowing and prescribed burns can make a real difference. So I am hoping we can have partnership in that approach.

Some have said: Well, isn't it the environmental laws that prevent us from undertaking this effort? And the answer is no. We have 2.3 million acres in Oregon that have gone through the environmental process. We could do the thinning, mowing, prescribed burns tomorrow if we had the funds to do it.

So jobs, fire resilience, better timber stands, better ecosystem, saw logs to the mill. That is all the win, win, win, win products of this approach.

Colleagues, I know many of you have come to me and said: What can we do? Well, there are really two things. Help us do forest management in the collaborative style, in the stewardship style—in the thinning, prescribed burn, mowing style. Help us do that, and also let's recognize that this situation in Oregon and California and many, many other States isn't simply a freak occurrence of the winds. It is a situation where the forest is drier than it has ever been before. Drier than a kiln-dried 2 by 4. If you have gone to the hardware store to get kiln-dried 2 by 4s, they have been baked to have all the moisture baked out of them. There is less moisture in the forest during these periods of drought and heat than there is in that kiln-dried 2 by 4. They are ready to burn at a second's notice.

So this is the result of the changing dynamic of climate. The forest season has gotten much longer. It is no longer a June through August affair; it is a March through October affair. In California, it is a year-round calendar affair now. If you track this decade over decade, each one is worse. There is a longer fire season with more intensive fires and more acres burned. So that is a more difficult project.

Our Earth is wrapped by the commons of our air, and that air holds now a lot more carbon dioxide and a lot more methane and traps a lot more heat, and it is affecting everything. In Oregon, it isn't just the fires. It is also our snowpack. Our snowpack, decade after decade, is smaller and smaller. Why? Because it is warmer and warmer.

How does that affect things? Well, do you like to fish? If you like to fish, you know that a warmer, smaller stream is bad for the salmon returning; it is bad for the trout. And if you are a farmer, you know that smaller snowpack means less irrigation water and less

water to recharge the groundwater that you use when you don't have enough irrigation water, when you have to pump it out of the ground. So we have big impacts not just with the timber community with the forest burning but also on our ag community and our fishing community. The three pillars of our rural economy are all being substantially affected.

Offshore, it is a warmer Pacific Ocean, and it is a more acidic Pacific Ocean—30 percent more acidic than before we started burning fossil fuels. And people say: What is the connection? Well, those waves take the carbon dioxide in the air and convert it to carbonic acid. There is a 30-percent increase in acidity that is affecting our shellfish reproduction. Worry about that—that shellfish are having a hard time reproducing.

So this isn't an urban issue versus a rural issue. This is not a red issue versus a blue issue. This is the economy, the pillars of America, in farming, fishing, and forests being profoundly affected.

So let's work together to take this on. Yes, improve our forest management. We have altered the forests dramatically with our replantings that grow up at the same height and are too close together, but we can make those same second-growth forests far more resilient, jobs, and saw logs at the same time.

Let's work together to improve the health of the forest, especially around our urban areas, our small towns.

To my colleagues who say this is a moment when we are seeing not just the fires, we are seeing other impacts around the Nation; we are seeing the intense storms in the Midwest; and we are seeing the tropical storms and hurricanes hitting the gulf and never-before-seen storm surges on the East Coast—so we are all in this together. Let's work together to assist the families so powerfully affected. Let's work together to rebuild the communities. Let's work together to fund forest management in a way it has to be funded as a counterpart to the strategy of forest replanting that we have undertaken.

Let's work together to take on the warming planet because it affects everything and not just in Oregon and not just in the United States but across our planet. It is our responsibility. Let's get it done.

Thank you.

ADJOURNMENT UNTIL 9:45 A.M.
TOMORROW

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Under the previous order, the Senate stands adjourned until 9:45 a.m. tomorrow.

Thereupon, the Senate, at 7:56 p.m., adjourned until Thursday, September 17, 2020, at 9:45 a.m.

NOMINATIONS

Executive nominations received by the Senate: