

Tax

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change over the course of the current biennium.

In addition to the \$3 billion personal income tax kicker, the corporate kicker is also expected to be tripped, sending \$930 million to the state's K-12 budget.

Progressive lawmakers have long advocated for removing or reforming the kicker, seeing it as a policy that benefits the super-rich at the expense of state programs.

Republicans have staunchly opposed such suggestions.

"Thanks to the kicker, Oregonians will get some of their taxes back and with it, a much-needed break from the increasing burden of inflation," Senate Republican Leader Tim Knopp, R-Bend, said. "Now, more than ever, it's essential to protect the kicker. Too much spend-

ing got us into this inflation mess, it's not going to get us out."

Taxpayers have seen several record kickers in recent biennia, and economists said that so far those rebates haven't negatively impacted the state's spending capacity because the underlying economic factors that were generating the kicker were strong enough to still increase resources available to lawmakers.

However, because this particular kicker is dependent on uniquely large personal income tax payments, that pattern may not hold. From the previous quarterly forecast, forecasted revenues for the 2023-2025 biennium are down more than \$1.9 billion.

"We're seeing a lot more of (the kicker) offset the balances that we've built up," McMullen said. "That's largely because of the temporary nature ... of this taxpayer-behavior-driven stuff that's going to go away."

Economists also told lawmakers

there remains the threat of a recession, either in the short term or long term due to general negativity about the economy or potential unintended consequences stemming from actions the Federal Reserve is taking to combat inflation.

The country's inflation rate was about 8.3% last month compared to one year ago, as measured by the Consumer Price Index.

McMullen said there was "strong consensus" from the advisors to the Office of Economic Analysis that a recession should not be built into the immediate economic forecast, instead suggesting a "soft landing" approach that the Fed is trying to pull off.

The argument for that is individuals and businesses still have plenty of cushion in their balance sheets, plus the supply chain issues largely responsible for the current inflationary pressure are expected to abate in the coming months.

However, McMullen noted, the Fed

has not typically been successful threading the needle on combating economic factors without causing a "monetary policy-induced recession." There are also factors outside of the Federal Reserve's control.

"Unfortunately, it's still quite possible that we would enter into a recession in the very near term because it's not really always about fundamentals," McMullen said. "Recession is fundamentally a psychological phenomenon where everyone becomes pessimistic at the same time and businesses and households all pull back at the same time and they create this self-fulfilling prophecy. That doesn't need to have underlying issues or imbalances to happen."

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Students

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dents for more than three decades.

She also mentored teams from Lee Elementary (2019) and Chapman Elementary (2013) that placed nationally in the ExploraVision competition.

"This group, more than any other I've had, was never really satisfied," Foelkl said of the group's efforts to

make every piece of the project better.

ExploraVision is the world's largest K-12 science competition, with winners sharing innovative proposals to help overcome some of the greatest challenges facing the world today, from healthcare to sustainability and energy efficiency.

First- and second-place national winners in each of four age divisions are honored out of hundreds of entrants.

Jonathan, Esau, Claire and Audrey

competed in the grades 4-6 division. Jonathan is a third grader and the others are fourth graders.

Queen of Peace, a private school in South Salem for preschool through fifth grade, provided them the support to work on a project for the ExploraVision competition. The school offers an E-STEM curriculum, integrating environmental education with science, technology, engineering and math.

"This tied in so well with what they're learning in their classrooms,"

Foelkl said.

Bennett presented the students with certificates of recognition from the city.

"We're so proud you accomplished this," Bennett said. "It's always a thrill when somebody from Salem puts a mark on the map."

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Shortage

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a couple hundred additional firefighters and \$100 million in disaster funds both agencies can draw from to avoid raiding their own budgets during expensive fire seasons.

The amount the federal government spends on wildfire suppression has steadily risen over the past decades as wildfires become larger and more intense, reaching a record-setting \$4.38 billion in 2021. A year ago, monster infernos like California's Dixie and Caldor fires burned more than a million acres, destroyed multiple towns and more than 2,300 structures, and cost \$900 million and thousands of firefighters to suppress.

In addition to an uptick in federal firefighters, many states are also upping the number of wildland firefighters they employ, including an additional 100 fire personnel in Oregon for 2022.

Concern about hiring firefighters

While the federal government and states have optimistic goals, the reality of hiring firefighters has proven challenging in the tight labor market.

"This is an urgent threat to natural resources, public safety, and taxpayer dollars, as the federal government pays a premium to contract and borrow firefighting resources from state and local authorities when federal resources are unavailable," the letter from lawmakers stated.

In testimony before the Senate Appropriations Committee May 4, Forest Service Chief Randy Moore said the agency had hired about 10,200 firefighters, out of its goal of 11,300. But, he added, some areas had only reached 50% of the staffing goal.

"We are making offers, and there's a lot of declinations in those offers," Moore said in the hearing. "There's a lot of competition in the labor market for these skills. Because when you have county, state and private firefighters often sometimes [making] double the salaries the Forest Service firefighters are making, it's very hard to compete with that."

Federal entry-level wildland firefighters earn roughly 50% less than firefighters with the California state agency Cal Fire, according to an analysis by the Grassroots Wildland Firefighter Committee.

Firefighters with the Forest Service earn about \$38,000 per year, while their counterparts that work for private or state firefighting agencies make closer to \$70,000 to \$80,000, acting Forest Service chief Vicki Christiansen said in a hearing last year. Some entry-level firefighters make as little as \$15 per hour.

Forest Service officials declined to say exactly where the shortfalls in hiring were, but the response drew concern from Sen. Jeff Merkley, D-Oregon.

"Fifty percent sounds a little scary when you're thinking about the fires that we'll be facing in our various states," Merkley said in the hearing.

Merkley expressed confidence that "the agency is making steady progress in hiring more firefighters and is working to have the firefighting resources they need as wildfire season gets underway," he said in an email to the Statesman Journal.

The Department of Interior, which plans to hire 5,600 fire personnel, said it had hired 4,100 so far, but added that it was typical not to reach full staffing until summer.

The letter said that years of low pay

and other issues have "hollowed out the federal wildland firefighting workforce."

An end to 'fire borrowing' and rise of emergency fund

The amount of money available to federal agencies to fight wildfires has grown since a 2018 bill established the ability for agencies to access a "disaster/reserve" fund that grew to \$2.45 billion this year, up from \$2.35 billion a year ago.

In 2018, Congress passed legislation that allowed the agencies to tap disaster funds when suppression costs exceeded their budget.

Both agencies said the legislation has helped eliminate the practice of "fire borrowing," in which the agencies would raid from their other departments, including recreation, engineering and even fire prevention programs, to pay for the soaring costs of fighting wildfires.

"To date, it has been very successful," a Forest Service spokesperson said of the program, adding that the agency dipped into those funds in 2021.

The program works like this: If either agency uses up its entire fire suppression budget, it can then go to the emergency fund rather than using up other parts of its budget. It can pay for additional contract firefighters, large fire camps or whatever else might be needed.

Sen. Ron Wyden, D-Ore., who helped author the legislation, said the program has worked as intended.

"Since 2018, the Forest Service and Interior are no longer forced to raid prevention funds to fight fires," Wyden said. "Oregonians know all too well the devastation of today's wildfires. When it comes to saving lives and property from destruction, prevention and suppression must go hand in hand."



Brentt Call, left, and Mike Poulos, firefighters with Utah Taskforce One, take a break from securing a fire line on the Bootleg Fire east of Klamath Falls that burned more than 413,000 acres during the 2021 fire season. CHRIS PIETSCH/THE REGISTER-GUARD

What kind of wildfire season will it be?

The forecast of the coming season paints a picture of high wildfire danger in the Southwest through June before the above-normal risk shifts to northern California by June, the entire middle of the county by July and much of the West Coast by August.

This year already has been active, with Arizona's Tunnel Fire burning 30 homes and multiple wildfires in New Mexico forcing the evacuations of thousands.

"Looking at the risk map overall, I'd say we're preparing for another long year," said Jessica Gardetto, a National Interagency Fire Center spokeswoman in Boise and a former wildland firefighter. "Almost the entire central swath of the country comes into the (high danger) zone, so if we have a lot of activity there, and then if we have the type of fires we've seen across the West recently, that could be a real strain on resources."

During the height of the 2021 wildfire season, which was more active than normal, some wildfire crews across the West, including in Oregon, reported being short-staffed as resources were shifted to areas where the danger to communities was highest.

"Last year we did get stretched pretty thin on resources," Forest Service spokesman Brian Reublinger said. "But it's pretty normal that fires will exchange resources and things when one fire has a greater need over another, especially in a busy year."

Much of the risk this season is spurred by the ongoing megadrought west of the Mississippi. Seventy-five percent of the High Plains is experiencing at least moderate drought while 77% of the West remains mired in severe drought, despite improvements during

a wet and cool April, according to the U.S. Drought Monitor.

The final ingredient is that long-term forecasts indicate a hot and dry summer across basically the entire United States — potentially fueling quick-spreading fires in many different parts of the country.

Taken together, the fire season looks just a bit better than a year ago — which set records for destruction and cost — but not much, Gardetto said.

"Honestly, at this point, all we can do is plan for the worst and hope for the best," she said.

U.S. wildfire suppression budget

U.S. Forest Service base funds: \$1.011 billion

Department of Interior base funds: \$384 million

Disaster/reserve funds: \$2.45 billion

Unspent reserve funds from previous years: \$612 million DOI; \$271.7 million for USFS

Total possible funds: \$4.7 billion

Federal firefighting resources (USFS and DOI)

Firefighters/personnel: 16,900 (11,300 USFS, 5,600 DOI)

Engines: 1,549 (649 DOI, 900 USFS)

Air tankers/helicopters/aircraft: 334 (III DOI, more than 200 USFS)

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