

Natural Resources

HB 1061

Brief Description: *Distributing more equitably the cost of forest fire protection between forest protection assessments and the general fund.*

Sponsors: *Representatives Rockefeller, Barlean, Doumit, Eickmeyer, Edwards, McDermott, Haigh, Kenney and Jackley.*

Brief Summary of Bill

- *Declares it state policy that the costs of fire protection for forest lands be equitably shared between forest landowner assessments and the state general fund.*
- *Increases the assessment for forest protection for parcels of land over 50 acres by three cents for every acre over 50 acres.*
- *Limits refunds of forest protection assessments to forest landowners who own more than four parcels of forest land rather than two or more parcels of forest land.*

Hearing Date: *1/22/01*

Staff: *Bill Lynch (786-7092).*

Background:

Owners of forest land are required to adequately protect against the spread of fire from or onto their property during the fire season. The Department of Natural Resources (DNR) is required to provide fire protection for forest landowners who are unable to provide their own fire protection. DNR provides forest fire protection to much of the forest land in the state, and may contract out fire protection services with local governments.

DNR funds the cost of providing forest fire protection to forest landowners through forest protection assessments and state general fund appropriations. The cost of fires which originate as a result of a landowner operation are borne by the landowner contingency forest fire suppression account.

The annual forest protection assessment imposed on a forest landowner in a forest protection zone for each parcel of land is a flat assessment of \$14.50, plus twenty-two cents per acre for every acre over fifty acres.

A 1997 study of the state fire program for forest lands compared the amount of funding received for fire protection by fund source among several western states. This study found that Washington state contributes the smallest percentage of funds for fire protection from its state general fund, and the highest percentage of funds for fire protection from landowner assessments. This study considered it imperative that a more equitable split between the state general fund and landowner assessments be established for forest protection.

A forest landowner who has paid forest protection assessments on two or more parcels, each parcel containing less than fifty acres and each within the same county, may obtain a refund. If all the parcels together comprise less than fifty acres, the refund is equal to the amount of the flat fee assessments paid minus fourteen dollars and the administrative fee retained by the county assessor. If all the parcels together comprise fifty or more acres, the refund is equal to the amount of the flat assessments paid minus: (1) fourteen dollars; (2) twenty-two cents for each acre exceeding fifty acres; and (3) the administrative fee retained by the county assessor. Concerns have been raised by DNR about the amount of resources it uses to provide small refunds.

Summary of Bill:

The Legislature declares it the policy of the state to equitably share the costs of fire protection between the forest fire protection assessment account and the state general fund.

The assessment for forest protection is increased for parcels of land that exceed fifty acres from a flat fee plus twenty-two cents per acre for every acre over fifty acres, to a flat fee plus twenty-five cents per acre for every acre over fifty acres.

In order to obtain a refund, an owner of forest land must pay forest protection assessments on four or more parcels, each parcel containing less than fifty acres and each within the same county. If all the parcels together comprise fifty or more acres, then the amount of the refund is equal to the amount of the flat assessments paid minus: (1) fourteen dollars; (2) twenty-five cents for each acre exceeding fifty acres; and (3) the administrative fee retained by the county assessor.

Effective Date: *Ninety days after adjournment of session in which bill is passed.*

Appropriation: None.

Fiscal Note: Requested on January 15, 2001.