

State, local governments in Oregon receive \$4.3 billion from feds

By HILLARY BORRUD
The Oregonian/OregonLive

SALEM — Oregon cities and counties and the state government are set to receive a combined \$4.3 billion from the \$1.9 trillion aid package Congress passed earlier this month.

The largest chunk, \$2.6 billion, will go to the state to spend on Oregon's response to the pandemic or other uses. Budget analysts are working to pin down the level of flexibility the state has to spend the funds.

Oregon will also receive \$155 million for the state

government to spend on capital projects, and county, city and other local governments are slated to receive a total of \$1.5 billion, according to information from U.S. Senate Democrats.

That is on top of the \$1.1 billion the federal relief law will send to Oregon schools.

Spending options

As for how the state government could spend its share, a spokesperson for Sen. Ron Wyden, D-Ore., said the options include paying for the government's

response to the pandemic and providing premium pay to essential workers.

"Offsetting lost revenues to provide essential government services" is another option, Hank Stern wrote in an email, as is paying for water, sewer and broadband infrastructure.

Oregon's tax revenues have continued to exceed economists' expectations during the pandemic and ensuing recession, so much so that they are on track to trigger the state's one-of-a-kind "kicker" tax rebate, which would send some of the windfall back to tax-

payers as credits when they file taxes in 2022.

Economists and state budget analysts have predicted a more challenging fiscal picture for the 2021-23 biennium, which begins July 1.

Lawmakers must pass that budget by the end of June.

Even before the Legislature approved \$800 million in additional spending in a December special session, analysts expected state revenues would be approximately \$800 million short of what would be needed to maintain the current level

of services. Staff at the Legislative Fiscal Office expect the cost of providing a status quo level of services to rise from \$24 billion in the current two-year budget, to \$25.6 million in 2021-23.

As improving revenue forecasts erase some of the state's anticipated shortfall, that could leave more of the federal aid up-for-grabs as lawmakers draft the next budget. Interim Legislative Fiscal Officer Laurie Byerly said states are still waiting for guidance from the Department of Treasury so it is unclear the degree

of flexibility the state will have to spend the funds.

Oregon governments also received \$1.8 billion for a variety of specific uses, including to distribute for rental assistance and \$499 million for schools, through Congress' December relief bill and \$2.45 billion from the CARES Act earlier in 2020.

Unlike the cash payments that can land in people's bank accounts fairly quickly, federal aid that flows to governments can take months to make its way to specific programs or recipients.

Oregon lawmakers consider new approach to cutting wildfire risk

By MATEUSZ PERKOWSKI
Capital Press

SALEM — Oregon would emphasize reducing fuels in high-risk forests near communities and key environmental resources as part of broader legislation aimed at mitigating wildfire hazards.

A crucial aspect of the proposal involves steering forest treatments toward where they're most needed, regardless of property ownership.

"We are taking an all-lands approach here," said Dylan Kruse, government affairs director for the Sustainable Northwest nonprofit organization. "Immediately, we're going where there's the most urgent need."

Though the Oregon Department of Forestry would take charge of the planning and implementation, the agency would rely on help from Oregon State University and other entities.

The targeted approach would likewise rely on state money while "leveraging" funds from the federal government.

At its core, the legislation is aimed at selecting where and how to conduct forest projects that would be most effective, Kruse said.

"We know we can't treat all the forest acreage we want to in this state, so we have to narrow down and

prioritize where we get the best return on investment," Kruse said during a recent legislative hearing.

The U.S. Forest Service has developed a "quantitative wildfire risk assessment" that indicates about 5.6 million acres in Oregon need fuels treatments, he said.

Under the legislation, projects would begin in the four highest risk categories, with an eye toward protecting human life, property and critical infrastructure, as well as watershed health and habitat restoration.

For projects to be undertaken on federal lands, they would have to undergo analysis under the National Environmental Policy Act and exclude roadless areas, riparian reserves and other sensitive sites.

The ODF already engages in "shared stewardship" projects with the U.S. Forest Service and other agencies, so the proposed legislation would accelerate this approach, said Jeff Burns, the department's partnership and planning director.

In February, the agency requested collaborative project proposals from across the state and received 93 applications for roughly \$20 million, he said. The ODF is funding 37 of those proposals with \$4 million from

the state's emergency board — enough to treat 7,000 acres — but has another 56 "shelf-ready" projects as a result.

Under the most recent version of Senate Bill 248, one of the bills being considered, ODF would receive \$20 million to implement new projects in the 2021-2023 biennium.

The current proposal would serve as a type of "pilot project" that lays the groundwork for future treatments and partnerships, said Kruse.

Of the 5.6 million acres identified as requiring management by the Forest Service, about 65% are on federal lands, 25% are owned by small woodland owners, 6% belong to state, local and tribal governments, and only 4% are on industrial timber properties, said Kyle Williams, forest production director for the Oregon Forest & Industries Council, a timber group.

"Our federal lands are struggling. They're overstocked, overgrown and underutilized," Williams said.

Reducing wildfire danger is just one component of the broader legislation under review by lawmakers, who also plan to address transmission system plans, defensible residential spaces, smoke monitoring, emergency response and other factors.



Andrew Selsky/Associated Press, File

Lawmakers convene at the Oregon Senate in Salem on June 20, 2019. Republican boycotts of Oregon's Legislature have become so frequent that Democrats want to sanction boycotters with \$500 daily fines and even disqualify them from holding office. Democrats hold the majority in the state House and Senate.

Democrats seek to end GOP boycotts of Legislature

This is third year in a row Republicans have used walkouts

By ANDREW SELSKY
Associated Press

SALEM — Walkouts by Republicans in Oregon's Legislature have become so frequent, with GOP lawmakers torpedoing progressive legislation, that Democrats want to sanction boycotters with \$500 daily fines and even disqualify them from holding office.

The issue has become acrimonious, with Democrats saying the boycotts harm the democratic functioning of the state. Oregon is particularly vulnerable to boycotts because, while 46 of the other statehouses in America require only a simple majority for a quorum, the northwestern state requires two-thirds of lawmakers to be present.

Democrats have most of the seats in the Oregon Legislature, but lack the two-thirds majority to conduct business if Republicans stay away.

On Thursday, March 18, the Senate Committee on Rules held an emo-

tional public hearing on four measures that seek to deprive Republicans of the leverage from quorum rules that critics say they have weaponized.

"I'm looking forward to engaging in a debate about how we can continue to address this flaw in our democracy," said Senate Majority Leader Rob Wagner, the committee chairman.

This is the third straight year in which Republicans have used walkouts. They have also sometimes insisted that bills be read in full, causing bills to stack up after they leave committees, and delaying floor votes on them.

The Legislature's 2020 session ended early, and acrimoniously, because of a Republican boycott over a climate change measure. House Speaker Tina Kotek said then that Republicans violated their constitutional duty of voting on bills, adding: "We have been held hostage by a

small group of elected representatives."

The previous year, a GOP senator indicated he'd resist with gunfire if state troopers were sent to bring him back to the Capitol.

This year, Republicans have already been absent from a Senate floor session. GOP lawmakers have also insisted on bills being read in full, leading Kotek to schedule night sessions in the House.

The day of this year's walkout, the Senate Republican caucus asked the governor to immediately reopen schools for full, in-person instruction. Republican Senators had felt their demands for eased COVID-19 restrictions went unheard.

At Thursday's hearing, held remotely via Zoom because the Capitol is closed to the public, ordinary Oregonians got on their computers and phones to vent their anger at GOP lawmakers who boycott. They said they'd be fired if they missed work.

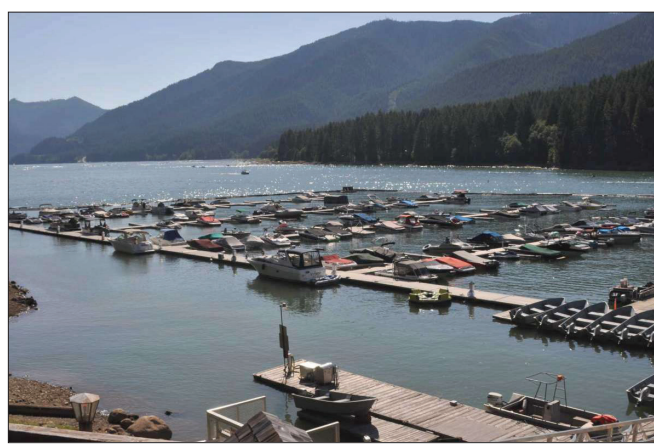
Officials: A dam in Oregon could fail in a large earthquake

By ANDREW SELSKY
Associated Press

SALEM — The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers has determined that a large earthquake — which is expected to occur again in the Pacific Northwest sooner or later — could cause the spillway gates of a dam in Oregon to buckle, resulting "in a potentially catastrophic flood."

The Corps recently announced it will try to minimize the danger by reducing the maximum height of the lake by five feet starting in April. Hundreds of thousands of people, including those in the state capital, live downstream from the Detroit Dam, whose construction in the 1950s created the narrow, nine-mile long Detroit Lake.

The move comes as Oregon and the wider Pacific Northwest are coming to grips with "the big one" that experts say is coming. Earthquakes in the Cascadia subduction zone, which extends from the ocean off Northern California to Canada's Vancouver Island, have an average magnitude of



Terry Richard/The Oregonian via AP, File

This Aug. 14, 2010, file photo shows Kane's Marina on Detroit Lake Reservoir in Oregon. The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers has determined a large earthquake, which is expected to occur again in the Pacific Northwest sooner or later, could cause the spillway gates of the dam in Oregon to buckle, resulting "in a potentially catastrophic flood."

around 9, making them among the world's biggest.

A quake in that zone has a 37% probability of happening off Oregon's coast in the next 50 years, according to Chris Goldfinger, an Oregon State University professor and geologist.

Just last week, an earthquake early warning system was launched in Oregon. Operated by the U.S. Geological Survey, the state joined California in the system that sends alerts to smart phones. Washington

state is expected to join the ShakeAlert system, which operates on an array of seismic sensors, in May.

Lawmakers are also trying to prepare the state for a major earthquake.

In the Oregon Legislature, House Bill 3083 mandates that contracts for public works must adhere to seismic safety standards and seismic rehabilitation standards in constructing or renovating public buildings or critical infrastructure in earthquake-prone areas.

**Enjoy Life
more,
Stress Less**

at

**GRANDE
Ronde**

Retirement & Assisted Living

1809 Gekeler Ln.
La Grande
541-963-4700

*PROTECTING our
Residents during this
Pandemic*



Nicole Cathey

Turning 65, paying too
much or want to
compare your options?



Get Trusted, Friendly,
Expert, Medicare
Insurance Help
admin@kereed.net



Kevin Reed

10106 N. 'C' • Island City 541-975-1364 Toll Free 1-866-282-1925 www.reedinsurance.net