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House Committee On Climate, Energy, and Environment

Testimony on HB 4016: Prescribed Fire Liability Pilot Program

Submitted by: Kyle Smith, Director of Government Relations

Chair Marsh, Co-Chairs Levy and Levy, and Members of the Committee:

The Nature Conservancy (TNC) is a science-based, non-partisan organization committed to conserving the lands and waters on which all life depends. In Oregon, TNC has over 80,000 supporters and members in every county. Based in communities around the state, we manage lands and waters in varied ecosystems and partner with ranchers, farmers, fishers, timber and environmental interests on some of the most challenging conservation issues facing people and nature.

The Nature Conservancy is pleased to offer support for House Bill 4016, which builds on the historic investments Oregon made in wildfire preparedness through Senate Bill 762 in 2021 and Senate Bill 80 in 2023. While it's tempting to be distracted by the rain and cooler temperatures outside, we must not forget the recurring danger our state as longer, hotter, and drier summers drive high intensity wildfires that threaten our communities, harm some of Oregon's forest ecosystems not adapted to this type of fire and choke our skies with smoke and ash.

Much of the work this session will be focused on housing and houselessness, but those investments will remain at risk without a comprehensive strategy and funding to mitigate risks from wildfire to homes and communities, protect vulnerable populations from wildfire smoke, and implement science-based ecological forest restoration to help Oregon's dry fire-adapted forests be more resilient to extreme wildfire.

More than \$12.7 billion worth of homes in Oregon are at risk from wildfire, with smoke and air pollutants posing serious threats to human health and damage to tourism and economic development. Suppression costs for 2024 are projected to be around \$136 million and will continue to grow year over year until we are able to implement stable funding to make our landscapes more resilient. This bill continues our forward momentum in preparing for the impacts of wildfire through prescribed burns, home hardening, and smoke mitigation and is accompanied by a \$29 million package of Funding Priorities for a Fire-Resilient Oregon. This combination of programs to accelerate resilient landscapes and fire-adapted communities is a proven method to reduce wildfire risks to both people and nature. While larger conversations around permanent wildfire funding are happening this short session, we look to House Bill 4016 and its associated funding package to fill gaps in our wildfire programs while we explore more durable solutions.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today. I'll now look to my colleagues, Mr. Kruse and Mr. Gafe for more on what this package achieves and why it is so vital for our state.