

# Local officials support Oregon's fire risk map reversal

BY PHIL WRIGHT  
Hermiston Herald

PENDLETON — The Oregon Department of Forestry's decision to pull back and revise its wildfire risk map was a wise move, according to local elected officials.

Sen. Bill Hansell, R-Athena, said the rollout of the map and ensuing letters to property owners about fire risk was not handled well. This not only put the cart before the horse, he said, it raised the worries of lots of people.



Hansell



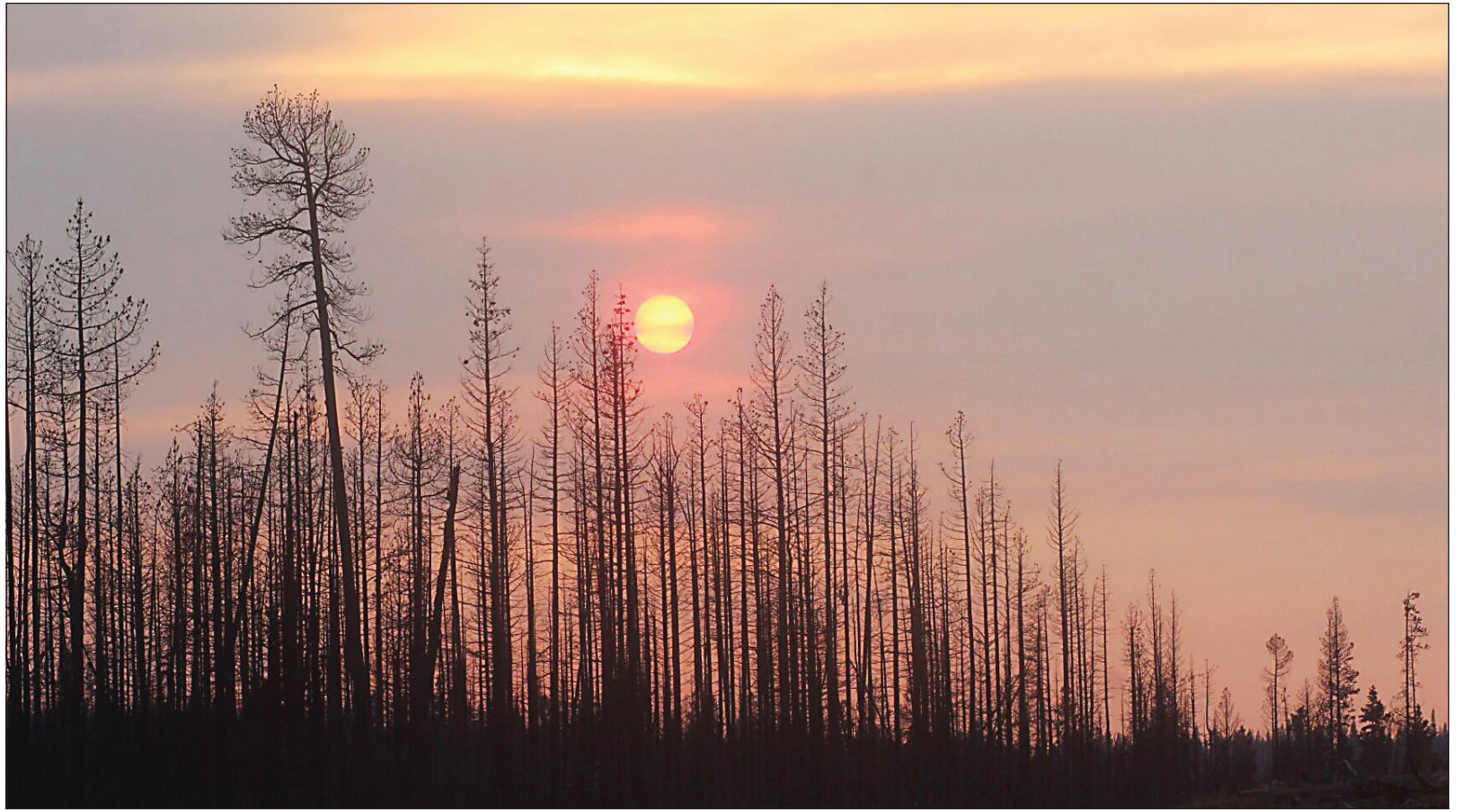
Shafer

The state forestry department yanked the wildfire risk map Thursday, Aug. 4, five weeks after publishing it. According to the Oregon Capital Chronicle, the move came after outcry from Republican state lawmakers and residents in southern and Eastern Oregon who said the roll out of the map was clumsy and led to people losing their property insurance or having premiums doubled. They said the Oregon Department of Forestry was ill-equipped to handle the impacts of the map in the middle of fire season.

"My phone was ringing off the hook, and the emails," Hansell said, after the state put the map online. Lawmakers were aware the state was working on the map, he said, but the process did not include public input that he was aware of.

The map was part of a \$220 million bill — Senate Bill 762 — that came from the 2021 legislative session as part of a state push to protect Oregonians against worsening, climate change-fueled wildfires.

The Oregon Department of Forestry and Oregon State University created the Oregon Wildfire Risk Explorer map. The searchable map showed the wildfire risk of 2 million tax lots across the state, categorizing them in five categories: no, low, moderate, high or extreme risk. About 80,000 property owners were found to



Mike McMillan/U. S. Forest Service, File

The sun sets in the summer of 2021 over a stand of burned trees from the Bootleg Fire in the Fremont-Winema National Forest. The Oregon Department of Forestry on Thursday, Aug. 4, 2022, withdrew its fire risk map after publishing it five weeks earlier in the wake of backlash from the public and politicians.

be in high or extreme risk areas, and received letters from the Department of Forestry telling them that they could be subject to fire-resistant building codes currently under development.

Imagine living on Weston Mountain, Hansell said, and you have never heard of Senate Bill 762 but you then get a letter from the Oregon Forestry Department saying your land is in a high-risk fire zone and you could be subject to fire-resistant building codes that are in development. And if you disagree with that, you can appeal.

But appeal what? Hansell said. The farmer in this case does not even get to know what regulations to appeal.

Umatilla County Commissioner John Shafer of Pendleton said that is a scenario he can relate to because he re-

ceived the letter about a week ago.

"I was trying to figure it out," he said. "I was as much in the dark as anybody else who received it."

Shafer said his property is under the protection of a city fire department with a Level 3 Insurance Service Organization rating and the letter states he was in a high-risk area of wildfire.

"That didn't make sense to me," he said.

The map created backlash during its brief existence. Many people argued that it incorrectly listed homeowners in high risk areas when they may not have been in part because they were not given credit for taking steps to make their homes fire resistant. Others complained that the map resulted in insurance companies raising premiums sig-

nificantly and lowering property value.

Shafer said right off he wanted to know who in Salem from Eastern Oregon was working on addressing this, and found Hansell was on it as well as Rep. Mark Owens of Crane and Sen. Lynn Findley of Vale, all Republicans.

The refinements that will be made to the new fire risk map will incorporate feedback from more than 2,000 Oregonians received during the recent in-person and online meetings with people around the state, according to the Oregon Department of Forestry's website.

The department has not set a timetable for the revisions, according to the website, because it wants to allow for plenty of time to get input from the public.

Oregon State Forester Cal Muku-

moto said in a statement his agency got specific feedback from 2,000 residents about problems with the risk designations that were assigned by the Oregon Explorer project and said climate scientists would refine the map and reissue a new version at a later date.

"While we met the bill's initial deadline for delivering on the map, there wasn't enough time to allow for the type of local outreach and engagement that people wanted, needed and deserved," Oregon State Forester Cal Mukumoto said in a statement. "We know how important it is to get this right."

"I actually applauded the efforts of the Oregon Department of Forestry to roll it back," Hansell said.

■ The Observer reporter Dick Mason contributed to this article.

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