

Opinion: Fire fee is an illegal tax on Californians

By Ted Gaines

Despite my efforts to stop it by referendum and legislation, the illegal fire tax is being assessed on more than 825,000 people starting this month.

This so-called fee was passed in 2011 to extract up to \$150 per habitable structure from rural property owners. The tax will not provide any more fire protection and will actually make it harder for local fire agencies to raise the money they need to keep people safe. It's a lose-lose proposition for the people in my district and for anyone concerned with public safety and the rule of law.



State Sen. Ted Gaines in the Angora burn area in June.
Photo/LTN

This tax should have been subject to a two-thirds vote in the Legislature just like every other tax, but the Democrats called it a fee to get around that requirement. The Howard Jarvis Taxpayers Association will file a lawsuit disputing the fee's legality and I hope it gets overturned ASAP.

Until that happens, though, the state Board of Equalization

(BOE) plans to begin mailing the first bills for the new fire tax this month and hopes to have all bills sent by December. The BOE also plans to mail an advance notice to the affected property owners to warn them that the bills are coming, and to provide them with a brochure explaining the "fee."

No matter how many mailers or explanations or warnings any agency sends out, it doesn't make this tax any more right or more legal. It was, is and always will be a shakedown of rural property owners that takes their money every single year but gives them zero in the way of additional fire safety.

The answer to fire protection in California is not bogus taxes, but budgets that invest in core government services that protect every citizen in the state – rural, urban or suburban. My office will be watching this issue closely and will keep you updated on any new developments.

Visit www.calfirefee.com to see if you live in a "State Responsibility Area" and will be paying this tax. For questions regarding your bill, contact the BOE at 888.310.6447. For more information regarding the Howard Jarvis Taxpayers Association litigation, contact (916) 444.9950.

State Sen. Ted Gaines, R-Rocklin, represents Lake Tahoe.