



Oregon Forest Industries Council

### Wildfire protection costs

## Oregon's fire protection cost-sharing law must be revised to split insurance costs and increase resources for high-risk districts.

### Overview

The State of Oregon has primary responsibility for the prevention and suppression of forest fires on approximately 16 million acres of public and private forestland in the state. Oregon has a well-deserved and longstanding reputation for aggressively and effectively fighting forest fires beginning with local readiness, control and landowner involvement. As a result, Oregon is the only state able to annually secure an insurance policy that helps protect the state against the risk of large, catastrophic fire suppression costs.

Oregon's fire program, which began in 1911, is also known for a high degree of cooperation between the state and private forest landowners. That cooperation includes sharing the cost of maintaining the program at a high level. Basic infrastructure costs (ensuring readiness at the district level) have been shared 50-50 by private landowners and the state since 1991. Suppression costs for large fires are covered through a complicated mix of state and landowner funds plus insurance.

The State helps pay for the fire program in Oregon because many forest fires are caused by the public and because public values (clean air and water, fish and wildlife habitat, etc) as well as private values (standing forests and interface homes) are at risk from forest fires. Private landowners in Oregon actually pay a much higher percentage of the overall fire program costs than do their counterparts in all neighboring states. In California, for example, the state General Fund pays 100% of wildfire suppression costs.

For a variety of reasons – including climate change, which is beyond the state's control – fire suppression costs have escalated and the landowners' share of those costs has increased disproportionately. Other factors increasing costs include residential development in the "urban-rural interface" and increased fire risks to state-protected land associated with the mismanagement of federal forests in Oregon. The obligations shouldered by landowners to maintain this program have become a real burden particularly in southern and eastern Oregon, where fire risks are high but forestland values are low.

### Position

State law needs to be changed to realign the cost responsibilities for this program between the state and private landowners. Such changes should include an equal sharing of the annual insurance policy deductible costs and the allocation of additional resources to the high-risk, low-value districts where most of the fires are occurring.