

Firefighter shortage raises concerns

By ALEX BAUMHARDT
Oregon Capital Chronicle

WASHINGTON — Oregon faces a shortage of wildland firefighters that could be “a recipe for trouble,” according to U.S. Sen. Ron Wyden. Wyden wrote to U.S. Secretary of the Interior Deb Haaland and U.S. Secretary of Agriculture Tom Vilsack recently with concerns that their agencies weren’t prepared to handle another catastrophic fire season such as that of 2020 and 2021. He said one out of five wildland firefighter jobs in Oregon and Washington stand empty, depleting the ranks of those tasked with containing and quelling wildfires. The wildland firefighting program for the region is currently staffed at 1,840 firefighters, according to the U.S. Forest Service. The agency considers 2,281 to be fully staffed. “Oregon is still struggling to build after two back-to-back horrific fire seasons,” Wyden wrote. He said the federal agencies have access to more money for wildfire prevention and fighting than ever before with the passage of the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act in November, which included \$600 million to boost firefighter wages nationwide and \$8 billion for states to mitigate wildfire risk. “Your departments received this much needed support. Now, more than six months after being given this new flexibility, we are past time for action,” Wyden said. He asked for an update on how funds had been distributed so far, how funding amounts to each region of the country were determined and how many acres the U.S. Forest Service would treat in Oregon, such as getting rid of dead and dying debris in federal forests. Representatives from Wyden’s office said he has not had a response from either Haaland or Vilsack to his June 7 letter. At a June 9 meeting with the U.S. Forest Service Chief Randy Moore, Wyden further pressed for information on where federal money was going, and when Oregon would be receiving greater federal help with wildfire prevention, management and firefighter shortages. About half of Oregon belongs to the federal government, which has so far allocated \$39 million to the state to spend over five years for wildfire prevention under the infrastructure bill. For wildfire prevention, Moore said the Forest Service will treat vegetation on 20 million acres of national forests over the next 10 years, and collaborate with other local and state agencies and tribes to treat 30 million more. “Our plan is to look at 50 million acres within this time frame in order to make a difference on how that fire is behaving across, particularly, the West,” he told Wyden. On workforce shortages, Wyden laid out the extent of the need. “Western states are actually trying to borrow firefighters from each other,” Wyden said to Moore. Wyden said that firefighters he spoke with in Oregon universally wanted better pay. “We already see these ‘help wanted’ signs offering much better pay in various other positions,” Wyden said. “Given the billions of dollars Congress provided in the Bipartisan Infrastructure Act, particularly for forestry, the question from Oregonians is obvious — how is the department going to use that money to fix this shortage of permanent wildland fire positions?”

Critics fear restrictions coming with new wildfire map

By MATEUSZ PERKOWSKI
Capital Press

SALEM — Oregon forestry officials are bracing for controversy after approving statewide hazard ratings that encompass up to 300,000 properties with elevated risk of wildfires. Many of those tracts are expected to face new defensible space and building code requirements under “wildland-urban interface” criteria recently enacted by the state’s Board of Forestry. Critics anticipate the two regulatory actions will result in sweeping and unworkable restrictions for rural communities when a map of affected areas is released later this month. Blowback from rural residents against the new requirements is expected by the state forestry officials due to objections they’ve encountered during the rule-making process. “We have to recognize there will be people and organizations that will continue to push against this and attempt to embarrass the department and related agencies,” said Jim Kelly, the board’s chair, during a recent meeting. “It will enter into the governor’s race and all that. I think we all need to be prepared.” The Oregon Department of Forestry received roughly twice as many comments opposed to the mapping regime than in favor of it, mostly because people thought the wildland-urban interface was too expansive,



Stayton Fire District/Contributed Photo, File

The Oregon Department of Forestry has approved mapping rules that critics fear will cause over-regulation of rural properties.

said Tim Holschbach, the agency’s fire prevention and policy manager. The agency will send out written notices to 250,000-300,000 landowners affected by the rules. They can appeal their classifications if they’re subject to regulation, he said. Periodic audits will review the effectiveness of the rules, which can continue to be modified. As the rollout of the wildfire map gets underway, ODF realizes it will be in a “fish bowl” of public scrutiny and it expects that revisions will be necessary, said Mike Shaw, the agency’s fire chief. “The agency’s work is not done. The work will continue through this year. We know we’re not going to be perfect,” Shaw said. “There will be adjustments in the future. This is a great first step.”

The Oregon Farm Bureau has worried about adverse impacts to agriculture since lawmakers began negotiating comprehensive wildfire legislation last year. The Legislature ended up passing Senate Bill 762, which the Farm Bureau criticized for its “top-down” approach to wildfire mitigation. The group favored a “bottom-up” strategy of consulting with rural communities proposed in another bill. To get the bill over the finish line, lawmakers eliminated SB 762’s definition of wildland-urban interface, or WUI, and instead directed the Board of Forestry to set the parameters based on “national best practices.” However, the Farm Bureau and other critics believe the board’s WUI criteria are nonetheless overly broad. The vast acreage likely included in

the designation will leave people “shocked,” said Lauren Smith, the group’s director of government and national affairs. “Our legislators will be very surprised when they start getting constituent calls,” she said. “When you

get a WUI that is nearly the size of the state of Oregon, it sort of defeats the purpose.” Properties will be subject to regulation only if they’re both within the WUI and have a hazard rating of “high” or “extreme” wildfire risk. Roughly 250,000-300,000 properties fall into the “high” and “extreme” risk categories, but ODF doesn’t yet have an estimate of how many are also in the WUI. The Farm Bureau expects a great deal of overlap, which will have a drastic effect on rural areas, Smith said. “You’ll see large swaths of entire communities pulled into high or extreme risk WUI,” she said. “There’s a lot of regulation going on focused on this map and all these rural communities, and not a lot of representation by them.”

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