



McKenzie Rebuilds

Assessment Report

Oregon Solutions | May 2021

Acknowledgements

Oregon Solutions greatly appreciates all those who generously gave their time to inform this assessment and report.

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Editing and layout: Cat McGinnis, National Policy Consensus Center

Cover photo: McKenzie River, Oregon, IStock



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1. INTRODUCTION

In late November 2020, Lane County, led by Commissioner Heather Buch, requested that Oregon Solutions conduct an assessment to determine what, if any, collaborative avenues may be available to help McKenzie River Valley communities prepare to rebuild in the wake of the 2020 Holiday Farm Fire. While there was a tremendous response from first responders and county residents after the onset of fire, the county says the fire's aftermath has exacerbated several chronic issues in the area, including inadequate communication networks, aging and failing septic infrastructure, high levels of poverty, and a declining economy.

Despite the devastating impacts of the fire, project sponsors say the McKenzie community is resilient and realizes that this moment provides them an opportunity to rebuild in a better and more sustainable way to support recovery and a prosperous future. To help, leaders propose a collaborative project that would seek to accelerate the rebuilding of homes and infrastructure lost to the fires so that residents can return home. The project would also seek to do so in a manner that protects the McKenzie River watershed, provides economic and educational opportunity for current and future residents, and delivers housing options for families and individuals at all income levels. It is understood that achieving these long-term outcomes will require substantial new resources, expanded local capacity, and collective action built on trust and a shared vision for the sixty-mile corridor.

The goal of this assessment was to determine if there was enough substantive interest from key stakeholders to work together in a collaborative approach, such as an Oregon Solutions process, on a project that would look for ways to rebuild the communities along this corridor. This report reflects the findings from our interviews. It also includes our recommendation regarding designation of the effort as an Oregon Solutions project by the governor.

ABOUT OREGON SOLUTIONS

Oregon Solutions is the state of Oregon's program to help communities address community-based problems and opportunities through sustainable solutions. We do this by creating a collaborative platform where businesses, governments, nonprofits, community-based organizations, sovereigns, and other stakeholders can align resources and pool efforts to achieve desired results.

OUR PROCESS

Oregon Solutions' engagement starts with an assessment. When invited, Oregon Solutions begins an assessment to explore whether and how a collaborative approach might be structured to address a particular community issue. The assessment is composed of a series of one-on-one or small group interviews. If an assessment finds there is a project that can be conducted by Oregon Solutions, it will go before the governor for consideration of a designation as an Oregon Solutions project.

2. METHODS

In February through April 2021, Oregon Solutions spoke with forty diverse stakeholders and partners to fully assess the needs, issues, opportunities, willingness, and interest of parties to engage in rebuilding efforts along the McKenzie River Valley. Twenty-two of these discussions took place as one-on-one, confidential interviews lasting between forty-five and sixty minutes. Three focus groups, in which a total of eighteen people participated, were also conducted. All participants are listed in appendix A, and the question and discussion guide is provided as appendix B. Oregon Solutions has aggregated the responses of these structured conversations in this document. No comments are attributed to any individual.

We sought to interview a broad range of multisector interests in the McKenzie River Valley. Our goal with assessment interviews and focus groups is to have all interested parties feel their perspectives and interests will be represented by the process.

3. BACKGROUND

On September 7, 2020, the Holiday Farm Fire was ignited in the McKenzie River area, eventually burning some 170,000 acres and causing catastrophic damage to homes, businesses, infrastructure, and the environment. The communities of Blue River and Vida were both hit especially hard and were almost complete losses. All told, approximately 500 homes were damaged or destroyed and 1,000 individuals displaced. As of this writing, approximately 200 former residents remain in state- and FEMA-funded hotels, and an unknown number of other survivors are scattered, living with relatives, in other temporary situations, or are otherwise unstably housed. Some former residents are camping in RVs on their properties, even though they are without access to reliable water, wastewater facilities, or communications infrastructure.

Some eight months after the disaster, survivors are growing impatient with their inability to return to their communities. They are frustrated at the inability to quickly have their properties cleaned up, to get a rebuilding permit or replacement manufactured home, and to resume their lives. Lane County, the state, and various federal officials continue to wrestle with providing better interim housing options and many other aspects of immediate recovery needs, while many local groups are taking some matters into their own hands.

The urgency, frustration, lingering trauma, and lack of a comprehensive roadmap telling officials precisely how to conduct all the detailed aspects of response have been all-consuming for many. The fire also exposed a cycle of rural disinvestment by the public and private sectors, and exacerbated a number of long-standing community challenges:

- An economy that is highly dependent on tourism and the income of well-off retirees, and that also has not fully recovered from its transition away from timber-related employment
- Inadequate and aging infrastructure, including some failing septic systems
- Insufficient (and in some places absent) communications networks

- Evidence of deep rural poverty and a lack of quality affordable housing
- Declining school enrollment that threatens the viability of the institution and the communities themselves

In spite of the challenges, the McKenzie River Valley and its communities have important assets on which to draw, including a *strong network of community organizations*—both long-standing and newly formed since the fires—capable of mobilizing volunteers and marshalling resources to address needs, as well as a *shared commitment to protect the McKenzie River*.

A defining feature of the McKenzie River Valley is that the sixty-mile stretch contains nine small, unincorporated communities reliant on Lane County for government services. The independence of these rural places is a point of pride and central to the culture of the people who live there. At the same time, the lack of more localized governance, accountability, and responsiveness creates challenges for local residents, especially given that county institutions, budgets, and service delivery aren't organized to provide the level of support and problem-solving necessary in the wake of a disaster such as the Holiday Farm Fire.

4. OVERARCHING FINDING

Residents and those working on the recovery effort are passionate about the McKenzie and show a strong desire to help the community rebuild better. But in the wake of the devastation, residents are fatigued. Even so, **most also welcome the idea of professional and neutral outside facilitation, a structured process, and a locally recognized and respected convener** to help stakeholders begin to create a shared vision of the future.

Absent any structured process, there is near universal belief that a resilient, climate-smart, and equitable rebuilding of the area won't happen. Many feel the status quo could instead result in uncoordinated efforts that further compromise the watershed; the proliferation of non-conforming living arrangements for the lowest income residents; unpermitted and unsafe wastewater treatment solutions; and the perpetuation of wealth gaps as those with means secure property for retirement or vacation homes. In short, the lack of a cohesive process at the outset could lengthen the time it might take for residents of the area to return home. But the nature and complexity of the long-term recovery and rebuilding face challenges.

Linked to the recognition of the value that a robust process would bring is the notion that **recovery presents the need and opportunity to address multiple, overlapping pre-existing challenges**.

The magnitude of the long-term recovery challenge is overwhelming to many residents. At the same time, residents understand that rebuilding may bring the opportunity to finally address some of the problems if there is good coordination, sufficient federal funding, and a compelling vision and strategy for people to rally behind. The challenges most cited in interviews are summarized in the following chart:

Pre-existing challenges	Opportunities with rebuilding
<p>The <i>insufficiency of basic infrastructure</i> in the communities of the McKenzie River corridor have been understood for many years. From aging (and in some cases failing) wastewater systems to overhead power lines subject to weather-related outages and gaps in cellular and internet service, area challenges have been the subject of various efforts for some time. Those efforts have been unsuccessful mostly because of a lack of funding, but also because of environmental and land use concerns.</p>	<p>To capitalize on new state and federal investments in expanded infrastructure of all kinds</p> <p>To create better alert systems</p> <p>To address the structural barriers to rural housing inherent in Oregon’s long-standing land use framework</p>
<p>The <i>employment base</i> for residents in the area is concentrated in recreation and tourism, sectors that do not provide family-wage jobs. It is widely understood that the communities never recovered from the curtailment of timber harvesting and logging that provided the genesis for most of the small communities.</p>	<p>To capitalize on the new reality of “work from home” that can bring a diversity of working age adults and young families that can strengthen the economy, the community, and stabilize school enrollment</p>
<p>The <i>low wages</i> of many long-time residents stand in contrast with the wealth of more recent arrivals, known to some as “the gentrified retirees.” The attractiveness of the McKenzie River area as a vacation spot has brought some new investment and local spending, while also accentuating both culture and wage gaps.</p>	<p>To elevate wages by diversifying the economy, and to find common ground among old and new residents for what the future could look like</p>
<p>The only new <i>housing</i> that’s been built in recent years is occupied by high income earners and vacationers. Precise housing stock data is hard to come by, but anecdotal information suggests significant numbers of residents had been living with informal rental agreements, in RVs and old mobile homes and excess property owned by friends and family. The one manufactured home park in the area, 26-space Lazy Days, was a complete loss in the fire.</p>	<p>To catalyze new affordable housing options for renters and owners, at a scale that works within the communities</p>
<p><i>Enrollment at the McKenzie School</i> has been declining for several years. It currently stands at 200 (in a building that can hold 600 students), and well over half of those students receive free lunches.</p>	<p>To recapture families through smart housing and economic development strategies</p>
<p>The importance of the <i>McKenzie River watershed</i> both as a unique and special shared asset, and as the source of drinking water for the entire region, including Eugene and Springfield, means special attention will need to be paid to the size, scale, and location of replacement housing and associated utility infrastructure.</p>	<p>To better protect the watershed as destroyed homes are rebuilt and septic systems upgraded or replaced</p>

5. IDENTIFIED NEEDS

5.1. Community support networks need expanded capacity and coordination

The fire event and quickly escalating evacuation orders catalyzed immediate action by local residents to ensure their neighbors were able to escape safely—a task made extra challenging by the lack of communications infrastructure.

Before the government and Red Cross could mobilize, residents of Blue River gathered and kept each other safe, eventually finding their way to Springfield when the normal community gathering spots were no longer safe. Over the coming days, the deep relationships and connections among the evacuees enabled volunteers with the means to gather and distribute food, water, and other essentials, while the more official sheltering and mass care operations came online.

Similarly, trusted environmental stewardship organizations leveraged their established relationships with property owners to mobilize in the early weeks post-fire. They got teams into burn areas near the river to stabilize ash and debris, and to assess and manage the landscapes around burned homes.

Interviewees described these early efforts as evidence of community capacity to come together and act quickly in response to an unprecedented and deadly disaster—an ethos of self-reliance that in some ways is a hallmark of the culture of the small, rural communities in the McKenzie corridor.

At least two new humanitarian groups emerged out of the early response: *Love First* and *Locals Helping Locals* are each responding through volunteerism and fundraising to needs of fire survivors not being met by government, including creating forums for residents to share experiences and aid each other.

5.1.1. Expanded capacity needed

A concern voiced by several interviewees is the capacity of a relatively small number of active volunteers to continue to provide such a high level of service, advocacy, and problem-solving. While the work has been vital and their neighbors laud what's been accomplished, the over-reliance on a handful of volunteers speaks to the need for greater organizational capacity for community-based work.

*“The same tired ten
volunteers can’t do it all.”*
—An interviewee

5.1.2. Need for better coordination

Several longstanding organizations are active in connecting community members to resources and convening conversations about how individuals and the area can move towards long-term recovery. As in many small towns, the school and fire districts have deep multi-generational relationships and a history of trust. In addition, United Way of Lane County, McKenzie River Chamber of Commerce, McKenzie Community Development Corporation, and others are each seeking to mobilize resources and play active roles in the long-term economic viability and prosperity of the larger geography of eastern Lane County. They are also seeking to take advantage of capacity building assistance and structure brought by FEMA and Oregon’s Office of Emergency Management, as well as

philanthropy. To date, this work has not been well coordinated, and there is increasing confusion about roles and authority as well as a growing sense of unproductive duplication.

5.1.3. Integration of BIPOC communities

We heard that, before the fires, a few Blue River residents were beginning to organize around racial and social justice issues, but the fire put those efforts on indefinite hold. Some interviewees suggested that the area had historically not been welcoming to non-English speaking, immigrant, Latinx, and other BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and people of color) fire survivors, which could account for the low population. We also heard that, to the best of interviewees' knowledge, there is a small population of BIPOC residents in the area, and they are struggling.

Today, the active human service, case management, and housing organizations place a high value on culturally competent outreach and service delivery. There is not, however, a local organization that works specifically with BIPOC residents. As work progresses, efforts will be needed to ensure that inclusion and a pursuit of racial equity are explicitly considered with the interests and perspectives of BIPOC residents informing engagement, decision-making, and implementation.

5.2. Need for a convening entity that can establish the multi-sector engagement needed for success

While a number of entities exist in the region, interviewees did not feel that any of them had the gravitas or platform needed to engage and unite the various entities currently operating and needed for restoration. McKenzie Community Development Corporation has initiated and led an effort to unite the small, unincorporated communities along the McKenzie River as a single "sixty-mile Main Street" that could draw more tourists and build on the unique characteristics of the corridor.

While pointing to some of its small-scale successes, some interviewees feel it will need more time and a more established track record to garner the trust and respect from a sufficient portion of area residents to be the best entity to take on convening or implementation of the scale of projects that will be needed.

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McKenzie Community Development Corporation

The McKenzie CDC seeks to foster and support economic, environmental, and community well-being for the McKenzie River area.

The McKenzie Community Development Corporation (McKenzie CDC) serves the unincorporated rural communities along the 60-mile McKenzie Highway "main street" from the Springfield Urban Growth Boundary to the river's headwaters. It is a 501 (c) (3) tax-exempt nonprofit that has led or assisted with numerous community development projects since it was first incorporated in 1995 as the Blue River CDC.

Many interviewees say community organizations focused on river and watershed stewardship are well established, trusted, and effective. These include the McKenzie River Trust, McKenzie Watershed Council, and Upper Willamette Soil and Water Conservation District, which formed Pure Water Partners some time ago with support from the Eugene Water and Electric Board. Operating both collaboratively and independently, these groups include trusted local residents and, according to several interviewees, have been working for several years with private property owners to help them maintain their land in ways that protect the watershed. We heard that the relationships and history of trusted stewardship enabled the partners to quickly catalyze volunteers for restoration, revegetation, and aspects of debris management in the earliest days after the fires.

Going forward, some interviewees said protection of the McKenzie watershed will take on even more significance given the ways in which the riparian zones have been damaged, and the need to remove hundreds of fire-damaged trees that risk further destabilization of the landscape. Re-vegetation is already underway with an eye toward creating future resilience. But with multiple public and private landowners and diffuse responsibility for various aspects of planning, funding, and implementation of forest restoration, there's an urgent need for collaboration even beyond what has historically been in place and the focus of these groups. The Eugene Water and Electric Board is naturally on the front lines of these discussions given its role as the water and electricity provider to Eugene and most of eastern Lane County.

The engagement of these multiple entities will be vital, but none are in the role to convene the multi-sector engagement critical to restoration.

5.3. Little can happen without replacement housing

As with most of Oregon, the communities in the path of the Holiday Farm Fire already had a severe shortage of affordable homes. And while poverty statistics are not readily available for the area, incomes for the communities' residents up and down the McKenzie are understood to be below those in the rest of the county and state. Average incomes and home values are distorted by the presence of large numbers of retirees who may have relocated to the area, and purchased or built large homes that do not match the type and tenure of the housing lived in by many long-time residents.

A total of 463 homes were destroyed by the fire as it burned through the communities of McKenzie Bridge, Rainbow, Blue River, Vida, Nimrod, and Leaburg. Judging by the experience of fire-impacted rural communities in California over the past few years, rebuilding will be costly and take years.

"It's like they don't want anyone to live in rural Oregon anymore."

—An interviewee

The loss of so much housing in an unincorporated area tests the limits of state land use laws which generally limit rural residential development. Blue River, which lost every house, was platted on relatively small 80x100 lots back when mining and logging provided employment for most households. There is nothing within Oregon's land use framework that provides for that community to be rebuilt in the same fashion it was; so various exemptions will be required, which is sure to set up a round of vigorous policy debates.

Among the other complications that residents and other interviewees shared about housing is that all homes rely on septic systems to manage wastewater, and a significant portion of those septic systems were already failing before the fires. We heard about efforts over the past several years to develop some kind of shared municipal wastewater system in Blue River, but the economics and environmental impacts on top of land use restrictions had thus far prevented development of such a system. Homeowners' housing insurance is unlikely to pay for a new septic system even if it was destroyed in the fire, and updated regulations have raised the bar—and expense—for new systems. Those homeowners who may be ready to rebuild, and who have their insurance and water utilities figured out, find that slow permit issuance from the county, plus a lack of skilled construction labor and rising materials costs have made moving forward incredibly challenging.

In the meantime, outsiders, including speculators and would-be owners, seeking a new home or vacation spot in the area, and starting to purchase properties once they are cleaned, create fears that long-time residents will be priced out or forced to sell.

All of this context adds to the frustration that fire survivors feel about the service they are getting from their government. It also makes the necessary discussions among local residents about how they want their future communities to look all the more challenging. Interviewees described sadness and a sense of overwhelm about what the answers about long-term housing replacement might look like.

Nearly all expressed worry about being able to recreate anything new that would be affordable to the lower income people who've long called the area home.

“VRBO renters don’t have the same investment in protecting the watershed as permanent residents do.”

— An interviewee

5.4. Governance across the nine unincorporated communities is deeply needed to overcome existing challenges

In the months since the fires, Lane County has taken numerous response and recovery actions. It hosts an easy-to-navigate website¹ that contains updated information about property clean-up, available financial and housing assistance, watershed efforts, and rebuilding resources. Branded “McKenzie Rebuilds,” the website also contains useful interactive maps that are updated to show rebuilding progress.



As noted above, the Holiday Farm Fire only burned in unincorporated parts of Lane County. This means, among other things, that post-fire government services are concentrated within county departments which were not organized to provide the level of service needed for recovery. Various state and federal agencies hold responsibility for some activities that will be necessary for recovery, and local residents have mixed views of the responsiveness of those agencies.

¹ Available online here: <https://www.mckenzierebuilds.org/>



Various state and federal agencies hold responsibility for some activities that will be necessary for recovery.

Separate and apart from the question of government agency responsiveness is the issue of visible leadership. Without an elected mayor or city council, the residents look to the East Lane County Commissioner to address their concerns and solve problems with redevelopment. Regardless of the effectiveness of this commissioner (who interviewees say is well-respected), the governance and representation challenges are real, especially in the wake of such disastrous fires. In some places, charismatic and well-liked individuals have been dubbed the “unofficial mayor” of their respective community, a dynamic that fills an apparent void when the closest elected official feels distant.

Aspects of recovery and rebuilding leadership can and will come from a few other places, but interviewees expressed concern that it won’t be as coordinated or fully representative of the range of views as will be needed for resilient, community-led, long-term recovery without some outside convening and facilitation assistance.

The dearth of local leadership capacity is not a new challenge. Almost a decade ago the Ford Family Foundation worked with Rural Development Initiatives to support several cohorts of leadership training in an effort to improve community development capacity within the McKenzie corridor, specifically the McKenzie Community Development Corporation. Some interviewees described these dynamics as part of the overall culture of the area. Indeed, a common attribute of many rural places is that residents chose to live away from cities and the trappings of government. There is an independent spirit and a pride in self-reliance and neighbor-to-neighbor problem solving that is a core value, especially for long-time residents.

All of this leaves something of a leadership and convening power vacuum at a critical time when self-reliance isn’t sufficient. Significant numbers of people and organizations have demonstrated important leadership, especially in the immediate aftermath of the fires. But

interviewees all agree that none have the combination of capacity, expertise, and credibility to convene the entire community in the kind of dialogues that will be needed for comprehensive recovery.

5.5. Need for a shared vision

Most interviewees had at least some concept of what they thought a future McKenzie River Valley could look like if rebuilding and recovery efforts were successful. Everyone mentioned one or more of the elements in the “challenges and opportunities” chart above.

When asked how easy or hard they thought it might be to get to consensus, almost every interviewee described the wide range and diversity of views of those who have a stake in long-term recovery. They noted the history and culture of the different communities, and described dynamics of up-river versus down-river, old-timers versus newcomers, and more. We heard from most interviewees that developing a consensus view of what the future ought to look like would be quite challenging. Many are leery of government taking too much control away from local residents. Most think professional, neutral, and skilled outside facilitation and a structured process, together with a locally-recognized and respected convener, would help the stakeholders immensely to create a shared vision of the future.

6. RECOMMENDATIONS

We find this situation would benefit from a collaborative effort and recommend this proposed project receive governor designation as an Oregon Solutions project.

The infrastructure, environmental, governance, BIPOC, and social issues in the McKenzie River Valley are complex. The Holiday Farm Fire further illuminated those complexities. Residents, governments, and nonprofits are working tirelessly to bring in needed resources. Absent a coordinated table with adequate resources and support from a neutral, trusted facilitator and conveners, it will be challenging for the parties to create a shared vision they can use to successfully rebuild the area for the benefit of the entire community. The diverse array of interests—public, private, nonprofit, and BIPOC— would benefit from this collaborative support.

Our findings also indicate that a successful recovery effort will require alignment and coordination between entities with overlapping authorities. A collaborative process would bring these entities, stakeholders, and resources together and help implement a shared vision for the region. In addition, a collaborative process can create a vehicle for building needed shared leadership, allowing all parties to participate without having the sole responsibility placed on a single entity. A governor’s designation would be an important signal to public agencies of the importance of this project and the need to hold it as a priority. At the same time, the Oregon Solutions approach will put these state agencies in service of local problem solving that is an important value to the community.

Oregon Solutions recommends the initial focus of collaborative engagement be on developing a consensus-based long-term vision and gaining agreement on the most important physical recovery projects to be pursued together. Given the complexity of overlapping challenges, the unique history of the region, and the lingering trauma and grief experienced by most residents, this process can be expected to take longer than other visioning work. The second phase would focus on implementation of one or two key projects identified by the group, where collaboration, including shared funding, cross-sector coordination, and some experimentation or even risk-taking on the part of county or state government is required. In addition to the deliverable of an actionable and fully-funded project plan, this phase would be designed to increase local community development capacity and cement more trust.

APPENDIX A: INTERVIEWEES

<i>Alphabetical by Organization</i>	<i>* group interview participant</i>
Business Oregon	Melissa Murphy*
Eugene Water & Electric Board	Jeannine Parisi
Eugene Water & Electric Board	Karl Morgenstern
Homes for Good	Jacob Fox
Lane County	Matt McRae*
Lane County	Austin Ramirez*
Lane County	Alex Cuyler*
Lane County	Keir Miller*
Lane County	Patence Winningham-Melcher*
Lane County	Lucy Zammerellie*
Lane County	Laurel O'Rourke*
Lane County	Greg Rikhoff*
Lane County Commission Chair	Joe Berney
Lane County Commissioner	Heather Buch
Lane County Sheriff	Cliff Harrold
Lane Transit District	Tiffany Edwards
Locals Helping Locals	Cliff Richardson
LoveFirst	Christine Cameron
McKenzie CDC	Tim Laue
McKenzie CDC	Marilyn Cross
McKenzie River Guides	Steve Shaeffers (sp)
McKenzie River Trust	Brandi Crawford Ferguson
McKenzie School District	Lane Tompkins, Superintendent
Meyers General Store	Melanie Stanley
Nonprofit Assoc of Oregon	Jim White*
Onward Eugene (formerly TAO)	Matt Sayre
Oregon Community Foundation	Patrick Hosfield*
Oregon Community Foundation	Maylian Pak*
Oregon DEQ	Mary Camarata*
Oregon DLCD	Patrick Wingard*
Oregon DOT	Jae Pudewell*
Oregon House of Representatives	Cedric Hayden
Regional Solutions Coordinator	Sarah Means
Rural Community Assistance Corp	Jason Carman
Seneca	Todd Payne, CEO
The Ford Family Foundation	Max Gimbel*
United Way of Lane County	Jared Pruch
United Way of Lane County	Stephanie Jennings *
Upper McKenzie Community Center	Kathy Jaworski
USDA RD	Holly Halligan*

APPENDIX B: INTERVIEW AND DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Are you familiar with Oregon Solutions? Collaborative processes?
2. Tell me about your experience with recovery so far. Have you ever been involved in disaster recovery before?
3. We're assessing potential for a collaborative problem-solving process for the entire McKenzie River area. In that context, how would you describe you/your organization's primary goals and interests?
4. Look forward five or ten years—what would a successful recovery and rebuilding look like? Can you name some key elements of success?
5. Where would you start in order to achieve long-term success?
6. Talk about your sense of the biggest challenges and barriers.
7. Would you say that others share your view? To what degree are there varied views about what could or should happen in the McKenzie River area? How hard might those be to reconcile?
8. What kind of assistance (besides money) might be needed from the county, state or feds? Regulatory approvals?
9. If there were a collaborative problem-solving table, who comes to mind as essential for that table?
10. What can you tell me about how communities of color have been impacted? Any ideas about how to bring forward those voices?
11. Based on what you know, do you think an Oregon Solutions process could be helpful? (Forum to develop consensus for guiding principles; coalescing around priorities; shared commitment to success; gravitas of governor's designation; etc.) How do you envision long-term progress without an Oregon Solutions process?
12. Any ideas about who might be a great convener?
13. Anything I've not asked you that you want to share? Any questions for me?