

Small change to wildfire bill brought bipartisan support

By TED SICKINGER
The Oregonian



Kari Greer/U.S. Forest Service Photo, File

After some last-minute jockeying and wordsmithing, both backers and advocacy groups who had opposed elements of Oregon's omnibus wildfire response bill say they are satisfied with the version that lawmakers passed last month.

SALEM — After some last-minute jockeying and wordsmithing, both backers and advocacy groups who had opposed elements of Oregon's omnibus wildfire response bill say they are satisfied with the version that lawmakers passed last month.

Senate Bill 762, which comes with a \$185 million price tag, contains myriad provisions to up the state's game when it comes to fighting wildfires, preparing communities for them, and making forests more resilient to fire. It comes after the state's devastating Labor Day fires last year, and as it enters what many experts believe will be another challenging fire season this year.

The bill garnered bipartisan support after lawmakers agreed to sidestep the biggest sticking point over lands subject to property restrictions intended to slow the spread of wildfire. Lawmakers removed a key definition from the bill so that it could be outlined with more input later, assuaging some Republicans.

Sen. Jeff Golden, D-Ashland, the chief sponsor of the bill, said he was looking to hold the line on any amendments that would water down the bill and was fine with the outcome.

"When it became clear

that we needed to have one more amendment to get a real bipartisan vote, the only thing I wanted was to make sure that no category of land would be categorically excluded from regulation," he said. "I got that."

At issue was how the bill defined the so-called wildland urban interface, or WUI — the area where new building codes and defensible space provisions would apply and property owners

would potentially bear costs and aesthetic impacts. In common parlance, the WUI is the transition zone between undeveloped land with combustible vegetation and clustered human development.

As such, it can be the first line of defense against wildfires entering larger urban areas, or simply areas considered at highest risk for property damage or loss of life because of their location in

the woods or grasslands.

However, some groups that initially opposed the bill, including the Oregon Farm Bureau and the Oregon Property Owners Association, argued that the WUI definition it included was far too broad, and could subject virtually the entire state, from 5,000-acre ranches in eastern Oregon to homes within Portland and other urban areas, to the proposed regulations. Rural legislators offered

up nightmare scenarios: farmers being forced to plow under crops, homeowners being required to clear-cut legacy trees and remove all ornamental vegetation, and a broad swath of Oregonians subject to massive new costs when building new structures or renovating existing ones.

It was never clear those fears were based in reality. Before anything gets regulated, the bill directs the Department of Forestry to produce a map of wildfire risk across the state at the property level, and the Oregon State Fire Marshal to establish requirements for property owners to manage combustible vegetation around homes and other structures.

The Department of Consumers and Business Services, meanwhile, will adopt wildfire mitigation building code standards for new structures and substantial renovations by October 2022.

But those new requirements would only apply in areas of the wildland urban interface where wildfire risk was deemed high or extreme. The bill includes a process for property owners to appeal the designation of their property if it falls in the high or extreme risk categories. And some of the cost estimates thrown around by lawmakers related to new building codes appeared to be wildly inflated.

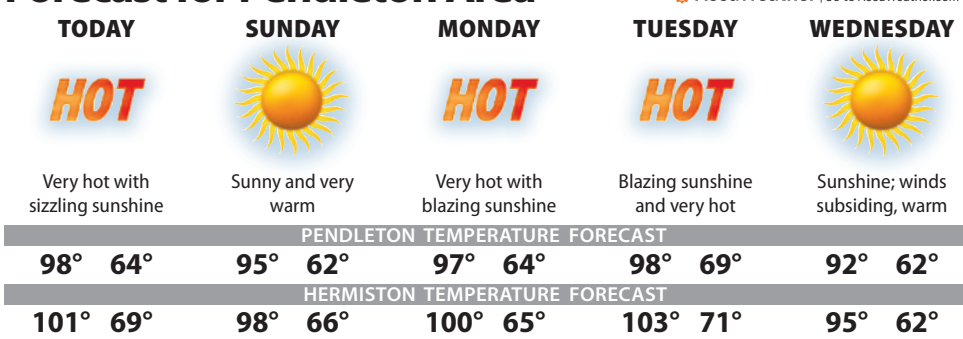
Nevertheless, with a bill that many have labeled one of the most important this session, legislative leaders were anxious to attract some bipartisan support and avoid having it widely labeled as yet another cram-down from urban Democrats that would harm rural Oregonians. So they convened a last minute committee to seek a compromise.

The deal involved a small tweak to the bill's language, pulling the definition of the wildland urban interface from the legislation and delegating it to the Oregon Department of Forestry to define after more public input. The Board of Forestry was directed to adopt a new definition not later than 100 days after the passage of the bill.

Dave Hunnicutt, president of the Oregon Property Owners Association, said he still had concerns about the bill and its implementation, but the change made it significantly better.

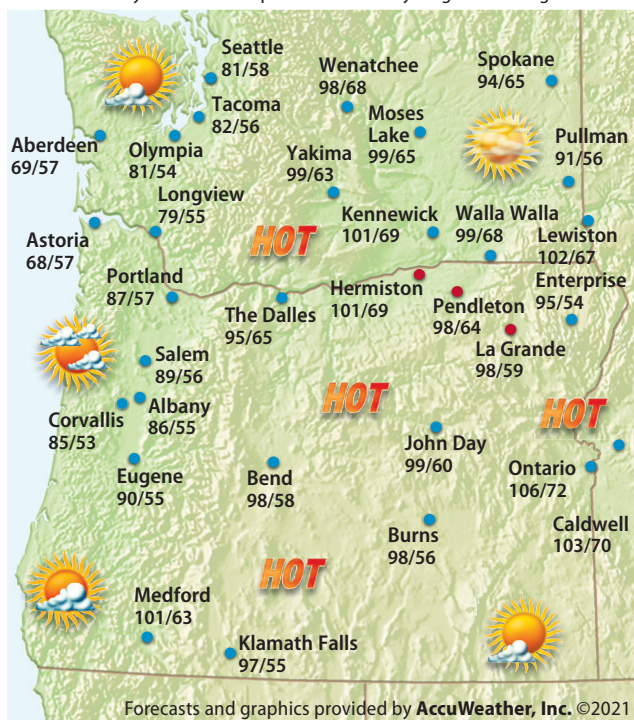
"No one in any other state would refer to a house on 500 acres in Lake County as urban, but the way the bill was drafted, that's what forestry would have been required to do," he said. "It was critical for us to not have a broad definition of the WUI put into statute. We'll probably wind up with a definition that is reasonable and makes sense and that's all we've ever asked."

Forecast for Pendleton Area



OREGON FORECAST

Shown is today's weather. Temperatures are today's highs and tonight's lows.



ALMANAC

PENDLETON through 3 p.m. yest.

TEMP.	HIGH	LOW
Yesterday	91°	60°
Normals	85°	56°
Records	106° (2013)	42° (1955)

PRECIPITATION
24 hours ending 3 p.m. 0.00"
Month to date 0.00"
Normal month to date 0.02"
Year to date 4.34"
Last year to date 8.57"
Normal year to date 7.59"

HERMISTON through 3 p.m. yest.

TEMP.	HIGH	LOW
Yesterday	93°	65°
Normals	85°	56°
Records	107° (2013)	42° (2003)

PRECIPITATION
24 hours ending 3 p.m. 0.00"
Month to date 0.00"
Normal month to date 0.01"
Year to date 1.93"
Last year to date 1.65"
Normal year to date 5.71"

WINDS (in mph)

Today	Sun.
Boardman WSW 8-16	WSW 8-16
Pendleton W 7-14	W 8-16

SUN AND MOON

Sunrise today	5:11 a.m.
Sunset tonight	8:48 p.m.
Moonrise today	1:28 a.m.
Moonset today	3:03 p.m.

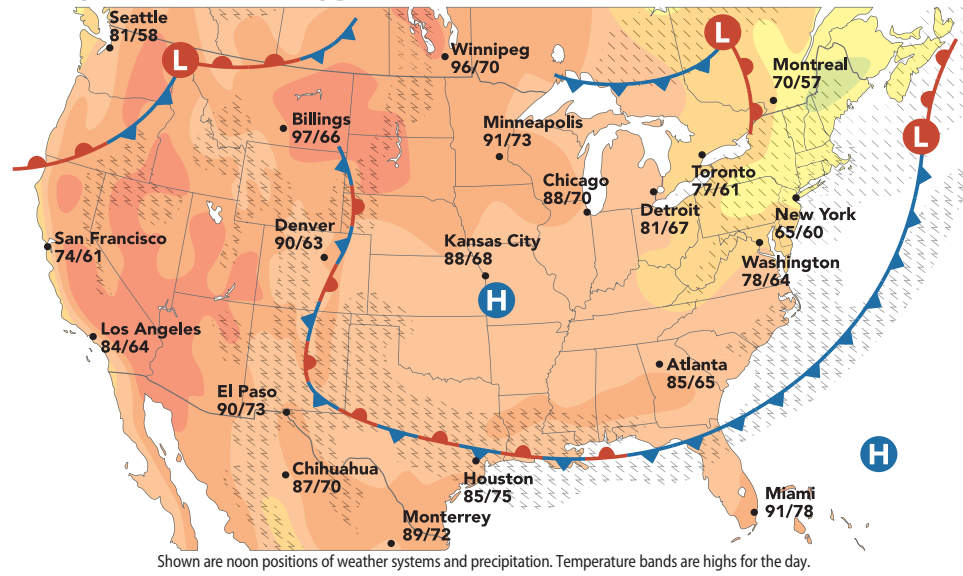
New First Full Last
July 9 July 17 July 23 July 31

NATIONAL EXTREMES

Yesterday's National Extremes: (for the 48 contiguous states)

High 111° in Needles, Calif. Low 35° in Wolcott, Colo.

NATIONAL WEATHER TODAY



Shown are noon positions of weather systems and precipitation. Temperature bands are highs for the day.

-10s -0s 0s 10s 20s 30s 40s 50s 60s 70s 80s 90s 100s 110s

showers t-storms rain flurries snow ice cold front warm front stationary front high low

100-acre blaze burns in Keating Valley

No structures damaged in blaze about 18 miles from Baker City

By JAYSON JACOBY
Baker City Herald

BAKER CITY — A fire sparked by farm equipment on the hottest June day on record in Baker County raced through dry grass and sagebrush in Keating Valley, threatening several homes before crews from multiple agencies, with help from a pair of air tankers, stopped the blaze Tuesday, June 29.

"It really took off in 110-degree heat with 20-mile-an-hour winds behind it," said Buzz Harper, chief of the Keating Rural Fire Protection District. "In that heat and wind it could have been real bad."

The fire burned about 100 acres, Harper said. No homes were damaged.

Baker County Sheriff Travis Ash said the sheriff's office gave evacuation notices to about 10 residents

as a precaution.

Flames came within about 50 yards of one home, Harper said.

Harper said the blaze started in a field where a swather was operating. He said he suspects a disc on the swather hit a rock, causing a spark.

When he was notified about the fire, Harper said he took one engine, with a water capacity of 250 gallons, while his son, Steven, and another Keating volunteer, Brad Bottoms, headed out with a 1,000-gallon engine.

Buzz Harper said the trio, with the two engines, arrived within a few minutes and had nearly stopped the fire, at about 10 acres, when both ran out of water almost simultaneously.

"When you're in the middle of it all (the water) goes pretty fast," he said.

The fire, still propelled by the hot, dry wind, continued to move to the north and northwest, with flame lengths around 20 feet when the blaze hit patches of drought-desiccated sagebrush. Embers were starting spot fires 200 to

300 yards ahead of the main blaze, Harper said.

Harper said multiple fire agencies, responding through the mutual aid system, arrived soon after with a variety of equipment including engines and bulldozers.

Overhead, a pair of single-engine air tankers dropped fire retardant on the fringes of the blaze to block its spread.

"They did a great job of setting up lines," Harper said of the aircraft.

He was glad to have two tankers available so quickly, considering that fires are burning elsewhere in the region, and the fire danger is high due to the record-setting heat wave, so there's no surplus of firefighting resources.

"We were lucky to get what we got," Harper said.

The Pine Valley and Eagle Valley departments, Baker Rural, the Lookout-Glasgow Rangeland Fire Protection Association, U.S. Forest Service, BLM and Oregon Department of Forestry each responded to assist, Harper said.

IN BRIEF

Walla Walla County in Washington has first case West Nile in 2021

WALLA WALLA — The first detection of West Nile virus in 2021 has been in mosquitoes in the Burbank area, according to Washington state health officials.

The Washington State Department of Health said in a news release Thursday, July 1, that mosquitoes infected with West Nile virus are able to spread infection to humans.

Last year two people were reported to have become infected with the virus in Washington.

The majority of people infected with the virus do not get sick. About 1 in 5 will develop a fever or other symptoms that go away without medical treatment.

For a small number of people, infection with West Nile virus can lead to permanent neurological effects or death. People over age 60 and those with certain medical conditions are most at risk of severe disease.

— Walla Walla Union-Bulletin

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