SENATE BILL REPORT
SB 6082

As of April 16, 2009

Title: An act relating to forest fire protection assessment refunds.

Brief Description: Regarding forest fire protection assessment refunds.

Sponsors: Senators Pridemore, Tom and Shin.

Brief History:
  Committee Activity: Ways & Means: 2/26/09.

SENATE COMMITTEE ON WAYS & MEANS

  Staff: Maria Hovde (786-7710)

  Background: The Legislature has given the Department of Natural Resources (DNR) direct charge of and supervision of all matters pertaining to the forest fire service of the state. As a result, DNR is responsible for wildfire protection on 12.7 million acres of nonfederal (private, state, and tribally-owned) forest land.

Any individual who owns forest land subject to DNR's fire protection is required to pay an annual assessment to the appropriate county for each parcel of such land. This assessment is a flat fee of $17.50 per parcel, plus an additional 27 cents on each acre exceeding 50 acres. To defray administrative expenses of billing and collecting these assessments, the counties retain 50 cents of the total assessments paid on each parcel and the remainder is paid to the state.

An owner who has paid assessments on two or more parcels, each containing less than 50 acres and each within the same county, may obtain a refund from DNR as follows:
   • If all the parcels together contain less than 50 acres, then the refund is equal to the flat fee assessments paid, reduced by the total of 1) seventeen dollars; and 2) the total amounts retained by the county from such assessments.
   • If all the parcels together contain 50 acres or more, then the refund is equal to the flat fee assessments paid, reduced by the total of 1) seventeen dollars; 2) twenty-seven cents for each acre exceeding 50 acres; and 3) the total of the amounts retained by the county from such assessments.

This analysis was prepared by non-partisan legislative staff for the use of legislative members in their deliberations. This analysis is not a part of the legislation nor does it constitute a statement of legislative intent.

In 2007 the Legislature directed DNR to convene a work group to study issues related to wildfire prevention and protection. In September 2008 the Forest Fire Prevention and Protection Work Group submitted its recommendations. According to this report, in calendar year 2007 DNR processed 18,200 refunds totaling $600,000. The refund process cost DNR $400,000 for this same time period.

Summary of Bill: The refund of these annual assessments is eliminated.

Appropriation: None.

Fiscal Note: Requested on February 25, 2009.
[OFM requested ten-year cost projection pursuant to I-960.]

Committee/Commission/Task Force Created: No.

Effective Date: The bill takes effect on August 1, 2009.

Staff Summary of Public Testimony: PRO: This bill is one part of the recommendations submitted by the Forest Fire Prevention and Protection Work Group. A second recommendation was to restructure the rates, which can be addressed next year. These restructured rates would provide greater equity between the costs being paid for fire protection and the need. For example, a lower base rate could be charged to landowners without improvements on their parcels and a surcharge can be added to the parcels that have been improved. The current structure, however, assumes all costs are equal. According to the most current statistics on these assessment refunds, about 19,000 refunds are processed each year totaling $750,000 at a cost to the department of $215,000.

OTHER: This bill ignores the equity part of the Work Group's recommendations. For smaller landowners a flat fee is paid for multiple parcels. However, for larger landowners a flat fee is paid plus twenty-seven cents for additional acreage.

Persons Testifying: PRO: Senator Craig Pridemore, prime sponsor; Heath Packard, Department of Natural Resources; Joseph Shramer, Department of Natural Resources

OTHER: Peter Heide, Washington Forest Protection Association