One Foot in the Black: Part 2 – The Deep Dive into Oregon's Firefighting System

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Kyle Williams: Here in Oregon, if I have a fire on my landscape, we talked about this earlier, I'm going to go down, get whatever fire truck I might have had for my log inside. I'm going to go grab my log in crew, or I'm going to go grab my foresters, and I'm going to head up on the hill, and I'm going to start trying to put that thing out. And then ODF is going to show up with the white trucks, and I'm going to say, hey, there's a good spot to go down there. You can get water. What else do you need for me? They're going to say, I need a dozer. I don't have a dozer, right? The Department of Forestry of the State of Oregon doesn't have enough heavy equipment, bulldozers, that kind of stuff. Well, we do. They're going to say, I need a couple of those. I'm going to call up my contractor, or I'm going to call up my roadside, and I'm going to say, hey, get the cat up here. Okay, and we're all going to work together out on that landscape that's got access, that's got the fuels broken up, that hopefully we did a broadcast burn on that unit, right, 15 years ago before we planted it. And between us, we're all going to go home for dinner tonight after we put this fire out. That doesn't happen anywhere else.

Chris Edwards: Welcome to Forestry Smart Policy, a podcast produced by the Oregon Forest Industries Council for policy makers and other thought leaders influencing decisions in Oregon. I'm Chris Edwards, your host and president of OFIC. In this episode, I sit down with Kyle Williams, the director of forest protection for OFIC. Kyle is one of Oregon's preeminent experts on all aspects of fire from suppression and initial attack to funding Oregon's complete and coordinated system and what makes that system the envy of all other states. Kyle started his career as a firefighter for the Oregon Department of Forestry and worked his way up through the ranks there for 14 years before moving to the private sector, initially to train foresters on the Forest Practices Act and then later as a harvest supervisor for a private timber company. He started at OFIC in 2018 as the Director of Forest Protection. Kyle describes his job as the steward of Oregon's complete and coordinated fire system, making sure the system is adequately funded and OFIC's members are fully engaged and invested in helping put fires out. Kyle is also an expert at deciphering and interpreting how policy concepts would impact the fire system in Oregon. In this second episode of our two-part series, we really get into how Oregon fights fire on state and private land, and what makes our wildland firefighting system unique from any other in the US. Kyle also breaks down the extremely complicated funding mechanism that pays for the system, the growing costs associated with our wildfire crisis, and what's being discussed to address the problem. Without further delay, here's the second half of my discussion with Kyle Williams.

So we've spent a lot of time talking about what's going on in the federal lands because so many of the acres burn are on federal lands, and that really is what's driving our smoky skies in the summer. That's not to say that private lands don't have fires. So let's talk a little bit about the fire suppression system that's run by ODF at the state level. What, you know, we hear a lot of different things during a legislative session about the system. What makes Oregon's system unique?

Kyle Williams: Well, the landowner component. It's really the end of the sentence, and then we'll build out from there. There is not another state in the United States, Western states, you name it. I'm learning about some Australian stuff that's kind of neat. But there's nowhere else that has a partnership between the Government Emergency Service and the private landowner component, both fighting fire together out on the landscape, right? The landowners contributing equipment, trained personnel, right? Knowing where everything is at on that landscape, thinking ahead in terms of developing opportunities to get water, blocking access at times of year when having people out there starting fires would be dangerous. All of that is integrated into the wildland fire protection system that the state of Oregon provides, right? And so when you look to other places, California certainly, right? It's a traditional emergency service. I pay my taxes as a landowner. The guys in the red trucks or yellow trucks show up and put my fire out, and I hope they're really good at it, okay? That's the California example in a nutshell, right? Cal fire, whoever. Washington is a little bit like ours. It's kind of a hybrid. Here in Oregon, if I have a fire on my landscape, we talked about this earlier, I'm gonna go down, get whatever fire truck I might have had for my log inside. I'm gonna go grab my logging crew, or I'm gonna go grab my foresters, and I'm gonna head up on the hill, and I'm gonna start trying to put that thing out, and then ODF's gonna show up with the light trucks, and I'm gonna say, hey, there's a good spot to go down there. You can get water. What else do you need from me? They're gonna say, I need a dozer. I don't have a dozer, right? Department of Forestry of the state of Oregon doesn't have enough heavy equipment. Pull dozers, that kind of stuff. Well, we do. They're gonna say, I need a couple of those. So I'm gonna call up my contractor, or I'm gonna call up my roadside, and I'm gonna say, hey, get the cat up here. Okay, and we're all gonna work together out on that landscape that's got access, that's got the fuels broken up, that hopefully we did a broadcast burn on that unit, right, 15 years ago before we planted it. And between us, we're all gonna go home for dinner tonight after we put this fire out. That doesn't happen anywhere else. And oh, by the way, we helped fund that white truck that showed up there, right? We paid for 50% of it at the district level in order to put it out on the hill. And so there is nowhere else that the landowners are as engaged, and rightfully so, we believe.

Chris Edwards: And so what percentage of fires are put out at what size?

Kyle Williams: Yeah, so the statistics right now for ODF, 96% of their fire, a little over 96% of their fires are put out at 10 acres or less. The KPM is a little higher than that. They're shooting for 98%, I think. That's off the top of my head, so don't hold me to it, but I'm pretty confident that's.

Chris Edwards: Well, that's a much different approach. That is direct attack, go in, put it out, rather than just letting it burn until we can catch it, hopefully. And hopefully it doesn't get away from us.

Kyle Williams: That's very different. The metrics on the federal lands are a little bit different. There's not a KPM you can point to and say they're trying to be 96% under 100 acres, right? That's generally the goal. It's different, so you can't quite do apples to apples, but fires getting larger than 10 acres on ODF lands are the exception, not the norm, certainly.

Chris Edwards: So you said you mentioned at the district level earlier. So district meaning…

Kyle Williams: Yeah, and I went really quick over this when I was doing the introduction of the first part. So the state, ODF's protection system is broken up into what are called districts and some examples of associations, but we won't get quite that far down. But think about regionally breaking up the landscape, right? And so you've got a district that's kind of Coos County-centric, maybe. You've got one around Jackson Josephine County, kind of mid-valley. Anyway, there's 12 of them that combined provide the protection system across the private acres, okay? And the beauty in that is that the right solution in terms of how many trucks you should have, how many firefighters you should have, how many helicopters you should have ahead of time at the district level, right? So think about this like your fire department. Look out your window at the fire station over there. They've got three trucks in there, right? And that's part of my city fire department that's got four more stations that have three fire trucks in it, right? So then expand that out state-wide in terms of the ODF system, and that's how we do it, okay? So in this, going back to this example, down in southwest Oregon, you might need 24 fire trucks and 100 firefighters, okay? Those are kind of rough numbers, but that's about what they do. They get together and determine what's called the adequate level of protection for each one of those districts. And so the Southwest folks say it's 24 and 100, and the budget is this, in order to provide that and meet that performance metric of being able to put out 98% of our fires, right? This is what it takes. They go to the Astoria and they have the same conversation. Our goal is 98% of fires at 10 acres or less. How many trucks do we need? How many people do we need? And that answer is different.

Chris Edwards: So does it cost the people in Southwest Oregon more? Does it cost landowners more than it would in Astoria?

Kyle Williams: It does, yeah, on a per-acre basis. And so the way we create the payment at that district level, so for that local fire component, right, if you're a landowner in Jackson County, you've got 100 acres or you've got 10 acres, whatever it is, you pay on a per-acre basis up to a certain point. Let's keep it simple. You take the budget. So if it's 24 trucks and 100 people, let's say that's a million bucks, right, a year to create, and that pays for the facilities, right, the light bill, the full guts, feathers and all, to be able to put those fires out. Correct, yep. As well as, so you've got that, and then you add in a component of what's called the area. So there's 12 districts and there's three areas, and so we're kind of tiering our way up, if you think about it, right? There's an area office that oversees four or five districts, potentially. So there's some area costs, they're not as much, get added to that budget. And then there's a Salem component, right? And so, right, state government providing a surface, a service, there's the overhead that it takes to do that. And so then there's a cost that gets put into that district budget there. You add all of that stuff up, and you divide it out by the number of acres that are in that district, okay? And that gives you what's called your per acre rate, all right? So it might be, if it's a million bucks, for simple math, let's say that that kicks out $4 per acre, okay? Then what happens is the landowners would pay half of that, okay? So they would pay $2 per acre, and the General Fund would pay $2 per acre. And I'm going to make the case that it's a good deal for both parties, okay? It is in the benefit to all Oregonians to have all these fires get put out, right? Who benefits if the fire gets put out on your property, Chris? Is it just you, or is it the watershed district? Is it the town that didn't end up getting the smoke shoved into it, right? Is it the fishery that you might have saved to keep that cool, clean water for, right? And so there's a whole broad set of folks that benefit from getting fire put out. So in recognition of that, they, the Oregonians writ large, kick in 50% from the General Fund. And then you, because you do get a benefit from that, right, by having that fire put out, you kick in 50%. And between the two of us, we come up with $4 per acre to fund that district budget, right? And that is unique to anywhere, right?

Chris Edwards: So how do they do it in California, then?

Kyle Williams: Well, that's simple. That's General Fund. All General Fund. It's an emergency service. Think about that, right? We split out wildland firefighting from all other emergency services in this state in the way we think about it, okay? So police, who pays for police? Everybody, right? Everybody in the community. You don't even think twice about it. Who pays for the fire department? Everybody. You don't even think about it, right? Only wildland fire do we have a specific subset that's like, no, those guys should pay. In

California, it's like, no, everybody should pay. It's good for all of us, right? Other states, generally speaking, it's like, yeah, everybody should pay. It's an emergency service. But because of the way we've done things in Oregon for so long with that landowner component deeply engaged in the system, we actually take pride in the fact that we pay for half of it at the district level. It's important to us, right? I mean, we're there shoulder to shoulder, both in making that decision about what the adequate level of protection is and in terms of going out and putting the fire out.

Chris Edwards: So you've got a local district, smaller geography. They have a budget paid for by the rates that you just talked about. That's what we would call base protection. That's your local, that's your sort of fire department in air quotes. That is responsible for that initial attack and getting that 98%, trying to keep 98% of those fires contained at 10 acres or less. Let's say a fire isn't contained at 10 acres or less, and it blows up and all of a sudden, you've got 100 acres, 200 acres, and it's growing. At what point does that exceed the capacity of that local budget and local resources to suppress?

Kyle Williams: Yeah. Well, it's hard to say. There's not really an exact trigger for that. But basically, in the judgment of whoever the fire supervisor is at the time, right? I've gone past, we're going to keep using this Southwest Oregon example. This fire is bigger than my 24 engines and 100 people can deal with. I need help. Here's the beauty of the system. You might call that Astoria district and say, hey, are all your guys otherwise busy, or can you spare an engine to send me? And Astoria will send you an engine in Eastern Lane, right? So the Springfield office will send you an engine, and the guys out in John Day just got a whole bunch of rain, so they'll send you two engines, and pretty soon you bring that whole system to bear, right? They're all fighting fire. The thing keeps growing potentially, okay? So we've got another layer that's called the Severity Program, and that's paid for through a contribution from the General Fund as well as landowners via their harvest tax, okay? So we also pay, in addition to that per acre rate, we pay a harvest tax, okay? We pay a little bit more of a per acre rate that goes to that larger fire component. And then if you own a house out in the wild land, you pay a $47.50 surcharge that goes to pay for some of this. And so a combination of those landowner funds and General Fund pay for additional severity resources, which is more helicopters, the state's air tanker, okay? So those big planes that throw all the retardant out, right? The state's got a contract for one of those, and that's paid through severity funds. Might be additional crews and that kind of stuff that are available. And then you get into what's called the Large Fire Fund. So once a fire exceeds the capability of the district to be able to fight it and pay for it, you're then eligible for emergency fire costs, which is that large fire, that third component over the top can go back, district being the first one, right? The severity resources, the extra equipment, and then the large fire funding. And so that taps into there's on an annual basis $10 million available from those landowner funds. So the per acre, it's an additional per acre rate on top of your district rate. It's your harvest tax, and it's that surcharge if you own a home out there, as well as another component called the minimum lot assessment, but we aren't going to get into that right now. So anyway, landowner dollars create $10 million in funds called the Oregon Forest Land Protection Fund. Every year, that's available to help pay for large fires that escape the district's capacity. Those funds are matched now dollar for dollar by General Fund. So for every dollar you expend of the Oregon Forest Land Protection Fund money, the General Fund kicks in the dollar. And on a summer like we just had, between those two funding sources, you're able to cover those large fires that may escape the district's capability of putting them out. That's been stressed in recent years. As you can imagine, the last decade has been challenging. We've gone a range of around $60 million in a given year down to like we just had, less than 10 or less than 20. And so at times, you don't have enough, and the General Fund ends up kicking in more than their 10 million in order to match the Oregon Forest Land Protection Fund. But that's how you do it. You layer on those pieces of it when a fire escapes the district.

Chris Edwards: And then we also have the much celebrated, often talked about, Worldly Unique Insurance Policy here in the state of Oregon. What's that all about?

Kyle Williams: Yeah. And this is really important, because I think people hear the term insurance, and they assume, oh, the landowners' trees get burnt up. That insurance fund is just going to pay them in order to cover that cost. Not true. Very important to know. That is not true. We don't get paid back when our trees burn up. There is no insurance policy for that, generally. The insurance that we're referring to here is actually a policy that is purchased by the state through Lloyd's of London. So that famous brokerage in London. That, to this point, is a $25 million coverage. So the deductible, the last time we burned through the deductible was $50 million. So we had the $10 million from the landowners, $10 million from the General Fund. The fires kept going, kept going. That $30 million gap, and then we hit the insurance fund. And so Lloyd's paid out, I think we ended up at somewhere a little north of $60 million that summer. Lloyd's, the fund, the policy, paid out $13 million, actually, to make it so that the General Fund didn't have to kick out any more dollars. Right. So that insurance fund is covering General Fund exposure. Correct. Not landowner cost exposure. That's 1000% correct. But landowners helped pay the premium cost for that policy. Right. So the way it's broken out is landowners pay that $10 million for the direct large fire costs. They pay $3 million for those severity resources that we were talking about, the tankers and helicopters. And anything that's left over, they contribute to the premium. And in the last year, when it was a $50 million attachment point, the premium was about $4 million. So landowners could pay up to half of that premium cost.

Chris Edwards: So moving beyond fire funding and the complete and coordinated system, moving forward, how is the legislature tackling this? What course is the legislature on currently?

Kyle Williams: So how is the legislature tackling it? I think there's two pieces here, and largely that funding component needs to be set over to the side, because there's not a very coherent conversation and thought about how to deal with that cost side of it. We all recognize that fire is getting much more expensive and damaging and more of it. But there's no really intelligent, well thought out solution. How do we address that? There's concepts out there that largely the punchline ends up with, well, landowners just need to pay more. And that is an easy button. It seems like, oh, you just hit that, make them pay more. There is a law of diminishing returns in terms of the capacity for these lands to pay for themselves. And we are very near that when you combine those district rates and the large fire component, general business taxes, all of that. And don't forget that largely these acres that are shouldering this burden are lands that just don't return much in terms of value. So some of the more susceptible and fire-prone landscapes also are not as, quote, productive from a timber value perspective. End of story. Think about where our fire risk is. The general fire risk is in this state. It's in Eastern Oregon largely, right? There are like three mills in all of Eastern Oregon. What are you supposed to do as a timberland owner in Eastern Oregon? Okay, great. You've got 15 trees per acre, and you can't pay to truck them to the mill, let alone make any money off of them. But we're going to ask you to pay every year $4 an acre to protect them. Okay, maybe. Southwest Oregon, same story, right? Our fire interval is such down there right now, and it's a patchwork of federal lands and private lands that about every 15 years, we burn the same acres over and over again. How are you ever supposed to grow a tree to a harvestable age in that part of the world? And by the way, around Medford, those mills are going away at a fairly rapid clip because they don't have enough available timber to go through the mill to make them a viable operation, okay? So the two-thirds of our state that are most at risk are the hardest places to make any money off those acres, okay? And so if you just go smash that easy button, landowners pay more, well, pretty soon, you bankrupt everybody that is intended to grow. I heard a landowner last year at one of the association meetings in eastern Oregon say, man, I hope my trees burn up because the only way I can make any money off this place is growing cows, and those trees are in the way of that. They're costing me money every year.

Chris Edwards: Is that good policy for Oregon, Chris? No, it's not. It's terrible policy for Oregon. It's terrible for the Oregon landscape, and Oregonians don't want to see that. I'm convinced of that, but Oregonians don't really know how all this policy making works, and there are a whole lot of other agendas that are nipping at the heels and the periphery of this conversation.

Kyle Williams: That's correct. And so to that extent, you can't just think of this problem in terms of dollars and cents, and that's how we're going to make the solution, right? I want to separate that cost component. It needs to be a shared responsibility, all Oregonian solution, right? Because that's who we are talking about in terms of the negative impact. Now, there's a different component to this, and that's the 762 one that you brought up. And it gets back to that three-legged stool and how do we address some of these bigger problems, right? And that's investment in creating resilient landscapes. The state's got a $25 million grant program that's going to go into creating that thinning, following it up with prescribed fire, right? Putting some money into doing that work. The other piece is getting our communities prepared, and that's what the map, again, the air quotes map, was supposed to help address, right? We're going to identify the places that we need to do that, defensible space and home hardening and all those kind of things. Well, that turned out to be a mess, right? Oregonians don't like to be told what to do. And, surprise, surprise, if you do it in a very rushed fashion with challenged data sets would probably be a fair way to say it. I mean, there was nothing wrong with the humans that were trying to do the work. They just didn't have good enough data sets in order to produce an adequate product, right? And so that map ended up inevitably being not very good. Anyway, we'll set that aside. We can continue to work on that. We do want to know where the investments and the focus should be, right? That, I think, persists. And it's just a matter of what's the right way to tackle that in terms of the data in, data out kind of thing.

Chris Edwards: Okay, so in follow-up, then, you're talking about grant funds to do landscape treatments. How much money is that going to take? And how many acres can we realistically expect to treat per biennium? And how many biennia will it take to finally catch up? Or is this like paint the Golden Gate Bridge? Like you start at one end, and they paint, and by the time they're to the other end, they start on the other end.

Kyle Williams: Well, there's a component, yeah, there is a component of needing to think about this in terms of a continual loop, right? You can't just treat one acre and walk away and call that good forever. You need to be thinking about regular intervals. So then you're going, oh man, that's daunting. How many acres can I even get that initial treatment done on? Let me tell you that I don't, you cannot, the government is not going to pay its way across enough acres to say we've got everything accomplished, right? But what we can do is kickstart critical pieces of the landscape, right? And so you start stringing together, like I had talked about earlier, you know, the best ridge to protect this community is this one. So let's focus the investment there. And then if we can keep thinking about creating an economic component to some of this material, right? And it doesn't have to be, and again, this is where I get cornered with it, you just want more logs from the backcountry. I don't. But what I do think makes some sense is that if in treating that ridge I can create a few saw logs that create a little bit of revenue that can then catapult into the next ridge, that just makes sense, right? We are not as a state or as a federal government going to pay our way across enough acres to do this. But if we engage the private sector and create that, again, that economic return component, we can start rolling downhill pretty fast, right? And it doesn't even have to be necessarily all saw logs, okay? And so they talk about that component too. It's like, well, saw logs are what we send through the mill, okay? So those are the ones, great, six inches in diameter at kind of where you look at the tree and greater, right? Those are the ones that fit in the mill. Well, there's no saw logs in there, so we ought not do it. Well, don't forsake biomass yet, right? It's not, we don't have it at scale in order to say, yeah, there's a real economy in biomass. But if we start thinking about what are the regulatory hurdles that we've got in place that make it so that biomass isn't a viable economy yet, let's go look at those. And what can we do to still responsibly protect public health but allow investment in biomass utilization so that when that ridge is just, whatever, a thousand stems to the acre of four-inch dog hair pine that's got zero commercial value for a mill, but by golly, if we've got biomass utilization, boom, now that acre's got a little bit of value, right? Maybe even if it's break even, that's better, right? Because then you've got that grant money that you can send into the next one, send into the next one, send into the next one. It's, again, turning that Titanic is going to be slow. We're looking at decades, decades, Chris, to get this place back on track to where it is more naturally resilient, right, from a ready-for-fire standpoint.

Chris Edwards: And sprinkling $25 million a biennium at it is going to get you in the few thousand acres. We've got four million. So maybe those few thousand acres can be really strategically placed?

Kyle Williams: That's how you do it. That's how you do it right now, until we can create more momentum behind this program. I'll tell you what you can't do is just go, well, there's no way we will ever pay our way or tackle this problem. It's too big. Four million identified high-risk acres. That's false premise, right? So the challenge is just too great. So you know what I ought to do? Nothing. I ought to just do nothing. And whatever calamity is a result of fires across the landscape, we'll just accept that, and when they get down to our communities, by golly, we'll just hope that we've done enough preparation for it. False. Patently false. You can always go out and strategically start putting these treatments on the landscape so that you give that community, right? So you went out, again, three-legged stool. You went out and you treated the landscape around that community, okay? Then you did the defensible space around those homes, and then you fought like heck with the suppression component to put it out. You know what? That place survived. It's not the next paradise after all, right? It's not the next whatever, insert community that's been completely devastated in the last decade again. But what we didn't do was say, the problem is just too big. We shouldn't do anything. It's a waste of money to go treat that ridge right now. That's false.

Chris Edwards: Yeah, it's a big problem, and it's daunting to think about. None of us want another Labor Day. And I'm not sure that we can prevent that at this point. As long as we have federal partners and Eastwind events, I'm hearing a plan to eventually be more resilient, but I'm not hearing that we eliminate smoky skies. Smoky skies are probably here to stay. Is that a fair conclusion, unless there's a significant change in federal forest laws? And I'm not saying that that's politically realistic, but that's going to happen. What would be required for the federal forest service to go in and put a fire out in the month of June so that the east wind in September doesn't spread it?

Kyle Williams: Yeah, what would be required? Well, it's all those same things, right? It's what we've been talking about. It's aggressive suppression on the front end, right? It's being willing to go down there and put that fire out when it's small. That's a component and that's a cultural sea change that is going to have to take place. They're able. I mean, you saw from this last summer, they, setting Cedar Creek aside, there was a lot more success this summer in terms of getting initial attack fires put out on the federal landscape. They were far more aggressive this last summer, and that was kind of a post the last few years. That was a lot of really hard work by me, communicating with Region 6 staff, our landowners engaging, the ODF staff engaging, right? We just did better in terms of the communication, the engagement, and going out and putting fires out. And then we had Cedar Creek, so I don't really want to say that everything's all hunky-dory, but there are still examples of doing better out there, and I don't want to not point that out, okay? So it's continuing that, right? And so, again, it's that suppression leg of the stool, okay? So you're going to do your best, and you're still going to have a few get away from you, i.e. Cedar Creek, right? There's some other examples, too. Then, again, back to the treatment, right? The Infrastructure Act, IIJH, all the acronyms for the federal, however you feel about all that money, there is a ton of it coming out to the West to start putting fuel treatments on the ground. And so when we look at it from a state perspective, and we go, well, there's no hope that the state of Oregon could try and pay its way out of this with its $25 million grant fund. Well, when you combine that with the federal dollars that are coming out here, and you put this treatment from the state dollars here, and you put this treatment from the IIJH dollars here, and you put this treatment from whatever alphabet soup dollars here, you're pretty sure, like, holy crap, we just did 1,000 acres around Cave Junction. So now when that lightning strike hits out there, that fire is going to stay at that 4-foot flame length ground level, right? It's not going to be that standard-placing fire again. And oh, by the way, we put some money into helping, Suzy's subdivision do some defensible space around her home, so that when that 4-foot flame length fire gets to her backyard, it just goes right there to Green Lawn, instead of burning right up underneath the deck, right? And so it's that holistic. You cannot just do one component. You can't just go like heck at that suppression component and hope anymore, right? We're not seeing success. You can't just go like heck at thinning and not following up with the prescribed fire and then do no suppression and no community preparedness, right? You can't just do community preparedness. I will survive that standard-placing fire when it comes off the hill with a 30-mile-an-hour wind behind it. No. No, you won't. Go ask all of California about that. Go ask, you name it, XYZ about that. It won't work. So it's all three of those things. Have to be the focus. Have to be the continuous drum beat. We've got to capitalize on all of this federal money that's going to come out to Oregon and be engaged and be ready.

Chris Edwards: Man, I'll tell you what. We could over-engineer a jelly sandwich in this state right now. Okay, so how do you identify where those important landscapes are, that ridge around Cave Junction? Well, you know what? We ought to go ask 87 different stakeholders, and we ought to go through 67 different… Unfortunately, the reality is, you do have to go through all that right now.

Kyle Williams: You do have to go through all that right now. Right? That is part of our culture here in Oregon. It's insane. Everybody wants to have a say. I'm not judging that. I enjoy being able to have a say. I do. I'm a firefighter. I just go put the dang thing out. What the heck? What are we wasting time here? That's my perspective.

Chris Edwards: Yeah. No, and that is… The state of Oregon isn't, I would say, is probably not the strongest at responding to in crisis situations. Because culturally, Oregonians just demand having a seat at the table. Which means that you've got to coordinate a whole lot of interests. And things get really complicated really fast. And just the human function of scheduling, calendaring, that many humans to get together and talk about issues from so many different perspectives.

Kyle Williams: Well, and again, the peril in that is, well, we're all sitting around talking about the things that we ought to talk about and making sure that you got to talk about the things you want to talk about. We got into the next summer, and we got into the next summer, and we got into the next summer. And so what it's going to take is real leadership to balance the need for good, honest collaboration and opportunity for feedback with the absolute necessity to start getting this work done. Again, Titanic is going to be slow to turn. It takes 30 years to get here. It will take us another couple of decades to get out. But if we don't honestly start doing this, the list of Phoenix, Talents, Detroits, that's going to continue to get longer and longer and longer. And I don't think anybody wants that, but if we're all spending too much time sitting around making sure people's whatevers are adequately addressed, that list is going to keep growing. They're period, end of story, guaranteed.

Chris Edwards: Yeah, boy. You're leaving us on a down note, Kyle Williams. I was feeling inspired and like there was hope a couple minutes ago, but then we started talking about the bureaucratic realities to policymaking and administrative implementation of these things. And that is part of what we do every day here at the Oregon Forest Industries Council. Is work those systems, try to make sure that policymakers, whether it's in the legislature or at the Board of Forestry or other regulatory agencies get the policy right, make sure that it's implementable on the ground, and that we're the go-between between landowners that care about this stuff a lot. Any final thoughts before we wrap this thing up?

Kyle Williams: No, it can be an enormously complicated world, right? But it also can be very linear at the same time. It's like, all right, keep the fire small, keep the community safe, period. Right? That's the point. All right. Well, then don't overcomplicate it with everything else. Like, that is my ask. It's just like, to your point, we live in this policy-driven, complicated, really weird world.

Chris Edwards: Yeah, and unfortunately, there have been voices that are trying to overcomplicate it, trying to say, well, actually, we'd be better off if we just returned to the natural order of things, as if there weren't over 4 million people living in this state right now, in stationary homes that are plopped right in the middle of burnable landscapes. Let's just harden the homes and let it burn. Your landscape's not ready for that. And Oregonians aren't ready for that, and I'm confident of that. But we just need to keep doing our work, whether it's at the Board of Forestry, the Department of Forestry, in the legislature to help maintain focus and keep moving forward. Because as you laid out, we can do this. We can do this. It's just going to take some work, and it's going to take a little more time than I think some Oregonians think. Thank you much, Kyle, for being with us, and we'll have you back to talk about either a fire follow-up or one of the other hot topics we're dealing with here at OFIC.

So, that's it for now, folks. Hope you found our first two episodes to be useful to expand your understanding of wildfire causes, suppression, and financing here in Oregon. I already have some follow-up questions, and we're making plans to return to this topic in a future episode. But in the meantime, we have more content on the way. If there's something that you'd like us to cover on the Forestry Smart Policy podcast, be sure to drop us a note at podcastatofic.com.