



## Office of the Chief

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COURAGE  
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February 4, 2021

Representative Evans  
Chair  
House Committee on Veterans and Emergency Preparedness  
Oregon State Legislature  
900 Court Street  
Salem OR 97301

Chair Evans and Members of the House Committee on Veterans and Emergency Preparedness:

Thank you for the opportunity to present in support of HB 2426, relating to prioritizing preparedness equipment necessary for Urban Search and Rescue (USAR). In the wake of 9/11 two teams were established and managed by the Office of State Fire Marshall through federal funding. Previously, there were two teams that collectively represented ten different agencies. There was a north team, assembled from agencies north of Salem, and south team, which included Salem and agencies further south. Eugene Springfield Fire (ESF) was a member of the south team. Team members were certified in the necessary disciplines of rope rescue, confined space, trench rescue, structural collapse and search and rescue. Equipment for the teams was a combination of state provided resources and local resources. The blend of certified personnel paired with the right equipment provided a capability to cut, support, access, stabilize and extricate a victim of a natural disaster.

In approximately 2008, funding for the local USAR team was drastically reduced. Funding was then supplemented locally by the Cities of Eugene and Springfield. As funding continued to decrease the remaining federal funds were used for participation in state level training events and equipment maintenance. Once the federal funding ceased, ESF continued to maintain the state equipment and to maintain certifications as on-duty training allowed. Unfortunately, on-duty training reduces the availability, opportunity and scope of drills to keep members current in high risk, low frequency rescue scenarios.

The combination of career progression, retirements and lack of training funds has led to a decreasing number of certified team members within the department. Today, ESF continues to maintain a confined space, rope, water and trench rescue capability and associated basic



equipment as budget pressures permit. Unfortunately, much of the state USAR specific equipment purchased in 2002 is either retired or at end of life.

Oregon continues to be susceptible to natural disasters. Exercises such as Cascadia Rising highlight Oregon's vulnerability to earthquakes and tsunamis. Just within the southern Willamette Valley large occupancy venues such as Matthew Knight Arena, Knight Research Facility, Autzen Stadium and the only level II trauma hospital facility between Eugene and Sacramento pose a challenge. Additionally, these newer buildings are intermixed with a subset of older buildings built with unreinforced masonry which are more vulnerable to collapse.

Notably, the threat is not limited to the urban setting within the Willamette Valley. Oregon's aging infrastructure and population growth throughout the state have created a landscape threatened with structural collapse potential. Many of Oregon's southern and coastal communities were erected using these older, unreinforced building techniques. Specifically, the vulnerability to a collapse event became clear during snowstorm events and earthquake exercises. For example, just two years ago during a major snowstorm event homes, businesses, outbuildings and the Thurston High School gym collapsed under the weight of snow. Currently, there are no dedicated assets to address a collapse within the southern Willamette Valley or southern Oregon.

ESF supports the prioritization of USAR equipment to the southern Willamette Valley as the first step to reestablish a collapse capability to the mid and southern region of Oregon.

Thank you for your consideration

*Submitted electronically.*

Chris Heppel  
Interim Fire Chief

