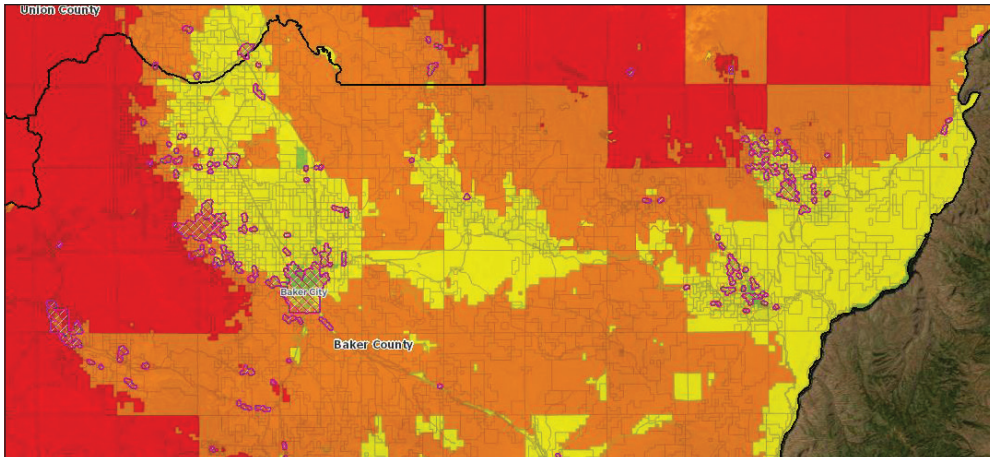


Oregon Department of Forestry maps

This map shows the wildfire danger ratings in the Sumpter Valley. Orange denotes high danger and red is extreme danger. Areas with diagonal lines are in the wildland-urban interface (WUI). All of Sumpter is both within the WUI and has a high or extreme danger rating, which means property owners could be required to take steps to reduce the fire risk on their properties, and comply with new building codes, under a new state law.

This map shows the wildfire danger ratings in Baker County. Orange denotes high danger and red is extreme danger. Areas with diagonal lines are in the wildland-urban interface (WUI). Yellow is moderate and green denotes either low or no risk. Owners of properties that are both within the WUI and have a high or extreme danger rating could be required to take steps to reduce the fire risk on their properties, and comply with new building codes, under a new state law.



Wildfire

Continued from A1

That map, which the Oregon Department of Forestry recently released as a collaboration with Oregon State University, also shows the boundaries for what's known as the wildland-urban interface — WUI — areas with homes that are within or near forests or rangelands where wildfires are more likely.

Senate Bill 762 requires the risk level be based on the local weather, climate, topography and vegetation, the latter criterion determined by aerial data. Property owners can appeal the classification if they believe it's improper.

Properties that are both within the WUI, and that have a wildfire risk rating of either high or extreme (on a five-level scale that also includes no risk, low and moderate risks) could be required, under Senate Bill 762, to create the same sort of defensible space that Morgan has around his home.

Such property owners might also have to comply with changes in building codes.

Morgan isn't comfortable with the state mandating the kinds of work he undertook on his property.

But he's even more troubled by the process the Department of Forestry has used.

In July the agency mailed letters to 250,000 to 300,000 property owners whose land has a wildfire risk rating of high or extreme, and whether, as in Morgan's case, the lot is also within the WUI.

Morgan's letter is dated July 21.

"I think this letter caught a lot of us off guard, including me," Morgan said on Tuesday, Aug. 2. "I think the state got the cart before the horse."

He cites the letter itself. It reads, in part: "You may be required to take actions to create defensible space around your home and adhere to changes to building code requirements. Both of these regulatory processes are still in development."

The problem, in Morgan's view, is that he and tens of thousands of other property owners are left to wonder what they might be required to do, and when.

According to the Forestry

Department, the Oregon State Fire Marshal is working on the defensible space requirements. The agency is slated to adopt those in December 2022, and take effect in 2023.

The state Building Codes Division is responsible for the building code requirements mentioned in the letter to property owners.

The agency is scheduled to adopt codes Oct. 1, 2022, and those will take effect April 1, 2023.

Sumpter the most heavily affected part of Baker County

On the Forestry Department's new map — www.oregon.gov/odf/fire/pages/wildfire-risk.aspx — Sumpter stands out among Baker County communities.

The entire community, which has about 212 residents and 500 homes, is both within the WUI and has a wildfire risk rating of either high or extreme. Sumpter is, in effect, a town within a second-growth ponderosa pine forest.

Kurt Clarke, chief of the volunteer Sumpter Fire Department, said as far as he can tell, every Sumpter property owner got a version of the letter that Morgan received.

Clarke said he's talked with a few residents who wonder whether, or how, the pending regulations under Senate 762 will affect them.

Others, he said, worry that their homeowner insurance policies could be canceled because, based on the map, their homes are in a high or extreme fire risk area. (Most of the city's tax lots are rated as high risk, with some scattered lots in the extreme category.)

Like Morgan, Clarke promotes defensible space tactics such as pruning trees and clearing the ground of needles and limbs.

He said the fire department and city officials encourage residents to take such precautions. Clarke believes Sumpter has made progress over the years.

The city allows residents to bring yard debris to a city property where it can be safely burned, Clarke said.

"My citizens, I've got to say, are very fire savvy," he said.

Still and all, Clarke said he believes it can be hard for some property owners to truly understand how devastating a wildfire can be if they haven't personally experienced a catastrophe such as what befell Paradise, California, in 2018, or another Northern California town, Greenville, in 2021.

The Camp fire destroyed 19,000 buildings and killed 85 people in Paradise. The Dixie fire burned most of the homes and other buildings in Greenville, although there were no deaths.

"Some people don't think it's going to happen," Clarke said.

Elsewhere in Baker County

Other than Sumpter, the biggest area in Baker County with properties that are within the WUI and have a fire rating risk of high or extreme is on the west side of Baker Valley.

This includes neighborhoods along and near Pine, Mill, Marble, Salmon and Goodrich creeks, and in parts of Washington Gulch.

In addition, there are multiple properties along the base of the sagebrush foothill just southwest of Baker City that meet both criteria.

Other places with scattered parcels that could be affected by Senate Bill 762 include:

- Unity
- Old Auburn Lane
- Stices Gulch near Dooley Mountain Highway
- Rock Creek and Bulger Flat west of Haines
- Along Highway 7 near Denny Creek
- Western and eastern fringes of Pine Valley
- East Eagle Creek
- Cornucopia

Others concerned about potential effects

Morgan's concerns about Senate Bill 762 are far from rare.

The Forestry Department received about twice as many public comments opposed to the wildfire risk mapping than in favor, mainly from people who believe the WUI areas are too large, said Tim Holschbach, the agency's fire prevention and policy manager.

Mike Shaw, chief of the Forestry Department's fire protection division, said the agency will be in a "fish bowl" of scrutiny due to Senate Bill 762 and its potential effects.

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 been one of the more vocal groups concerned about the effects of the wildfire risk map and the WUI boundaries.

The Farm Bureau criticized Senate Bill 762 for its "top-down" approach to reducing the wildfire risk in rural areas.

The number of properties both within the WUI and with a wildfire risk rating of high or extreme is smaller than the Farm Bureau anticipated, however.

According to the Forestry Department, about 120,276 tax lots — 8% of the state's total — meet both of those criteria, but about 80,000 of those have a home or other structure that might be subject to the defensible space or building code regulations.

Barns and other outbuildings are exempt from the requirements.

However, Lauren Smith, the Farm Bureau's director of government and national affairs, said she's concerned that the state might end that exemption in the future.

"We're always going to be uncomfortable because we will have properties that fall into that high and extreme risk WUI," Smith said.

Threat leads to cancellation of public meeting

The Forestry Department scheduled a series of five community meetings to explain the purpose behind the new map and risk ratings.

The first meeting, set for July 26 in Grants Pass, was canceled after the Forestry Department received a phone message "threatening violence," said Derek Gasperini, the agency's public affairs officer.

The only meeting in Eastern Oregon took place Tuesday evening, Aug. 2, at Eastern Oregon University in La Grande.

Mateusz Perkowski of the Capital Press contributed to this story.

State lawmakers call for 'full-stop pausing' of process

Baker County's two state legislators are calling on the Oregon Department of Forestry to withdraw a recently released map showing wildfire risk levels on each of the 1.8 million tax lots in the state.



Owens



Findley

Sen. Lynn Findley, R-Vale, and Rep. Mark Owens, R-Crane, wrote in a joint statement that the map "has no credibility."

"It serves as an ill-informed, unreviewed, and dangerous and divisive product pitting homeowners against the state of Oregon," the lawmakers wrote in the Aug. 3 statement.

"Pulling back the maps and pausing the process has had executive level and bipartisan legislative support. The Oregon Department of Forestry had a chance to restart the process and blatantly chose not to do so.

"We need to stop this process and recall the map, and allow landowners, county planners, and local fire agencies to review each site and develop an accurate map reflecting efforts by homeowners to mitigate the risk through fuel reduction and building materials to collate a final product. We realize this could add significant amount of time to the effort, but we believe it is imperative we do so. Anything less than full-stop pausing, pulling back and reassessing is pure arrogance by the State of Oregon."

Findley and Owens called the risk map "a complete and total failure," compiled "without any local review."

The legislators are concerned that the map, which classifies thousands of tax lots as having a high or extreme wildfire risk, will result in higher homeowner insurance rates or even canceled policies.

"Collectively, we represent 43 percent of the state geographically including some of the most wildfire prone forests and communities, greatest number of acres of farm and, least affordable housing, and largest populations of seniors and families at or below average income levels," Findley and Owens wrote. "Now, not only do our constituents need to worry about wildfires for their safety and livelihoods, but they also have to worry about going bankrupt due to a mismanaged mapping process."

Death toll rises to 4 in massive blaze in Northern California

BY HAVEN DALEY AND CHRISTOPHER WEBER Associated Press

KLAMATH RIVER, Calif. — Two more bodies were found within the burn zone of a huge Northern California wildfire, raising the death toll to four in the state's largest blaze of the year, authorities said Tuesday, Aug. 2.

Search teams discovered the additional bodies Monday, Aug. 1 at separate residences along State Route 96, one of the only roads in and out of the remote region near the state line with Oregon, the Siskiyou County Sheriff's Office said in a statement.

"This brings the confirmed fatality number to four," the sheriff's statement said. "At this time there are no unaccounted for persons."

Other details were not immediately disclosed.

Sheriff's officials said two bodies were also found Sunday, July 31 inside a charred vehicle in the driveway of a home near the tiny unincorporated community of Klamath River, which was largely destroyed in the McKinney Fire.

The fire jumped the Klamath River over the weekend and raged through the tiny community of about 200, destroying many of the homes along with the post office, community hall and other scattered businesses.

"When that fire came over that ridgeline, it had 100-foot flames for about 5 miles and the wind was blowing. It was coming down like a solid blowtorch. There was nothing to stop it," said Roger Derry, 80, whose home was among a handful that survived.

"It's very sad. It's very disheartening," said his son, whose name is spelled Roger Derry. "Some of our oldest homes, 100-year-old homes, are gone. It's a small community."

Good people, good folks, for the most part, live here and in time will rebuild. But it's going to take some time now."

More than 100 homes, sheds and other buildings have burned in the McKinney Fire since it erupted last Friday, July 29. The blaze remained out of control, authorities said.

Thunderstorms dumped some much-needed rain on Monday and into Tuesday even as temperatures hit the 90s Fahrenheit and the brush, fields and forest remained generally bone-dry.

But the storms also meant a threat of lightning strikes that already sparked several small blazes.

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