

Brown's council projects big bill to manage wildfire

■ Improving state's response to wildfire could cost \$4 billion

By **Cassandra Profita**
Oregon Public Broadcasting

SALEM — Oregon Gov. Kate Brown got a progress report from her Council on Wildfire Response on Thursday, and it came with a hefty price tag.

The board is advising the governor on how to change the state's wildfire policy in response to growing wildfire risks from overstocked forests, population growth and climate change.

Council Chair Matt Donegan told the governor that one of the

major changes the board is recommending is increased investment in wildfire suppression.

"It just stands to reason that in an era of climate change, in an era of fuel buildup and in an era of population growth and increased wildfire activity that we're going to have to spend more resources suppressing fire," he said.

He said the state will need an estimated \$4 billion in "a multi-decade initiative that will involve significant state, federal and private investment" to reduce wildfire risks through actions such as logging overstocked forestland.

"That number feels a bit overwhelming," Brown said in response. "But I think it's critically imperative that we bite off a significant

chunk right now — immediately."

The governor said she wants to spend more to improve wildland firefighting capabilities, increase controlled burning and help communities live with more wildfire smoke.

"There isn't really a fire season anymore. It's year-round. It's increasing in Oregon and frankly around the entire globe," she said. "I obviously know we need to do things differently and we need different tools and we clearly need additional resources."

Critics say the council's early recommendations are biased toward logging and putting out wildfires rather than letting forests burn as they naturally would and making homes more fire-resistant.

Ralph Bloemers with the Crag Law Center said he's worried the state will be relying too much on destructive logging to help pay for its new policy.

"My big concern is that the forest is going to be asked to pay for it. Which means the thing that we love, that we're trying to restore, is going to be degraded," he said. "And there's going to be more opportunities for fire to visit that landscape."

In a letter to the council, Dominick DellaSala, chief scientist at the Geos Institute, said the kind of logging the council's early reports advise "will not protect communities, stop fires in extreme conditions, or prevent smoke from affecting our communities."

"Simply put, we cannot log/ manage or suppress our way out of

wildfires," he wrote. "As the climate changes and we experience more drought and extreme temperatures, we can expect more extreme fire weather that will overtake our ability to suppress fire."

He advised the council to focus on solutions that help people live with fire such as making homes more fireproof and adding smoke shelters for communities near forests.

In response to critics, the governor said redesigning the state's wildfire policy is "a balancing act" and she's hoping that a combination of strategies will help avoid negative wildfire impacts like the ones Oregon experienced with the Eagle Creek Fire in the Columbia River Gorge in 2017.

Ex-Baker County fire chief cleared of misconduct charges

■ Dan Weitz was accused of defrauding Bend Fire Department in purchase of used air compressor for Baker rural

By **Garrett Andrews**
EO Media Group

BEND — A rural Eastern Oregon fire chief was found not guilty of official misconduct this week in a Deschutes County courtroom.

Dan Weitz, former chief of Baker Rural Fire Protection District, stood trial in Deschutes County Circuit Court for misconduct and first-degree theft by deception. Weitz, 62, was alleged to have deceived the Bend Fire Department when he bought a used air compressor at a deep discount in May 2017.

The case played out over two days before Judge Stephen Forte. A number of fire officials made the five-hour

drive from Baker County to testify and watch proceedings. In the end, Forte chastised Weitz for his business ethics but ruled the charges didn't fit Weitz's conduct.

"After listening to testimony and based on the evidence, it's clear to the court that the defendant was playing fast and loose with the rules," Forte said.

Air compressors are important in firefighting as they provide the breathable air used in body-worn respiratory systems. All departments need them, though they're an especially big-ticket item for smaller agencies.

At the center of this case is a 1991 Jordair SCBA



Garrett Andrews/EO Media Group

Dan Weitz, former chief of Baker Rural Fire Protection District, during his trial in Deschutes County Circuit Court, was found not guilty of official misconduct.

5,000-PSI air compressor that Bend Fire took out of service in 2017. A photo of the compressor, which is about 8 feet long, 5 feet tall and 5 feet deep, was entered

into evidence.

Compressor technology has come a long way in the past few decades. In addition to new air quality standards, systems require three-phase

power service, which is costly to install in buildings — (upward of \$10,000) but overall save districts electricity, and thus money.

Weitz joined Baker Rural in 2004 and was appointed chief in 2014. His predecessor experienced a strained relationship with the district's board of directors, according to testimony from both sides. This pattern continued after the predecessor selected Weitz as his replacement, and through the difficult 2015 fire season. The Cornet-Windy Ridge Fire caused numerous evacuations that summer around Baker County. Weitz testified he and Baker Sheriff Travis Ash quarreled during this period about how the evacuations were handled and how resources were distributed.

Along with his involvement in fire service, Weitz

has long kept numerous side businesses, he testified. He estimated he manages seven ventures, including land development and equipment refurbishing.

In early 2017, Weitz started an LLC in Oregon — Baker Rural Fire and Rescue — so he could begin selling used fire equipment to rural agencies.

In May of that year, Weitz attended the annual conference of the Oregon Fire Chiefs Association at the Eagle Crest Resort in Redmond. There, he met Bob Madden, Bend's deputy fire chief.

He learned from Madden that Bend Fire had recently upgraded compressors and had a 1991 Jordair unit sitting under a tarp in one of its parking lots, needing a new home.

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