

BENTON COUNTY FORESTLAND CLASSIFICATION
and
BENTON COUNTY FORESTLAND CLASSIFICATION COMMITTEE

The Oregon Department of Forestry (ODF) – West Oregon District currently provides wildfire protection on about 285,000 acres of forestland in Benton County. These lands have been part of ODF's protection responsibility for many decades and have been classified and assessed accordingly. ODF's expertise in wildfire "perimeter control", wildfire suppression and access to additional resources used to control fast moving wildland fires are effective and valuable in the Wildland-Urban Interface (WUI) fire protection environment. Discussions of where ODF should be providing wildfire protection and where it should not, and who should pay for this protection, also have been going on for decades. These issues have become more important as rapid expansion and development of Wildland-Urban Interface areas makes ODF involvement in these areas increasingly complicated and costly.

FORESTLAND CLASSIFICATION

The ODF forestland classification system originated with passage of the Forest Land Classification Act by the 1937 Oregon Legislature. Classification of lands as "forestland" essentially determined where ODF's protection responsibilities were. By the 1950's, the system had been adopted statewide with significant regional variation in interpretation and application.

Today, the wildfire protection environment, social and ecological systems, land uses, values and overall attitudes are much different. The population has increased and greater numbers of people are living within traditional forestlands with their fire prone fuels. This Wildland-Urban Interface covers significantly larger portions of the forest protection district than in the past, and includes thousands of private dwellings. Consequently, many of the conditions pertaining to the original forestland classification system no longer apply, and the ODF fire protection program has escalated in complexity and costs.

In 2007, a statewide review committee made up of landowners, cooperators, legislators and ODF reviewed the statutes, rules and policies that make up its forestland classification system. Review goals were to update the classification system to reflect current conditions, and identify ways to improve the efficiency and consistency of its application and administration. One of the outcomes of this policy review was to emphasize the establishment of county committees which will re-examine forestland classifications of all lands in the state, including Benton County lands within ODF's West Oregon Protection District.

Oregon Revised Statute (ORS) 526, the West Oregon District of ODF, and the Benton County Commissioners authorized formation of such a committee in the spring of 2008. The committee chose the name Benton County Forestland Classification Committee (BCFCC). It is examining all lands within the ODF West Oregon Forest Protection District in Benton County, classifying lands as "forestland" or "not forestland" according to fire risk potential, vegetation type (fire fuel), community structure, and proximity to other forestland. It is hoped that the committee's efforts will help resolve issues pertaining to ODF's fire suppression role on public and private forestlands within the District. The committee consists of three appointees by the Benton County Commissioners, a representative from the Oregon Department of Forestry, a representative of the Oregon State Fire Marshal's Office and a representative from the County Extension Agency.

All BCFCC meetings are open to the public and are announced in several locations. The committee has also held specific public meetings for the landowners in the West Oregon Forest Protection District within the county.