

State to redraw wildfire risk map

Decision comes after public backlash

By **TED SICKINGER**
The Oregonian

Facing public backlash, the Oregon Department of Forestry on Thursday announced it will redraw a map outlining wildfire risk for properties across the state and pause enforcement measures that would eventually require some owners to make improvements to protect their buildings.

The announcement comes only about a month after state officials in June released the map and began notifying select property owners about their potential responsibilities to clean up properties to reduce risk. That prompted a tidal wave of complaints from property owners who claimed the map was inaccurate, would require costly investments and would impact insurance rates and availability.

The agency and researchers at Oregon State University produced the map to comply with provisions of Senate Bill 762, which directed the agency to classify the fire risk of properties around the state in one of five categories.

The mapping effort identified some 120,000 tax lots across the state at “high” or “extreme” risk of burning, and some 80,000 properties that would be subject to new building code requirements and obligations to clear flammable vegetation from around existing homes and structures.

Last month, the agency sent letters to those property owners informing them of their risk level and the potential new requirements, along with information on how to appeal their designation. Those appeals were due by Sept. 21. The agency also scheduled a series of virtual and in-person informational meetings around the state to explain the process and garner feedback, the first of which took place last week.

The blowback — from property owners, legislators, county commissioners and various interest groups — was swift and loud, creating a public relations crisis for the Department of Forestry and its new leader, Cal Mukumoto.

In a news release Thursday, Mukumoto acknowledged that the agency rushed to deliver the map by a looming deadline, and “there wasn’t enough time to allow for the type of local outreach and engagement that people wanted, needed and deserved.”

The agency had received nearly 2,000 comments from Oregonians, he added, and now understands the key areas of concerns related to the risk classification.

“In response to input received since posting, we have decided to remove the current iteration of the wildfire risk map from the Oregon Explorer and withdraw the notices sent,” Mukumoto said in the release. “We will immediately begin working with Oregon State University on some refinements to improve the accuracy of risk classification assignments based on what we’ve heard from property owners thus far.”

The current appeals process will end and any appeals already filed will become moot, he said, though the agency will review the information submitted to aid in improving the map. Once the map is refined, he said the agency would seek input from communities before finalizing it and sending new notices to property owners in the extreme and high-risk classifications.

The agency has not yet established a



The remains of the Phoenix Motel in Phoenix after the Almeda fire in 2020.

Dave Killen/The Oregonian

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Cal Mukumoto | Department of Forestry’s new leader

firm time frame for release of the new map.

“We’re still working out the details and need to work with Oregon State University to find out how long it’s going to take,” said Derek Gasperini, an agency spokesperson. “We’re going backwards a bit here. We’re taking a step back to get some more input. We’re hoping to have some more practical details on the timeline early next week.”

Some 1,200 people tuned into a virtual meeting the agency held last week. A parade of southern Oregon property owners criticized what they said was a bungled rollout, an inaccurate designation for their personal properties, the impact on insurance rates and availability, and new requirements for fire resistant building materials and brush clearing around their homes.

State Sen. Jeff Golden, D-Ashland, the chief sponsor of the legislation prompting the designations, told participants that he understood the stress the notification had caused, but that some of that was coming from rumors and social media claims about the punishing requirements they would impose — claims he said aren’t true.

“It would also not be true to say we’re not going to require anything of Oregonians or do anything that could possibly impose news costs on anybody, because the point we’ve reached is too critical,” he said. “The home insurance issue is a real deal. ... The problem here isn’t Sen-

ate Bill 762, it’s the billions of dollars that insurers are paying out because of these growing megafires.”

That’s didn’t go over well with some of the audience, one of whom accused him of being a climate change evangelist and said he was ignoring the costly and onerous restrictions the law could impose on his constituents.

Mukumoto said in the news release Thursday that the agency was committed to getting the new iteration of the map right.

“We’re fully committed to continuing to work with the governor’s office, legislators, our partner agencies, local governments, and Oregonians to do just that.”

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