

FINAL BILL REPORT

SHB 2104

C 279 L 01

Synopsis as Enacted

Brief Description: Providing for an increase in forest fire protection funds.

Sponsors: By House Committee on Appropriations (originally sponsored by Representatives Rockefeller, Sump, Pearson and Doumit).

House Committee on Natural Resources
House Committee on Appropriations
Senate Committee on Ways & Means

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. The DNR provides forest fire protection to much of the forest land in the state and may contract out fire protection services with local governments.

The DNR funds the cost of providing forest fire protection to forest landowners through forest protection assessments and state general fund appropriations. 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 22 cents per acre for every acre over 50 acres.

A 1997 study by TriData 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 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. Concerns were also raised in the study about the state's ability to provide adequate fire protection because of inadequate resources.

Owners of multiple parcels of forest land located within the same county, each parcel containing less than 50 acres, may apply to the DNR for a refund of a portion of the fire protection assessment paid. The amount of the refund is frequently less than what it costs the DNR to process the refund.

Summary:

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 state contributions. The Legislature also declares that sufficient funds should be committed to the forest fire protection program so that the recommendations of the TriData study can be implemented on an equitable basis.

The assessment for forest protection is increased for parcels of land that exceed 50 acres from a flat fee plus 22 cents per acre for every acre over 50 acres, to a flat fee plus 25 cents per acre for every acre over 50 acres. This 3 cent increase in landowner assessments is contingent upon the state providing its equitable share of forest fire protection. If specific funding is not provided for this act by June 30, 2001, in the state operating budget, the 3 cent increase in landowner assessments is null and void.

Owners of small parcels of forest land, who are entitled to a refund for fire protection assessments because they own multiple parcels within a single county, may submit to the Department of Natural Resources a single application listing the parcels owned. The department is required to compute the correct assessment and allocate one parcel in the county to use for collecting the assessment in lieu of the current refund process. The county must bill the forest fire protection assessment on the one parcel identified by the department for collection of the assessment. The landowner is responsible for notifying the department of any changes in parcel ownership.

The new assessment process is phased-in over a period of five years. Property owners with the following number of parcels may apply to the department in the year indicated:

<u>Year</u>	<u>Number of Parcels</u>
2002	10 or more parcels
2003	8 or more parcels
2004	6 or more parcels
2005	4 or more parcels
2006	2 or more parcels

Votes on Final Passage:

House 97 0
Senate 40 0 (Senate amended)
House 83 0 (House concurred)

Effective: July 22, 2001