

# Wildfire bills moving forward

Fate of ambitious wildfire plan rests with legislators who decide on state budget matters

By Sam Stites  
Oregon Capital Bureau

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 citizens.

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 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.

It's unclear just how much the 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 Governor's Council estimated the cost 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 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.”

Golden 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 the 2019 fire season been as bad as the two previous years. With the state removed this year from the devastating fires and noxious smoke levels in 2017 and 2018, he thinks the bill is a bit tougher of a sell. It comes down to what can wait for lengthier policy discussions in the 2021 Legislature, and what needs to be done now.

According to State Forester Peter Daugherty, waiting isn't the best option.

“A lot of people would say, we've been waiting a number of years with fuel build ups and have known about the conditions for almost a decade and of the need for fuel reductions and restoration on federal lands,” Daugherty said.

Testimony from several groups and local governments raised issues over mandating fuel treatments and dealing with the federal government for projects on national forests.

According to Daugherty, those partnerships are in place and the state's relationship with the federal government is strong.

“They would love it for us to come in. We just recently signed a shared stewardship agreement about how we'll operate with the goal of having much more state influence,” Daugherty said. “We have mutual goals in terms of healthy, resilient forests.”

Golden and Daugherty said they believe the “historic” deal between timber interests and environmental groups announced last week would have a positive bearing on discussions around wildfire investment.

“I had some concern that the wounds from the timber wars were going to get in the way of this wildfire work,” Golden said.

Moving forward, Golden and his committee members will watch the budget committee's schedule and discussions on funding the bill.

With wildfire a major priority for Gov. Kate Brown, Democrats on the budget committee likely will keep step, but Republicans aren't quite as convinced the bill should be addressed now.

“This is just too much too soon,” said Sen. Kim Thatcher, R-Keizer, a member of the Senate Wildfire Committee. “I might have been on board with a lot of this, but I just don't want to commit to something I don't fully grasp yet.”

# Proposed amendments to cap and trade bill borrow ideas from Republicans, Timber Unity

By Claire Withycombe  
Oregon Capital Bureau

Lawmakers revealed on Feb. 12 changes to the plan to cut back on the state's greenhouse gas emissions that would ease the impact on rural Oregon and adopt elements proposed by Timber Unity.

The revisions are part of the continuing effort of Democratic sponsors to drive a policy that has greater statewide acceptance.

The proposed revisions to Senate Bill 1530 incorporate requests from Republicans and Timber Unity, a grassroots organization that has been agitating against a cap and trade system. Republicans in the Senate fled the state over last year's version of the bill.

The cap and trade program would set a limit on statewide carbon emissions and aims to reduce emissions over time.

Limits on emissions would apply to certain industries and major fuel importers. The policy would carve up the emissions limit into allowances that emitters can buy and sell on a market. The idea is that as emissions targets

get lower, fewer allowances are available, and industry would improve pollution controls.

Opponents have criticized the plan for its potential impact on consumers and small businesses, particularly through higher fuel costs.

The amendments could change how fuel would be regulated under the program. It delays the impact on Curry and Coos counties, as well as the Bend and Klamath Falls metro areas, to 2028, six years later than for the Portland area.

And rather than 20 counties triggering a statewide adoption of limits on fuel importers, this amendment sets the trigger at 23 counties.

And under the amendment, a greater share of the revenue from transportation — 90% — would go to counties or metro areas that engaged in the program to use on emissions reduction and climate adaptation projects. The rest would go to the state Transportation Department for projects around the state.

The amendments would incorporate policy ideas from Sen. Alan Olsen, R-Canby, and Sen. Lynn Findley, R-Vale, who sit on the Senate Committee on Environment and Natural Resources.

# Climate activists swarm Capitol

By Sam Stites  
and Claire Withycombe  
Oregon Capital Bureau

Activists seeking to clean Oregon's environment by reducing greenhouse gas emissions turned out by the hundreds at the Capitol Feb. 11, pushing legislators to move ahead with a cap and trade policy.

Demonstrators ranged from Salem-area teenagers who took time out from school to middle-aged Wasco County residents.

All told, organizers say that more than 1,000 people traveled to the Capitol to support Senate Bill 1530, which aims to cap and shrink the state's carbon emissions and generate revenue for environmental projects.

One of those local teens was Angelique Prater, 17, of Salem, who spoke to the



Oregon Capital Bureau/Sam Stites

From left, Portland State student Rachel Rodri and Willamette University students Emily Grunken, Sonia Zand, Jamie Smith, Maggie Chapin and Samantha Smith demonstrate at the Oregon State Capitol Tuesday, Feb. 11, to urge lawmakers to take action on climate change.

crowd Tuesday about her activism.

In an interview, she said that her parents, immigrants from Mexico who work in agriculture, were already feeling the effects of climate change — extreme temperatures in winter and summer.

She said she first heard about the proposal from

friends in school and then got involved in activism.

“I'm here today to fight for the climate crisis and to, you know, push our legislators to fight for strong climate legislation,” Prater said, adding that legislation was the most important part of “solving the climate crisis.”

# Bill giving public records advocate independence heads to vote

By Sam Stites  
Oregon Capital Bureau

It took less than two minutes Wednesday for a Senate committee to approve legislation to solidify independence for Oregon's public records advocate and the Public Records Advisory Council.

During a Feb. 12 work session, members of the Senate Committee on General Government sent Senate Bill 1506 to the Senate floor with a recommendation that it be approved. Sen. Kim Thatcher, R-Keizer, will carry the bill during Thursday morning's debate.

Senators spent most of Monday's work session hearing from supporters of the public records advocate and council. They told the committee both play important roles in promoting open government.

“Since their inception

in 2017 ... the council and advocate have utilized their broad perspectives and collective knowledge to collect data and make recommendations on improving the application of public records law in Oregon, as well as how the council and advocate can better serve Oregonians on public records laws,” said Stephanie Clark, council chairwoman and director of the State Archives Division.

Clark and others, such as Society of Professional Journalists board member and Portland Tribune reporter Nick Budnick, support improving public records law in Oregon through independence for the public records advocate and the council.

Budnick pointed out that following the abrupt departure in September of former Public Records Advocate Gin-

ger McCall, Gov. Kate Brown expressed her support for an independent advocate who was not attached to the governor's office. McCall cited attempts to influence her work by former Brown adviser and staff member Misha Isaak among her reasons for leaving the post.

“We don't always agree with the governor, our members, on this stuff,” Budnick said. “But in this case, what you have is an issue of, will the advice that's being given to the public — to local and state government officials who desperately need education, as do requesters — will that advice be neutral and independent? Will they adhere to the records law that you all passed? Or will they adhere to an elected official's interpretation of that law or partisan politics? Independence of this office is crucial to its credibility.”

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## Grant Soil & Water Conservation District 2020 Annual Meeting

Thursday, March 5th, 6:00 – 7:30pm  
Grant County Municipal Airport, John Day, OR

Guest Speaker: Brenda Sanchez, OR Dept. of Agriculture Strategic Implementation Area (SIA) Program Lead

### Upcoming Changes to Oregon's Agricultural Water Quality Management Program

Oregon Department of Agriculture (ODA) has the authority to enforce Administrative Rules under their Agricultural Water Quality Management Program; these rules apply to private property owners or operators whose land is engaged in agricultural use.

Since 2003, enforcement has occurred on a complaint driven basis; ODA is currently proposing an alternative known as the “Strategic Implementation Area” (SIA) process.

This process will select specific watersheds within Grant County and conduct remote evaluations of private lands using aerial and satellite imagery to identify potential water quality concerns; follow up field evaluations will be initiated to further examine the accuracy of the findings conducted remotely.

The proposed schedule to implement this program on private lands includes the North and Middle Fork John Day River as well as the Crooked River basins in 2021, Middle John Day River (downstream of Mountain Creek), Malheur River and the Silvies Basin (Greater Harney Basin) in 2022 and the Upper Mainstem and South Fork John Day Rivers in 2023.

The public is invited to join Grant Soil and Water Conservation District for this informative event. Complimentary refreshments will be served. More information can be obtained either by visiting our website: grantswcd.net, stopping by the District Office located in the USDA Agricultural Service Center (721 S. Canyon Blvd, John Day) or by contacting Kyle Sullivan at (541) 575-0135 x111.

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