

## ***Frequently Asked Questions***

**Q: The Oregon Secretary of State just released an audit report on the Oregon Department of Forestry. What led to the audit, what does it attempt to accomplish, and how long did it take?**

A: Periodically, the Secretary of State Audits Division conducts performance audits of state agencies to help improve processes and to help manage or minimize risk. The Division's performance auditors select agencies/topics/areas for review based upon annual risk assessments. The auditors were engaged with ODF in this audit for more than a year as a result of the challenging fire seasons experienced in 2013 and 2014. During the audit process, Oregon experienced yet another difficult fire season in 2015.

**Q: What were the audit report's primary conclusions, and what are ODF's responses to them?**

A: The audit identified several specific challenges faced by the Department including the trade-off of time and resources spent fighting fires versus implementing other important agency programs. The audit also noted how the cumulative stress of recent fire seasons has strained agency employees, who often work long hours under difficult conditions supporting firefighting efforts.

The audit recommended several actions that ODF take to address these challenges:

- Track costs, staffing, funding and workload impacts on programs unrelated to firefighting to reach and communicate to state leaders with a better understanding of the impact of fire operations on the agency as a whole.
- Track data on strategies used to detect, prevent and mitigate wildfires to guide decisions and allow prioritization of the most cost-effective and successful methods.
- Develop a systematic workforce planning strategy to ensure the agency can meet current and emerging personnel and workload needs.

ODF agrees with the audit results and recommendations, which are an important step in the agency's ongoing commitment to transparency and continuous improvement of its operations, funding, and organization.

**Q: Will any of the audit report's conclusions result in changes to the way the Oregon Department of Forestry does business? And if so, how?**

A: Yes, the Department is working to integrate these recommendations into the agency's normal planning cycles, including Board of Forestry Work Plans, biennial agency budget development, ODF Annual Operating Plan development and budget planning. ODF's services will remain the same – fire suppression as its top priority, along with forest practices act administration on private land and managing state forests. The audit recommendations will enhance:

- Work underway around work force planning to meet current and future needs – perhaps with added future capacity.
- Focus and attention around IT investments – business solutions that will improve our accounting, and reporting to state leaders with a better understanding of the impact of fire operations on the agency as whole – forests practices act administration and state forests management.
- Increased understanding of the need for increased mitigation of fuel loads across forest lands that can lead to catastrophic fires.

The Departments 2017 Agency Request Budget requests dollars and positions (capacity) on all of these fronts.

**Q: The audit report raised questions about ODF's ability to recover firefighting dollars through FEMA claims. What is ODF's response to that issue?**

A: ODF has a total of \$68.3 million in FEMA reimbursements coming for the past four years. To date, ODF has received \$49 million in reimbursements from 10 submitted claims. The agency has received 95 percent of its recoveries from 2013, 90 percent from 2014 and has just filed its first claim for 2015 (Stout's fire).

Processing these claims takes significant staff time receiving and paying bills from contractors, cooperators such as the USFS, Local Fire Districts and the Military Department, along with other States or Canadian provinces when resources from around the nation and Canada are fighting fire in Oregon such as experienced in the past three years. ODF staff then conduct cost reconciliation and an internal audit, for each fire, through the Emergency Fire Cost Committee before the FEMA eligible costs are confirmed and the FEMA claim process can be started. Once a claim is submitted and partial payments are made by FEMA, closing a file may take several - years to reach a final determination from FEMA.

**Q: How were stakeholders and interest groups included in the development of the audit report?**

A: The auditors interviewed many stakeholders, landowners, cooperating fire agencies and others as part of the audit process, all of whom expressed confidence in, and support for, ODF fire operations. Because ODF operates in a complete and coordinated system with many landowners and fire agencies, trust and open communications are crucial.

**Q: What will be ODF's approach to addressing the audit recommendations, and how long will it take to make changes in the agency based on those recommendations?**

A: Through its 2017 Agency Request Budget, the Oregon Department of Forestry has requested additional financial resources to assist with workforce planning, Fire Operations capacity in Business and aviation, State Forest support and continued investments in both federal forest restoration and Rangeland Fire Protection Associations. The Department credits the audit report with providing an additional platform from which to stress the need for strategic investments that will lessen the agency-wide impacts of fire and will help keep pace with the increased demands on all its Divisions. ODF will engage stakeholders and the Board of Forestry in its routine planning processes of fiscal and biennial budgets, annual operating plans and after action reviews to consider long-term operations and organizational improvements. Moving forward, the Department will engage with the Audits Division on an annual basis to report progress on the recommendations.

**Q: Where can I go for more information?**

A: The secretary of state website includes the complete report, including a detailed five-page response from the agency about each recommendation.

<http://sos.oregon.gov/audits/Documents/2016-18.pdf>

