

Forestland Classification Steering Committee

Project Background

The Oregon Department of Forestry employs a system of forestland classification that categorizes forest and grazing lands for the purpose of coordinating fire protection of those lands and adjacent rural communities.

Made up of statutes, rules and policies established more than 40 years ago, the classification system developed more or less on a district-by-district and county-by-county basis. While there was some central coordination and direction, differences exist across the regions of the state. Some of these variations reflect local forest conditions and fire protection needs, while others appear less ordered. Overall, the system lacks consistency - thus, the need for a review of rationale and process. In addition, the protection environment in which wildland and structural fire agencies operate has changed and continues to evolve. A key task of the committee is to determine on which lands the Department of Forestry has a role in providing fire protection and where it does not.

Effective initial attack

On one end of the spectrum, the wildland-urban interface continues to expand, often into what was formerly protected commercial forestland. ("Wildland-urban interface" refers to the area where structures and other human development meet or intermingle with undeveloped wildland - in this context, forestland.) This expansion generally but not universally has been accompanied by the development of well-equipped rural fire protection districts that are adequately staffed, qualified and funded to provide for successful initial attack of most wildland fires, particularly when working in concert with the Oregon Department of Forestry.

Coping with large wildfires

These rural fire protection districts handle small fires efficiently. But they aren't staffed or funded to effectively suppress large fires in the interface. Neither do they have a mechanism to access and pay for additional Office of State Fire Marshal, state or federal resources needed to do the job. In some areas of Oregon, interface expansion has reached a threshold at which the density of structures, streets and sidewalks renders forestland protection unnecessary. There is no clear definition as to when wildland becomes wildland-urban interface, or when wildland-urban interface has developed to the point that it is more appropriately classified as suburbs.

Interface challenge

In 1997, the Oregon Legislature adopted the Oregon Forestland-Urban Interface Fire Protection Act. This set of statutes recognizes the unique fire protection challenge posed by the wildland-urban interface and the need for a complete and coordinated fire protection system to address the challenge. While the act clearly recognizes that the Department of Forestry has a key role to play, fundamental questions about where and how the department will participate in protecting the interface, and where that protection is no longer needed, should be asked and answered.

Closing the protection gap

On the other end of the spectrum, fires on unprotected lands have become problematic, threatening and burning onto protected forestland. This has often resulted in large, costly fires and, not infrequently, Oregon Conflagration Act mobilizations to protect lives and structures. Consistent with the findings of a comprehensive review of the department's Fire Program conducted in 2004, the need for protection of wildland that poses a threat to adjacent forestland should be examined and some of those lands potentially assessed for fire protection to reduce threats to forestland.

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