

## Forestland Classification & Fire Patrol Q&A

### Forestland Classification Process Update

Forestland Classification Committees appointed by each County are in the process of evaluating areas that determine ODF's fire protection responsibilities. This is a process that encourages individual and public participation. Benton County established a classification committee in 2008. It took nearly two years for the committee to complete a preliminary classification. Public informational meetings were held throughout Benton County. The committee worked to develop press releases and advertised to the public all meeting dates and locations. A public hearing was held on February 18<sup>th</sup>, 2010. For the past several months, the committee has been reviewing all testimony received prior to and at the public hearing.

### How did the committee determine which lands are forestlands?

The committee's only role is to determine which lands within Benton County and the Oregon Department of Forestry's protection district meet the definition of forestland as stated in Oregon Revised Statute (ORS) 526.005 (a) and (b). The committee conducted field trips, used aerial photography, and coordinated with each local fire chief when making determinations in rural fire protection districts.

### How is the fire patrol assessment related to lands classified as forestlands?

The fire patrol assessment is used to fund the Oregon Department of Forestry fire protection system. This provides district services that support fire prevention and typical fire suppression services. The assessment also provides monies used in a statewide account to pay for large and expensive wildfires called the Oregon Forestland Protection Fund (OFLPF). Your fire patrol assessment is divided between these two funds.

### Why the assessment?

The major parts of our fire system depend on local funding for smaller fire situations and a statewide funding system for large expensive fires. Private forest landowners contribute to both the local and statewide funding and monies are collected primarily through the county assessment system.

### More details:

**If you own a land parcel without an improvement (as defined by the county), the minimum assessment is \$18.75.** \$15 is used for local funding and the rest (\$3.75) is ear-marked for the OFLPF Fund.

**If you own a land parcel with an improvement (as defined by the county), the minimum assessment is \$66.25.** \$15 is used for local funding and the rest (\$51.25) is ear-marked for the OFLPF Fund.

### Why is there a surcharge for improved lots and a minimum assessment?

An improved lot surcharge was imposed by the 1989 legislature. The surcharge is deposited to the Oregon Forest Land Protection Fund (OFLPF), in recognition of the increased cost and complexity of suppressing fire in Wildland-Urban Interface (WUI) areas where, in addition to forest values, lives, homes and other improvements are often at risk. The minimum assessment is set in statute (ORS 477) and was determined to be the lowest rate paid for one specific parcel for fire protection and suppression.

**I own more than one tax lot; do I have to pay more than one minimum assessment? Yes, however, there are two processes for combining tax lots and paying only one minimum assessment.**

The first, detailed in ORS 477.270 allows you to combine two lots for assessment purposes, and pay only one minimum. There is a onetime fee of \$25 and this request must be renewed annually. The second process is to combine your tax lots for tax purposes only through Benton County. Please contact the Benton County Assessor's office for more details.

**I don't harvest trees or even own commercial forestland. I have very little vegetation that would carry fire and have created good defensible space around my residence. Why am I being assessed for fire services?**

The short answer is that you reside within a community boundary that is subject to wildfire and are therefore part of the wildfire protection system. This the same concept that puts you subject to assessments for your structure if you build within city's or rural fire zone, school, library or 911 emergency system or jurisdiction. You become part of that system.

**I'm currently receiving fire protection from a rural fire district. Isn't this double taxation?**

No. They are two different services that are complimentary and interdependent for providing adequate fire protection. The rural fire organizations are primarily devoted to "structure" fire protection. This is the bulk of their training and equipment capacity. The Oregon Department of Forestry's (ODF's) primary fire role is providing "wildfire" protection. The fire protection system in Oregon depends on this interconnect-ability and shared concept of fire protection.

**Specifically, what added value does the Oregon Department of Forestry provide that rural fire districts don't?**

There are three general areas of service where ODF adds value. The first is wildfire suppression. ODF is the largest fire organization in the State. It provides access to state, regional and national fire resource capacity that includes fire retardant air tankers, helicopters, and professional contracted firefighting crews and equipment. Second, ODF offers vast experience in large fire organizational strategy and tactics, including the rural-urban interface. This level of protection is not available through other sources. ODF also provides the more routine and typical fire responses.

Additionally ODF provides fire prevention and law enforcement services. ODF regulates fire activities and laws within the District's fire protection boundary. This includes industrial and non-industrial use of fire and equipment. Examples include open burning, off-road vehicles, fireworks, and chainsaws. Because fire suppression activities are generally very expensive, fire prevention activities tend to be more cost effective and have the additional advantage of minimizing resource damage.

**How often will the Benton County Classification Committee review their findings?**

The Benton County Forestland Classification Committee is a standing committee within the county. Once the final written order is filed, the committee will meet annually or as needed to review possible land use changes, subdivisions, annexations etc...

**Can I appeal?**

If you wish to appeal the Forestland Classification Committee's final decision, you must file the appeal with the circuit court and provide notice to the secretary of the committee within 30 days of when the committee records the written order with the county clerk. The appeal is handled through the circuit court for the county as described in statute.