

# Brown's wildfire liability plan gets some push back

By Kevin Yamamura, Sacramento Bee

Gov. Jerry Brown tucked provisions into his budget that would limit payouts in wildfire liability cases, potentially saving timber companies and other major California landowners hundreds of millions of dollars as federal prosecutors pursue record-high damages in court.

The Democratic governor also asked lawmakers to impose a 1 percent lumber tax to fund forestry oversight while reducing industry costs. And he wants to reduce the frequency with which California reviews tree-cutting plans for environmental impacts.

Brown pitched the ideas as ways to help the state's timber industry provide jobs after a construction downturn and fierce competition with producers from the Pacific Northwest. He also highlights \$30 million in new lumber tax funding for environmental reviews that have gone missing due to budget cuts.

But the plan has drawn strong opposition from the Sacramento-based U.S. attorney's office, which is aggressively pursuing wildfire negligence cases, as well as some environmentalists who contend Brown is giving the industry too much.

Brown's legislation addresses wildfire lawsuits filed by government agencies. It would more narrowly tailor criteria for calculating wildfire damages and seeks to focus awards on restoration costs. Federal courts generally rely on state laws to determine wildfire damages.

U.S. prosecutors suggested the proposal could affect their pending case against the state's largest landowner, Sierra

Pacific Industries, and other defendants for a 2007 fire in Lassen and Plumas counties where damages could reach \$600 million.

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