



MONTANA FOREST OWNERS ASSOCIATION

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July 26, 2018

Environmental Quality Council
State Capitol, Room 317
1301 E 6th Ave
Helena MT 59601

Mister Chairman and Committee Members:

Please accept this submission by the Montana Forest Owners Association (MFOA, described below) concerning the topic of “landowner assessment fee” to fund fire preparedness to be discussed on July 26 at 8:30 a.m. as part of “Fire-related study topics.” The MFOA supports the concept that each taxpayer pay his or her fair share for fire preparedness costs. It appears that the new assessment proposal gives rise to a number of potential inequities. We respectfully suggest that further study be made of the issue prior to drafting any bill for the legislature to consider. Following are some of the inequities

Timber and rangeland management not rewarded

No recognition or consideration is given to those timber and rangeland owners who incur the expense and effort to manage their property to reduce the risk and severity of fire. Rural private forests that have been managed for fuels reduction and access allow for effective and inexpensive fire containment and suppression. These positions are supported by the attached analysis titled “Montana Fire Preparedness Assessments – a private forest landowners perspective” written by Dr. Peter Kolb, a highly respected forestry expert in Montana and the Northwest. Dr. Kolb is the MSU Extension Forestry Specialist and Associate Professor Forest Ecology & Management. He is surely known to many members of this Committee.

Burden shifted to landowners

The May 30, 2018, DNRC proposal is to place upon property owners (excluding federal, state, tribal and municipal) 100% of the \$13.9 million fire preparedness costs. Under the current system all Montana taxpayers, irrespective of land ownership, pay approximately \$8.2 million of the cost through the General Fund. In addition, federal government grants cover approximately \$1.9 million. The remaining \$3.8 million is paid by forested land owners in the west through “wildland fire protection district” assessments. It seems inequitable to place the entire funding burden upon landowners.

Assessment by parcel

The proposed assessment by parcel will result in inequities, some owners paying more than their fair share and some paying less. The parcel assessment bears no relation to how much land a person might own, or similarly the probability that a wildfire might need to be suppressed on his or her land .

Municipalities excepted

The new assessment proposal excludes parcels within municipalities upon the assumption that such parcels are already assessed fire preparedness fees by the municipalities. Although this seems equitable at first glance, this does not take into consideration that many persons in rural areas are also assessed taxes to support local fire facilities. Moreover, people and structures in municipalities benefit from fire

preparedness because fires do not recognize boundaries. Wildfires can and do spread from rural to urban settings. Thus, an argument can be made that all Montanans should contribute.

Increased fees/taxes to Montanans

And particularly, the DNRC should not fund 100% of its fire preparedness fees from new assessments without a corresponding reduction in the general fund collections that offset the new assessments.

Before discarding the current assessment system in its entirety, consideration could be given to amending the current system.

Thank you for your consideration and time.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Mike Christianson".

Mike Christianson
President

The Montana Property Owners Association, has been a Montana non-profit corporation since 1995. The MFOA's sole purpose is to protect and serve the interests of non-industrial private forest landowners. There are more than 29,000 non-industrial private forest owners that individually own forested parcels of 10 acres or more and cumulatively own in excess of four million forested acres in Montana. For more information, google MFOA or go to www.MontanaForestOwners.org