

Oregon News

OREGON LEGISLATURE



S. John Collins / Baker City Herald file photo-2015

The Cornet-Windy Ridge fire burns south of Baker City in August 2015.

Wildfire bills moving forward, but budget could douse momentum

■ One bill would allocate \$25 million to thin forests, but the other bill, which would overhaul the state's fire mitigation and suppression system, lacks a funding source

SALEM — Two bills being considered by Oregon lawmakers this session are expected to be the one-two punch the state needs to considerably reduce the impact of wildfire on its landscape and residents.

In recent years, the onslaught of smoke from major wildfires has choked many parts of the state through the summer months. Fires threaten homes where forests meet urban sprawl, and timber owners are losing precious resources for renewable building material and wood products.

Wildfire is one of the pre-eminent threats to Oregon's way of life in a multitude of ways, but the state is hoping this year it can make headway in minimizing its effects through an approach that takes both the short term and future into account.

The first is a bill — Senate Bill 1514 — creating 15 projects to be led by the state Forestry Department that would clear trees, underbrush and other forest material considered to be “fuel” for wildfire. The projects would take place in locations across the state determined by the department within the 5.2 million acres identified as high-risk areas by the Governor's Council on Wildfire Response. The projects would be funded by a \$25 million allocation laid out within the bill.

The second bill — Senate

“I don't want something that dies at the end of the session stuck in Ways and Means.”

— Sen. Herman Baertschiger, R-Grants Pass

Bill 1536 — would overhaul the state's approach to fire mitigation and suppression, and help communities adapt to smoke and fire.

It includes a lengthy list of new policies and regulations around:

- Assessing wildfire risk for utilities and having them create their own mitigation plans.
- Bolstering fire insurance and setting standards that encourage homeowners near forests to harden their homes against fire.
- Creating new positions within the state Office of Emergency Management to administer new mitigation and recovery efforts.
- Mitigating the health effects of smoke by helping homeowners in smoke-prone areas retrofit their homes with filtration systems.
- Establishing minimum standards of defensible space around homes.
- Setting a goal to annually treat 300,000 acres of forest and remove fuels to prevent fires from growing too large.
- Developing Oregon's forestry workforce.
- Requiring the State Fire Marshall and State Forester to help local jurisdictions, landowners, businesses and individuals create new wildfire

service districts, or expand and adjust current ones, as well as providing financial help.

What about the cost?

It's unclear just how much SB 1536 bill would cost or where that money would come from. A fiscal impact statement found the proposal needs further work by the Legislature's budget committee, but the Governor's Wildfire Council estimated the cost at approximately \$4 billion over the next 20 years, or about \$200 million a year.

It's a robust approach to many aspects of the conversation the Governor's Council and legislators continue to have around reducing the impact of wildfire. But a party-line vote in the Senate Wildfire Committee last week to send both bills into the budget committee indicates Republicans might not have the appetite to tackle the entire plan now.

The bill has a lot of moving pieces, and the version passed by the committee includes everything but one provision on land use. House Bill 4054, sponsored by Rep. David Brock Smith, R-Port Orford, creates an advisory committee within the Department of Land Conservation and

Development to review land use policies related to wildfire.

Sen. Herman Baertschiger Jr., R-Grants Pass, committee vice chair and Senate Republican leader, failed in his attempts to amend the bill to drop several sections.

Baertschiger said he's concerned the bill does too much at once and needs more discussion on certain policy and funding aspects. He pointed out that he's not attempting to derail the effort but to be realistic about what's feasible, especially at the budget committee.

“Ways and Means has already told me there's not a lot of money, so I want something we can get through the process,” he said. “I don't want something that dies at the end of the session stuck in Ways and Means. That's my bottom line.”

Sen. Jeff Golden, D-Ashland, is more optimistic.

“We're talking about significant dollars, and of course, the wildfire council's even talking about a lot more money over time, but I think all this work we've been doing makes for a pretty strategic launch,” he said. “The question is how much agreement is there that this is a tier-one emergency.”

Golden said he believes there would be no question of the emergency around wildfire and support for this bill had 2019 fire season been as bad as the two previous years.

Carbon bill on hold for now

■ Pause follows complaints issued by Republicans in the House

By Dirk VanderHart

Oregon Public Broadcasting

SALEM — Democrats are slowing forward momentum of a signature bill to regulate Oregon's greenhouse gas emissions, after complaints that the policy is being ramrodded through without adequate discussion.

House Speaker Tina Kotek, D-Portland, told reporters on Monday that legislative leaders plan to temporarily halt the progress of Senate Bill 1530, which would implement a cap-and-trade system in the state.

“This is a response to House Republican leaders who are saying, ‘We need to understand this bill better on behalf of our constituents.’”

— House Speaker Tina Kotek, D-Portland

A hearing set for Tuesday in the Senate budget committee was canceled so the House can discuss the issue more thoroughly.

Bowing to criticisms over a lack of process, Kotek says a bill identical to SB 1530 would be introduced in the House Rules Committee on Tuesday. That will allow House members to consider the proposal in depth — and listen to public testimony — in hearings planned for Tuesday and Thursday.

SB 1530, meanwhile, would be on pause, Kotek said.

“Our suggestion to the Senate was not to progress the bill until the House has had some opportunity to (get) further information on our side,” she said. “This is a response to House Republican leaders who are saying, ‘We need to understand this bill better on behalf of our constituents.’”

Senator Bill Hansell, R-Athens, wasn't so sure that the cancellation of Tuesday's work session was meant to satisfy the requests of House Republicans.

“I've heard they have more amendments to make,” he said. “I think what's happening is that the bill is being amended to bring more businesses on board to support it. On the other end, they're losing environmental groups that believe too much is being given away.”

Tensions over the cap-and-trade proposal have dominated this year's five-week legislative session. On Feb. 13, for instance, Republicans went so far as to walk out of one House committee in protest of Democrats' maneuvering.

Though the fundamental structure of Oregon's proposed system has been debated and scrutinized for years, GOP members in both chambers have repeatedly accused Democrats of abusing their authority by forcing SB 1530 through the building.

Under the bill, emissions from the transportation, manufacturing and utility sectors would be capped and reduced over time. Companies within those sectors would be required to obtain permits from the state for each metric ton of carbon they emit in a given year.

Democrats' gesture around SB 1530 appears unlikely to move Republicans, who have argued for years that a cap-and-trade system will hike prices in Oregon, hurting families and businesses. While the House Republican Office did not immediately have comment on Kotek's announcement, its members have shown no signs of supporting the bill unless it is submitted to voters for approval, something Kotek and other Democrats have refused to consider.

Teen dies from flu complications

COOS BAY (AP) — A 16-year-old student at a Coos Bay high school has died due to complications of Influenza B, officials said.

Coos Bay Public Schools Superintendent Bryan Trendell said in a statement that the student at Marshfield High School had died early Monday morning, The World reported. Marshfield High School Principal Travis

Howard said he's been in contact with an infectious disease specialist who assured him that the school was not in danger of further infection or contamination.

The student was a football and baseball player and was also in band, Howard said. A room has been set up at the school for students who might need counseling.

ODOT managers retire after probe

SALEM (AP) — Two Oregon Department of Transportation managers at the center of a 2017 whistleblower-retaliation scandal have retired following a six-month internal investigation into possible new policy violations.

David McKane, 60, and David Fifer, 63, worked for ODOT's Motor Carrier Transportation Division, which regulates trucking and operates weigh stations throughout the

state. Both were put on paid administrative leave on Aug. 27, 2019. Neither returned or will return to work, ODOT spokesman David House said.

Fifer retired Feb. 1. McKane's retirement will be effective April 1, accounting for accrued leave. Reached by phone on Monday, McKane declined to comment to the Statesman Journal. Fifer didn't respond to an email.

Happy Retirement

Open House
Baker Vision Clinic
Friday, February 28
1- 4 p.m.



After 35 years, Dr. Sheryl Blankenship is retiring from Baker Vision Clinic. As many of you know and appreciate, Dr. Blankenship has spent her career serving patients with dedication, enthusiasm, and care. We wish Dr. Blankenship all the best in her next great adventure; she will be truly missed by patients, staff and all those who she has worked alongside throughout her amazing career. Baker Vision Clinic will be hosting an open house for patients to stop by and show their appreciation for Dr. Sheryl Blankenship's many years of service.

**BEST OF HAWAII
FOUR-ISLAND
TOUR**

13 days, departs
year-round

**VMT
vacations**

FROM
\$2,249
\$1,999

1-877-840-6119
Promo code N7017

*Prices are per person based on double occupancy plus \$299 taxes & fees. Single supplement and seasonal surcharges may apply. Add-on airfare available. Offers apply to new bookings only, made by 3/31/20. Other terms and conditions may apply. Ask your Travel Consultant for details.

One solution for oxygen at home, away, and for travel

Introducing the INOGEN ONE — It's oxygen therapy on your terms

No more tanks to refill. No more deliveries. No more hassles with travel. The INOGEN ONE portable oxygen concentrator is designed to provide unparalleled freedom for oxygen therapy users. It's small, lightweight, clinically proven for stationary and portable use, during the day and at night, and can go virtually anywhere — even on most airlines. Inogen accepts Medicare and many private insurances!

Reclaim Your Freedom And Independence NOW!

inogen

Call Inogen Today To Request Your FREE Info Kit

1-855-839-0752

© 2020 Inogen, Inc. All rights reserved. MKT-P0108

Call today to connect with a

SENIOR LIVING ADVISOR

INDEPENDENT LIVING • ASSISTED LIVING • MEMORY CARE

aPlace for Mom

A Place for Mom has helped over a million families find senior living solutions that meet their unique needs.

There's no cost to you!

(888) 651-5669

! We're paid by our partner communities