

Who pays for fire protection?

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Wallowa County's so-called fire protection "donut hole" — interior land vulnerable to fire but not currently assessed a fire protection fee — may be a thing of the past starting in 2017.

State forest officials, county representatives and local fire chiefs held meetings last week in Flora and Enterprise to announce a proposal to officially place all non-federal land in the county that isn't within city limits or currently being farmed under the protection of the Oregon Department of Forestry.

A recent survey identified about 152,000 acres of grassland within the county that is not being assessed a tax for state fire protection but nonetheless requires state and municipal resources when fires occur. State and local fire officials argue that because of the risk of a catastrophic event, such fires can't simply be left to burn — they will be suppressed regardless of whether the landowner is paying for fire protection.

"We need to do this to make sure we have fire protection for everyone," said Wallowa County Commissioner Susan Roberts during Wednesday's meeting in Enterprise, which was attended by about 20 landowners. "It's a question of equability. We need to have equitable payment across the board for the whole county."

The ultimate decision lies with the County Classification Committee, a five-member panel formed according to state statute. Wallowa Unit forester Matt Howard was appointed by the state forester, and the OSU Extension Service appointed its Wallowa County co-leader, John Williams. The other three members — Chris Cunningham, Roy Garten and Bruce Dunn — were appointed by the county commissioners.

The last comprehensive forestland classification took place in 2010 and increased the county's overall acreage under ODF fire protection from 448,000 to 605,000 — 270,000 acres considered timberland and another 335,000 acres of grazing land. The 2010 classification did not assess grasslands within the Conservation Reserve Program, land in environmentally sensitive areas where landowners have agreed not to farm. It also left some private grazing land within the donut hole untaxed.

After much discussion, the committee recommended adding the assessment to all CRP land as well as the currently untaxed grazing land. The new classification would tax approximately 152,000 additional acres, bringing the county's total taxed acreage to about 757,000.

The increase in taxed land won't necessarily lead to a larger fire-suppression budget for ODF. That number is determined by a regional budget committee, which includes landowners from throughout Northeast Oregon. Once a budget is set, half of the money comes from the state's general fund and the other half is paid for by landowners — the more land that is assessed, the lower the fire-protection rate for individual landowners. That rate currently sits at \$1.50 per acre each year for timberland and 40 cents per acre for grazing land. On average, the rate increases by about 3 percent each year due to inflation, according to District Forester John Buckman, who attended Wednesday's meeting.

The fire-protection assessment is added to a landowner's annual tax bill, which is mailed in October. The proposal, if adopted, wouldn't go into effect until October 2017. The Classification Committee will hold a formal meeting Oct. 20 at the county courthouse to potentially finalize the decision.

Forestland is defined as "any woodland, brushland, timberland, grazing land or clearing that, during any time of the year, contains enough forest growth, slashing or vegetation to constitute, in the judgment of the forester, a fire hazard, regardless of how the land is zoned or taxed."

There are three classifications of forestland:

- Class 1: Timber class, including land suitable for timber production, possibly including structures (Class 1 applies only to Western Oregon).
- Class 2: Timber and grazing class, including land suitable for joint use of timber production and livestock grazing, possibly including structures. This is land that is assessed a fire-protection tax.
- Class 3: Agricultural class, including land suitable for grazing and other agricultural use, possibly including structures. This land also is assessed the fire-protection tax.

All land within city limits and land that is actively farmed (and therefor irrigated) is exempted from the tax.