

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

February 22, 2021

Dolph A. Diemont
Federal Coordinating Officer
Disaster Recovery Manager, 4562-OR
2850 Broadway Street N.E.
Salem, OR 97303

Dear Federal Coordinating Officer Diemont:

Thank you for the recent decision to approve federal Disaster Case Management resources for Oregon, and for FEMA's role in wildfire response and recovery. Given the severity of last year's wildfire season, we are writing to urge you to take every action possible to ensure that impacted Oregonians get the support and resources they need to recover from this point forward.

Last year was the most devastating wildfire season in our state's recent history. In the 2020 season, Oregon experienced its worst drought in nearly 30 years, which resulted in some of the driest forest conditions on record. On the afternoon of September 7, 2020, a windstorm moved into the region from the east. These winds, mixed with dry fuel loads, exploded existing fires and started new ones, catching communities by surprise. The fires destroyed or damaged more than 5,000 structures across the state, including thousands of homes in low-income neighborhoods. Tens of thousands of Oregonians were forced to flee from their communities. More than a million acres across Oregon burned in wildfires in 2020, and several Oregonians tragically lost their lives.

Since then, Oregon has begun the long path to recovery, but many wildfire survivors are still not back on their feet. We are particularly concerned about Oregonians with legitimate claims who have not yet received federal assistance and whose applications have been denied over technicalities. While we understand that a significant number of fraudulent applications for FEMA assistance were submitted following last September's wildfires, and that more than 3,000 applications for FEMA's Individual Assistance program have been approved, it is imperative to ensure that the remaining wildfire survivors who desperately need federal aid receive it as quickly as possible. This is particularly important given the disproportionate impacts last September's wildfires had on Oregon's Latinx and low-income communities.

Given the circumstances, we urge FEMA to partner to the greatest extent possible with state and local organizations to appropriately and flexibly address the concerns of survivors who have yet to receive assistance. This includes Oregonians who had unconventional living circumstances and lost their homes during the fires, and manufactured home owners and renters who may have experienced disproportionate barriers in their attempts to provide the information needed to file claims. We also urge FEMA to expand and improve the quality of resources for survivors in need of Spanish or other language assistance while filing claims so that these interactions can be handled with greater ease of communication.

The number and scale of fires, and the continuing fallout from the 2020 wildfire season, are unprecedented and catastrophic. We thank you in advance for your assistance in providing additional resources to help ensure that Oregonians aren't left behind in the recovery process.

Sincerely,



Jeffrey A. Merkley
U.S. Senator



Ron Wyden
U.S. Senator



Peter A. DeFazio
Member of Congress