

# Lawmakers reluctantly make \$17M down payment

BY TED SICKINGER

The Oregonian

If anything illustrated the need for Oregon to invest more in wildfire preparedness, it was last year's cluster of Labor Day infernos that chewed through a million acres of forestland, destroyed thousands of homes and structures and killed nine people.

Despite scores of recommendations that the governor's Council on Wildfire Response said were urgent back in 2019, the Oregon Legislature made no headway on the issue last year after two Republican walkouts over climate change legislation. Gov. Kate Brown's hope of addressing some of those proposals in one of the Legislature's special sessions didn't happen either, taking a backseat to more pressing pandemic-related funding and policing reforms.

But the Legislature's Emergency Board reluctantly made a tiny down payment on Friday, appropriating \$17 million for the Office of State Fire Marshal and the Oregon Department of Forestry to invest in wildfire prevention and preparedness programs.

The spending was approved despite concerns from legislative analysts and lawmakers, who doubt the two agencies can even spend the money in the six months remaining in the current two-year budget cycle. They questioned whether the Emergency Board has the authority to create new positions and programs that are typically debated by the Full Ways and Means Committee, and will then have to be made permanent for the next biennium in the upcoming legislative session, at substantial cost.

"I don't think I've ever seen the word 'problematic' used so often in a (Legislative Fiscal Office) brief," said Sen. Elizabeth Steiner Hayward, D-Portland, who ultimately voted to approve the spending. "This feels like really major policy. I have substantive concerns about the way this is structured and the way we're accomplishing it through the Emergency Board. As co-chair of Ways and Means, my stomach is a bit bound up right now."

## Spending breakdown

The spending includes \$4 million for the Office of the State Fire Marshal. In part, that would cover 25 new positions, which legislative analysts noted will increase the size of the office by nearly one third. The jobs will support modernization of the state's mutual aid system for emergency response and implement some of the wildfire council's recommendations to help communities better adapt and respond.

The appropriation will also provide \$2.3 million to support grants to local fire districts for equipment, prevention programs and training.

Lawmakers questioned



The Riverside Fire burns in the Mount Hood National Forest, seen from La Dee Flats near the Clackamas River, in the fall.

whether the agency could even make all those new hires, some of which are high level, by the June 30th end of the biennium. And legislative analysts noted that costs for the positions in the next biennium would total nearly \$6 million, and would compete with other priorities in the 2021-23 budget process.

The Department of Forestry, meanwhile, will get \$13 million. Of that, \$5 million would go for aviation contracts, including a "next generation" air tanker, two single-engine aircraft and a heavy-duty helicopter — assets that department officials say will substantially increase its capacity for early attacks on new fires to keep them small.

A fiscal analyst noted in his brief that the aviation appropriation is "problematic" because it will expire on June 30, just as the fire season is beginning. There is no assurance, if it expires before it is spent, he said, that lawmakers will make the funds available again.

The sharp increase in general fund money, he also said, "communicates a significant policy change that is usually contemplated during a legislative session."

Sen. Betsy Johnson, D-Scappoose, said she is a big believer in expanding the agency's aviation capacity, but that she was voting no because of all the other "ups and extras in this bill."

That includes \$2.6 million for the forestry department to hire 29 new employees in its fire protection program, including a new deputy division chief, and add between two weeks to one month to 147 seasonal positions. It will also provide nearly \$400,000 to fire protection associations, which are independent groups of landowners that provide their own wildfire protection. The estimated costs of continuing those new positions and programs would be \$10 million in the

next budget cycle, a 9% increase from the current fire protection budget, the legislative fiscal office reported.

Sen. Fred Girod, R-Stayton, wanted to know if any money was being allocated to update local alert systems or for local water trucks, both of which were major problems in the Labor Day fires.

Girod, whose home was destroyed in the Beachie Creek fire, added: "I want to make sure people don't sleep through a fire and get killed... It's extremely frustrating not to have water to put on a fire."

The answer to both questions, from both agencies, was "no." Not specifically.

The Department of Forestry would get another \$5 million for its "partnership and planning" program, including eight new positions. The bulk — \$4 million — would go to support forest restoration projects, including thinning and the removal of downed limbs and debris from forest floors that contribute to fire growth and risks. Specifically, the department wants to spend \$2 million on 13 projects on non-industrial private property, and another \$2 million on planning for forest restoration on federal

lands.

This is a tiny start on a massive problem, but it's controversial, too. Some lawmakers wonder why Oregon is spending its money to clean up federal forests. Once again, the meeting materials noted that fiscal analysts are "skeptical of the ability of the agency to complete, or even to substantively begin to implement the projects that are outlined in this request before the end of the current biennium and is concerned that funding this request presupposes a continuation of additional ongoing funding into the 2021-23 biennium."

## Focus on prevention

Meanwhile, environmental and firefighter groups maintain that thinning projects have little impact on fire severity and are really an excuse to harvest more trees. They believe communities need to be better prepared to deal with fire in an era of climate change, and the money would be better spent on ways to prevent structures from igniting in the first place.

Tim Ingalsbee, executive director of Firefighters United for Safety, Ethics, and Ecology,

said the Emergency Board's approval of more aircraft, boots on the ground and thinning projects are a conventional response that is out of step with the new realities of climate change.

"Again and again, this big iron is parked on the tarmac during the periods when people are in crisis," he said. "You take trees out of the forest and put more young firefighters on the front line."

"Climate change is creating more red flag conditions where it's not possible to suppress fires. We have people living directly in harm's way and felling the forest around them is not going to protect them."

Matt Donegan, a forestry executive who chaired the governor's wildfire council, disagrees. He says the need for more forest restoration work is real, and the Biden Administration's climate policy may include some major new federal investments in thinning and hazardous fuels reduction projects — money the state can access if it builds the pipeline and capacity to accomplish the work.

He agrees that fire is a natural and healthy phenomenon and that we need more of it to restore forest health. The problem, he says, is that forests are so overstocked with dead, dry debris after a century of fire suppression that managing prescribed burns or natural fires to restore healthy ecosystems is nearly impossible. Meanwhile, he said, there's never enough money to move forward with the projects at the scale needed.

*"Climate change is creating more red flag conditions where it's not possible to suppress fires. We have people living directly in harm's way and felling the forest around them is not going to protect them."*

— Tim Ingalsbee, executive director of Firefighters United for Safety, Ethics, and Ecology

The wildfire council's recommendations included spending \$4 billion to treat 5.6 million acres of Oregon forests over two decades — far beyond the state's current means. But Donegan said potential legislative concepts for the next legislative session could provide dedicated sources of funding for the projects, which could then leverage federal money. He called the Emergency Board's appropriation a stopgap measure, and said the emphasis should shift to the regular session that begins Jan. 19.

"The state needs to recognize the magnitude of this challenge, and we need to be providing the resources to meet that challenge," he said. "At this stage, we're not providing the resources to get the work done today, nor are we building the capacity to do the restoration of tomorrow. That's what this session needs to be about: building the capacity so we can meet the magnitude of the challenge."

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