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County commissioners across state blast wildfire hazard map

By Vickie Aldous
of the Daily Courier

County commissioners from around Oregon blasted state efforts to rank the wildfire hazard of every tax lot — pointing to examples like asphalt airport runways, three parcels in a 64-home subdivision and a gravel lot getting labeled as high hazard.

Commissioners voiced their concerns during a hybrid live and online meeting hosted by the Association of Oregon Counties in Salem.

About 100 people attended a viewing event in Grants Pass held by Josephine County's Board of Commissioners.

"How is this map going to make us safer? How is this map going to

stop wildfires? It's not," said Josephine County Commissioner John West.

After the destructive 2020 wildfire season, the Oregon Legislature passed a bill requiring the creation of a map that ranks the wildfire hazard of individual properties across the state.

The Oregon Department of Forestry, with help from Oregon

State University researchers and others, is tasked with carrying out the herculean — and controversial — effort.

Josephine County Commissioner Herman Baertschiger Jr. said the people crafting the map have to check conditions on the ground, not sit at computers doing modeling.

Turn to MAP, Page 6A

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Volunteers begin helping homeless people move out of Grants Pass parks

Monday's closing 17,725.76 -152.03

ARK Exchange

onco	112.56	-1.01	Hess	134.13	-18	Proclam	169.53	-82
oiled	99.97	-0.93	Hecap	100.82	-83	Rock/Wal	264.67	-3.43
ursh/vt	313.82	-0.08	IBM	198.18	+20	Sempra	81.23	-87
ave	377.01	-6.08	InfPac	48.79	+1.3	SouthCo	85.88	-61
inew	91.03	-7.5	JohnH	182.53	-1.04	Tetra	-	-17
uPort	82.01	+3.7	Loews	80.46	+0.1	Terton	89.78	-28
alon	296.48	-4.3	LAU	97.19	-5.9	3M Co	-	+28
discont	84.69	-7.3	MP Res	25.15	-0.9	Tricon	132.11	+28
ronkohl	118.10	-7.1	Marathon	28.39	-2.2	Trinken	83.24	-1.54
oCo	64.59	-6.0	Medtrics	289.21	+5.3	Tricortl	32.08	-0.4
oalockr	33.17	+3.8	McKesson	553.64	+6.17	UnionPac	249.69	+1.85
oIdm	11.07	-0.5	Merck	115.66	-6.1	Univis	5.55	-1.7
E Aero	170.83	-5.9	NOR Voylx	13.40	-0.6	VerizonCo	41.32	-1.7
enfills	291.26	+2.6	Northco	246.75	+4.38	USSteel	38.10	+2.8
enkhks	49.27	+5.2	OccPac	56.93	-4.5	ValCorp	34.93	-0.7
P Inc	35.55	-0.2	Oil	44.03	-3.5	WalMart	76.16	+1.3
allth	31.55	-3.3	PG&E	18.93	-1.1	WellsFargo	56.56	-1.6
eclm	6.22	-0.1	Pfizer	28.66	-2.6			

Commodities

Silver - \$29.899 Handy & Harman
 Silver - \$29.977 roy oz., NY Merc spot
 Copper - \$4.215 (open) NY Merc spot
 Aluminum - \$1.1530 per lb., London Metal
 5, today: 3500.30
 2511.20
 319.40
 315.99
 leaded: \$2792.75
 \$2714.38

Lumber

Open	High	Low	Settle	Chg.
Sep 24	496.5	486.5	492.5	463.0
Nov 24	508.5	508.5	504.0	507.0
Jan 25	522.5	522.5	521.0	521.0
Est. sales 1,008 Mon; sales 2,320				

West Stocks

Change	Ratio	Stock	Price	Chg.			
58.60	-80	Nike	84.89	83.61	84.94	+5.6	+7
24.61	-44	Northam	21.33	20.92	21.33	-3.4	-1.6
97.14	+14.63	Orestine	4.41	4.23	4.38	-	-
31.54	+30	US Bancp	45.78	45.45	45.60	-0.3	-1
30.08	-05	WellsFargo	56.92	56.38	56.56	-1.6	-3
6.77	+03	Weyerst	30.87	30.59	30.71	-3.8	-1.2

Map From 1A

OSU researcher Andy McEvoy said it's basically impossible to verify that all conditions on the ground match the map.

The draft map is set to be finalized in early October, with letters then going out to landowners whose property is ranked as high hazard and also in the wildland urban interface. Those landowners could face added regulations, although they and communities could also be eligible for funding to help reduce wildfire risk.

Commissioners of various counties had a long list of properties where they don't think the map's wildfire hazard ratings are accurate. Jackson County Commissioner Rick Dyer said more inaccuracies will likely emerge, especially since landowners in high hazard and wildland-urban interface areas haven't received letters yet.

"I know among my constituents there's going to be a profound feeling of inequity and resentment because these maps as produced and shown now do not represent actual hazard," said Dyer, who attended the Salem meeting in-person.

He said the only value of the map data is to encourage property owners to voluntarily improve the fire resilience of their property. Like many commissioners, Dyer said overgrown forests on state and federal land pose the biggest wildfire danger — not private property. He said aggressive initial attack and fire suppression efforts would save many more structures and acres than any mapping effort. Umatilla County officials complained that the Pendleton

up of asphalt, is labeled high hazard by the draft map. Wasco County officials questioned why a gravel lot was rated as high hazard, and a reservoir was rated at moderate instead of low hazard. Curry County officials said some properties in cool, moist areas along the Pacific Ocean are labeled at low hazard, while others are categorized as moderate hazard.

In Deschutes County, the forested Sunriver resort community is ranked at moderate hazard, while the adjacent Caldera Springs resort development is high hazard. Deschutes County Commissioner Patty Adair said Caldera Springs is a certified Firewise community, and \$2 million has been spent in the area to reduce wildfire danger. She said Caldera Springs doesn't believe it should be rated as high hazard.

Fellow Deschutes County Commissioner Phil Chang was among a few commissioners in the state who said he believes more areas should be rated at high hazard — including parts of Deschutes County. He said a high hazard rating could bring financial assistance to the area.

Chang said the state is being too lenient by reducing the hazard rating on agricultural land if it's been irrigated at least one year out of the last five. He said a lot of flammable vegetation can regrow in that time. Chang also said urban areas can be high hazard, with fire spreading from home to home. Benton County Commissioner Nancy Wyse said more properties should be rated as high hazard. That county is home to Corvallis.

Wallowa County Commissioner Todd Nash said rural properties are being unfairly targeted. He said irrigated pas-

down to low grass is still rated as moderate in his county. Meanwhile, Nash said areas in Portland that rate as low hazard have 12-foot-tall briar patches and chest-high, dried-out grass.

Wallowa County Commissioner Susan Roberts said first responders have their own local map of areas of concern to use, and that map doesn't match the state map. She questioned why the state mapping effort should supersede local knowledge.

At a time when Oregon is facing a housing shortage, added regulations and costs to develop land rated as high hazard could inhibit home construction, said Harney County Commissioner Bill Hart.

Yamhill County Commissioner Lindsay Berschauer said insurance rates have jumped since the state began the mapping effort.

"When I say the Legislature has made it unlawful for insurance companies to use this map, our constituents laugh in our face. No one believes that," she said.

State officials say insurance companies have their own data to make coverage decisions. Berschauer questioned how senior citizens, disabled people and low-income residents will be able to comply with the cost of new regulations.

Landowners with high hazard property in the wildland-urban interface could be required to reduce fuels on their property. New construction and major remodels might have to be done with fire-resistant materials, which could add 2% to 11% to construction costs, according to estimates by state officials. Berschauer said the state needs to make the process to appeal a hazard rating as easy as possible. "The current process sounds

homeowners and would likely require them to spend thousands of dollars in legal fees to navigate," she said.

The legislation passed by Oregon lawmakers doesn't allow the team creating the map to look at existing defensible space and fire-resistant construction on properties, said McEvoy.

Some of the pockets of land with a lower hazard rating that surrounding property are irrigated agricultural land. That results in the "speckling" effect on the map, he said.

Some neighboring properties also have different hazard ratings because one falls just below a category threshold, while one falls just above. The conditions on those neighboring properties might appear indistinguishable to a viewer on the ground, McEvoy said.

He said urban fire behavior is hard to predict, making it very difficult to assign hazard ratings to cities.

McEvoy said the mapping team is looking at conditions 900 meters in from the wildland-urban interface to assess hazard within cities.

Much of Talent and Phoenix burned to the ground during the 2020 Alameda Fire, but those towns are rated at a mix of low and moderate hazard.

The Bear Creek Greenway that helped funnel the fire from its start in Ashland to the southern outskirts of Medford is rated at moderate hazard.

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September 10, 2024

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RE: Letter Requesting the Repeal of Oregon Senate Bills 762 (2021) and 80 (2023)

Dear Governor Kotek, Senators Wagner, Taylor, and Bonham; and Representatives Fahey, Bowman, and Helfrich:

We, the Jackson County Board of Commissioners, wish to express our strong opposition to the adoption of the proposed Wildfire Hazard Map, pursuant to Oregon Senate Bills (SB) 762 (2021) and 80 (2023). Furthermore, we believe that the policy behind this legislation needs to be completely revisited, as it was implemented based on an inaccurate, inconsistent map and a flawed process that could lead to significant legal challenges, erode public trust, and unjustly restrict property rights in the community. As such, we request that you propose repealing the provisions of SBs 762 and 80.

This current iteration of the proposed Map, conducted pursuant to SB 80, promised to be a significant improvement over its predecessor that was developed under SB 762, and being more thoroughly researched and

vetted. However, what we have observed is the exact opposite. The proposed Map contains substantial errors in the basic information, incorrect tax lot counts, incorrect structure locations, misclassified fire scars, and outdated data. These fundamental errors highlight a troubling reality: the State has been unable to produce a map that meets the necessary accuracy and reliability to effectively reduce wildfire hazards. These inaccuracies also present real consequences that will impose substantial burdens, costs, and regulations on property owners.

Additionally, the challenges faced by the State in creating this proposed Map are compounded by mismanaged public lands that surround many of the most affected properties. These poorly managed areas significantly increase the risk of wildfires, and present a larger hazard than the conditions that property owners can control. This combination of inaccurate mapping and the neglect of surrounding landscapes underscores the need for a comprehensive approach that addresses both individual property management and the larger context of public land stewardship. Acknowledging these external factors is crucial for developing more effective strategies to mitigate wildfire risks and enhance community safety, and was not considered during the development of the proposed Map.

Furthermore, the process surrounding the development of the proposed Map lacked transparency and meaningful public engagement, and led to the disenfranchisement of property owners who were not adequately informed or consulted. Additionally, the notification of the application of the proposed Map to individual property owners **after the comment period closes** will require individual property owners to go through the costly and time-consuming contested case process that is required under SB 80.

Moreover, SBs 762 and 80 requires that the proposed Map's classification system rely on outdated data which fails to account for proactive measures taken by property owners to mitigate wildfire risks, such as home hardening and creating defensible space. This leads to arbitrary designations and unnecessary restrictions on responsible property owners who have already taken steps to protect their properties.

Given these pressing concerns, we urge you to repeal SBs 762 and 80 and reconsider the policy behind the adoption of the proposed Wildfire Hazard Map.

Thank you for considering our concerns and recommendations. We look forward to your response on this important matter.

Sincerely,

JACKSON COUNTY BOARD OF COMMISSIONERS



Rick Dyer, Chair



Dave Dotterrer, Commissioner



Colleen Roberts, Commissioner

:rd/jb/mc

By: Email Only

CC: Oregon Legislators, Oregon County Commissioners

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