

New state wildfire bill proposed

BY SANDY SHAFFER

A new bill is being discussed in the Oregon legislature this session that has the potential to significantly influence our future wildfire seasons, and our pocketbooks!

The proposed “Wildfire Protection Act” would change how fire suppression resources are funded, as well as when and how these resources are ordered up. If your property is classified as forest-timber or grazing land, you should be very interested in this new bill, because you help fund fire suppression in our state.

As a forest landowner I was definitely interested and so I did a little research on what we have now versus what is being proposed; then I talked to a couple of experts from the Oregon Department of Forestry (ODF) to better understand the possible changes. I liked what I learned.

Presently, we forest or grazing landowners pay a fee on our property-tax bills (labeled “OR Forestry Fire, Timber/Grazing”) for wildfire protection by our local Medford district of the ODF. If there is a structure on the property there is a second fee labeled “OR Forestry Fire, surcharge,” because it’s a known fact that humans are the main cause of wildfires. Both fees are calculated annually.

These fees go toward funding two levels of fire suppression: (1) Local “initial attack” of fires on private lands in our area by the ODF (usually fires less than 10 acres in size, which is about 95% of all fires); and (2) A statewide fund that covers the

first \$10 million to fight “large fires” (those requiring resources such as aerial retardant, aircraft, helicopters, or additional crews and fire teams). If the state’s “large-fire” costs are even higher, the next \$15 million is currently covered by the state’s general fund, and after that a special insurance policy takes over to cover up to another \$25 million.

Currently the local “initial attack” is funded 50-50 by private landowner taxes and the state’s general fund. However, the first \$10 million of the statewide “large-fire” fund is paid solely by our private landowner taxes.

The primary reasoning behind this new Wildfire Protection Act is that it’s more effective, less costly and safer for communities to extinguish wildfires while they are small. This isn’t rocket science; it’s universally accepted that, aside from fire prevention, reducing the response time to a wildfire is the most effective factor under our control to keep wildfires small. Because costs for “large fires” can escalate very quickly, more “initial attack” resources just makes sense.

The other reason for this new Act is that the cost of fighting Oregon’s “large fires” has only been averaging around \$8

million annually. This means that private landowners are the only ones footing that bill (because the costs are within that first \$10 million). Good news, yes, but fair? Hardly.

The new proposal is two-fold: to shift about \$3 million of private landowner funds from the statewide “large-fire” bucket over to the local “initial attack” buckets, and to also gradually (over two years) get to an even 50-50 split (private landowners and general fund) on the first \$20 million for “large fire” suppression costs. After that, the special insurance policy would go into affect. With increased firefighting resources throughout the state, that \$8-million average should drop (or maybe stay level if you account for climate change?).

If you are really paying attention to these numbers, you might be questioning the math on the “large fires”? Currently \$10 million plus another \$15 million needs to be paid before the insurance policy kicks in, but the new proposal is for only \$20 million to be spent before it takes affect. Why? Well, since Oregon has done such a great job of being prepared, reducing wildfire risks and having effective initial

attacks on fires, the state’s “deductible” for the wildfire insurance policy was reduced by \$5 million! So, we all should be patting ourselves on the back—our fire prevention and preparedness work has paid off!

You might also notice, as I did, that the proposed changes have the state’s general fund paying out more for wildfire costs in the long run. Yes, everyone in the state would be paying more and I have to say that there’s a part of me that’s pleased about this. After all, the majority of wildfires are human-caused and locally only about half of those are from landowners on their own property. The other half are caused by “the public”—motorists, recreationists, hunters, arson, etc., according to Dan Thorpe, our local ODF district forester.

The state’s reasoning for taking a greater share of wildfire suppression costs (in addition to the importance of wildfire protection to public safety) is their recognition of the broad public benefits of a healthy forest landscape—clean air and water, fish and wildlife habitat, economic contributions, recreation and more. The feeling is that Oregon’s livability is defined by its forests.

When/if this Wildfire Protection Act passes, we would see more firefighting resources available locally and possibly lower annual tax rates for our fire protection.

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NEWS from Oregon Department of Forestry

Josephine County’s last chance for wildfire fuel reduction assistance

Get a jump on protecting your home from wildfire by getting fuel reduction assistance today. Several Josephine County agencies and nonprofit partners have joined forces to help landowners get prepared for fire season. Assistance money can help landowners with brush reduction, dead vegetation removal, tree thinning and other landscaping projects that can significantly reduce the intensity of a potentially destructive wildfire.

In many cases, financial assistance is in the form of partial reimbursement after a fuel reduction job is completed. In some cases, such as when a landowner is physically unable to do fuel reduction work, assistance is available to cover most if not all of the cost.

In all cases, the goal is to make defensible space zones around homes in wildfire-risk areas. These zones help firefighters to protect homes threatened by wildfire. In some situations, it may be beneficial to reduce fuels along property lines, roadsides or other areas on larger lots.

The partners involved in this cooperative effort include:

- Grants Pass Department of Safety, Fire and Rescue Division
- Illinois Valley Community Development Organization (grant ends December 31)
- Illinois Valley Fire District
- Josephine County Forestry (grants ends in June)
- Josephine County Soil and Water Conservation District
- Oregon Department of Forestry, Grants Pass Unit

For a free on-site fuel reduction assessment, call 541-471-4248.

Smoke on the horizon

It happens every burning season. You want to burn your pile of brush and branches, but the air quality index is too high and open burning is shut off. Yet you can see plumes of smoke rising from the surrounding mountains.

How come burning is allowed in the high country when it’s shut off in the valley?

Burning is sometimes allowed on a higher-elevation site if the fire can generate enough heat energy to propel its smoke high enough where wind will blow it away from the valley. Debris pile fires in valley areas often don’t generate enough heat energy to propel smoke high enough to catch the upper-elevation winds. Burning in valley areas is often allowed only when lower-elevation winds exist to blow away smoke generated at the valley floor and from the surrounding foothills.

Higher-elevation burning is done primarily to reduce slash left over following a logging operation, or to get rid of tree branches, boles and brush cuttings created by a fuel-reduction project. Most of the higher-elevation burns take place on industrial forestlands, national forest lands, or Bureau of Land Management lands. Prior to igniting the burn, the owner or manager of the lands must have submitted a detailed analysis of the fuel to be burned, as well as the site, to the Oregon Department of Forestry (ODF). Factors in the burn plan include site elevation, aspect, slope percentage, a description of the fuel (such as tree species), the age of the fuel, the amount of fuel and the size of the area to be burned. There must also be an ignition plan, which describes the optimum temperature and wind speed

for burning, the ignition method, and the estimated time it will take to fully ignite all of the fuel. The plan must be approved by ODF before ignition may take place, and ODF’s smoke management meteorologists also decide when the burn may take place.

Information about ODF’s Smoke Management Program is posted on the Internet at <http://www.oregon.gov/odf/pages/fire/smp/dailysmoke.aspx>.

For daily information about prescribed fire projects on federal lands in southwest Oregon, see <http://ormic.org/rxfire.shtml> or call 800-267-3126.

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