

Agenda Item No.: 8  
Work Plan Title & #: Wildfire Risk Management – Issue 7  
Objective # & Title Oregon Forestland Classification Review  
Date of Presentation: September 5, 2007  
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**SUMMARY**

The purpose of this agenda item is to introduce the Board to the review currently underway of the Department’s Forestland Classification system. The Department assesses forest and range lands annually for fire protection provided by the Department. In late 2006, the State Forester formed a 29 member steering committee to address this issue. The Steering Committee consists of a broad cross-section of individuals and representatives of organizations that share an interest in protecting forest resources and addressing the expanding wildland-urban interface.

**CONTEXT**

ORS 526.305 through ORS 526.340 describes a process for classifying forestland into Class 1 - timber class, Class 2 - timber and grazing class, or Class 3 -agricultural class, for the purposes of fire patrol assessments. Other statutes in other chapters also address forestland classification. The last substantive review and update of the Forestland Classification system dates back over 30 years. The fire protection environment, land use and values at risk have changed substantially prompting a need for review of forestland classification and assessment.

**BACKGROUND AND ANALYSIS**

Oregon’s forestland was classified for fire patrol purposes, more or less, on a district by district and county by county basis. While some central coordination and direction was provided, differences in interpretation of forestland classification exist and have evolved over time around the state. Some of the differences reflect local fuel conditions, fire danger, fire frequency and fire risk and the need and desire from landowners for wildfire protection. Other differences are the result of varying interpretations of statute and rule as applied to the changing protection environment in Oregon. The system lacks consistency on a statewide basis. A review of the rationale of how and when to assess landowners for forestland fire protection is needed. The Department also needs to update the processes and methodology for classifying forestland.

The protection environment, land use and values at risk have changed substantially over time. On one end of the spectrum, the rural-forest interface continues to expand, often into what had been protected commercial forestland. This expansion, generally but not universally, has been accompanied by well-equipped rural fire protection districts adequately staffed, qualified and funded to provide for successful initial attack of most wildland fires, particularly when working in concert with the Department. However, these rural fire

protection districts are not staffed nor funded, to effectively manage and suppress large, extended attack and project size fires in the interface. Further, they have no mechanism to access and/or pay for additional outside state and federal resources needed to effectively manage and suppress large fires. Further, the interface expansion sometimes develops to a point where Department wildfire protection is unnecessary due to the density of structures, streets, sidewalks, infrastructure and robust City and Rural Fire protection capabilities. There is no clear definition in the continuum as the environment changes from wildland through interface to suburbia.

In 1997, the Oregon Legislature adopted the Urban Interface Fire Protection Act. This set of statutes recognizes the unique fire protection challenge in the wildland urban interface (WUI) and the need for a complete and coordinated fire protection system to address the challenge. While the Act clearly recognizes that the Department has a key role, fundamental questions about where and how the Department will participate in protection of the interface, and where that protection is no longer needed, have come up and should be answered.

At the other end of the spectrum, fires on unprotected, non-assessed lands are problematic. They frequently threaten and sometimes burn onto protected, assessed forestland. These can result in large, costly fires and, on occasion, Conflagration Act mobilizations. Consistent with the findings of the Department's Fire Program Review Protection Coverage Work Group, the need for protection of wildland that poses a threat to adjacent forestland should be reviewed and some of those lands potentially assessed to assure that threats to forestland are mitigated.

Oregon's forestland classification system consists of statutes, rules and policy that have not been comprehensively re-visited and reviewed in many years. In the meantime, as indicated above, the operating environment has changed. A comprehensive review is needed. Such a review is the objective of the Forestland Classification Review.

The issue of forestland classification has been submitted for the 2007 Issue Scan which will be considered by the Board's Issue Scan Work Group.

### **RECOMMENDATION**

The Department recommends the Board direct the State Forester to revise the Wildland Risk Management Work Plan to incorporate this issue as a new objective.

### **NEXT STEPS**

- Following Board endorsement, Department staff will begin work to develop a new Work Plan objective and a set of key products based on the work of the Forestland Classification Steering Committee.
- Recommendations for improvement to the forestland classification system are being formulated. A final committee report will be completed by the end of 2007 and considered by the Department. It is anticipated that Board consideration of the recommendations, and potential legislative concepts to address the recommendations, will occur in April 2008.

### **ATTACHMENT**

- (1) Oregon Forestland Classification Review Charter