

HOUSE BILL REPORT

SSB 6581

As Reported by House Committee On:
Agriculture & Natural Resources

Title: An act relating to funding for forest fire protection.

Brief Description: Funding forest fire protection.

Sponsors: Senate Committee on Natural Resources, Energy & Water (originally sponsored by Senator Hargrove).

Brief History:

Committee Activity:

Agriculture & Natural Resources: 2/27/04 [DP].

Brief Summary of Substitute Bill

- Requires a person to own six or more forested parcels smaller than 50 acres in one county in order to be eligible to have his or her forest fire protection assessments calculated for all parcels, but only billed to one parcel.

HOUSE COMMITTEE ON AGRICULTURE & NATURAL RESOURCES

Majority Report: Do pass. Signed by 11 members: Representatives Linville, Chair; Rockefeller, Vice Chair; Schoesler, Ranking Minority Member; Kristiansen, Assistant Ranking Minority Member; Eickmeyer, Grant, Hunt, McDermott, Orcutt, Quall and Sump.

Staff: Jason Callahan (786-7117).

Background:

Owners of forest land have the duty to provide for adequate protection against the spread of fire. The Department of Natural Resources (DNR) is required to provide forest fire protection to a forested parcel if the measures taken by the owner are found by the DNR to be inadequate. To pay for the protection, the landowner is assessed a flat fee of \$14.50, plus an additional \$0.25 for each acre owned over 50 acres.

If an owner of forest land has paid assessments on two or more parcels in the same

county, and both parcels are less than 50 acres, the owner is entitled to a refund of all or part of the assessment. Refunds must be requested on forms developed by the DNR, and are only available to qualifying landowners that can verify that all assessments and property taxes have been paid for the parcels.

Some owners are entitled to submit a single application to the DNR that covers all of the parcels under that person's ownership within the county. Once the application is submitted, the assessments are computed for each parcel, but only billed to one of the parcels. To be eligible, the owner must own a certain number of forested parcels sized 50 acres or less. The number of parcels required to be owned is dictated by the year in which application is being made. For instance, in 2002, a landowner had to own ten or more parcels to be eligible for a combined assessment. For 2004, a landowner only needs to own six or more parcels, and by 2006, a landowner will only have to own two or more parcels to be eligible for a combined assessment.

Summary of Bill:

A landowner of multiple forested parcels is only able to have his or her forest fire protection assessments calculated for all parcels, but billed to one parcel, if the landowner owns six or more parcels smaller than 50 acres in a given county. Owners of four or more parcels will no longer be eligible for the combined assessment in 2005, and owners of two or more parcels will no longer be eligible for the combined assessment in 2006 or thereafter.

Appropriation: None.

Fiscal Note: Not requested.

Effective Date: The bill takes effect 90 days after adjournment of session in which bill is passed.

Testimony For: Without this bill, small counties in forested areas could soon be facing high administrative costs. If landowners with only two parcels can file for a combined assessment, then almost every landowner will be given that opportunity. This will create burdens for already undermanned staffs. The bill does not take away the ability for an owner to get an assessment refund, but avoids a refund procedure that is expensive for the counties to administer and has little benefits.

Testimony Against: None.

Persons Testifying: Diane Dorey, Lewis County Assessor; Jack Westerman, Jefferson County Assessor; and Michelle Hagen, Washington Association of County Assessors.

Persons Signed In To Testify But Not Testifying: None.