

# Opinion: Time to fight the rural fire tax

By George Runner

A fire tax bill is coming soon to a mailbox near you. It's not fair; it's not constitutional, but thanks to Gov. Jerry Brown and the Legislature, the bills are coming all the same.

On Aug. 13, California began mailing the first of more than 825,000 Fire Prevention Fee bills to Californians who own property with a habitable structure in a State Responsibility Area- those 31 million acres where CalFire has primary responsibility for fire prevention and suppression.

It doesn't matter whether you've invested time, sweat and money to meet the state's ever-evolving fire standards. It doesn't matter whether you experience any benefit from CalFire's prevention activities. It doesn't even matter whether you already pay for local fire service – though if you do, you'll get a \$35 discount.

Like it or not, if you live in an SRA, the state is going to start billing you \$150 each year. And if you don't pay within 30 days, you'll face steep penalties and interest.

The bills are going out in alphabetical order by county between August and early December. That means residents of Alameda, Alpine, Amador and Butte counties will receive their bills in August. Residents of Tuolumne, Ventura, Yolo and Yuba counties most likely won't see theirs for several months.

The first round of bills is expected to raise \$84 million to help pay for the state's operations last fiscal year. The next round of bills is just around the corner – they'll be mailed beginning March 2013.

Forget the photos of firefighters fighting fires. This new tax won't pay for firefighters or put out a single fire. Nor will it do anything to expand the state's fire prevention efforts. The dollars collected will simply fund existing CalFire programs.

Supporters of the fire tax argue that folks who live in fire-prone areas should pay for increased state fire prevention costs.

Imagine if we funded other state programs similarly. The Legislature would then require property owners in high-crime neighborhoods to pay a "crime prevention tax" to fund the state's prisons and public safety programs.

After all, these high-crime neighborhoods produce more criminals.

Somehow I doubt urban politicians will extend the same logic to other state programs – especially not if it means higher taxes for the urban areas they represent.

When it comes to the fire tax, there's no relationship between a taxpayer's burden and the benefits he or she will receive.

Even so, the governor and Legislature are still trying to pretend this new tax is a fee. That's because the Legislature doesn't have constitutional authority to raise taxes without a two-thirds vote. By pretending the fire tax is a fee, the Democrat majority approved it on a simple majority vote.

I intend to join the Howard Jarvis Taxpayers Association in suing to halt this illegal money grab. But before a lawsuit can move forward, at least one property owner must 1) receive a bill, 2) file a written appeal and 3) have his or her appeal denied.

To help inform California taxpayers, I've established a website ([calfirefee.com](http://calfirefee.com)) providing detailed information about

the new fire tax. Visit this site to find out if you live in an SRA and might soon receive a fire tax bill. You can also find further details regarding the process, timeline and grounds for filing an appeal.

California needs a balanced budget, but we should not balance it on the backs of already overtaxed Californians. As an elected taxpayer advocate, it is my duty and privilege to work each and every day to protect taxpayers from unfair and excessive taxation – including this new illegal fire tax.

*George Runner is a member of the state Board of Equalization. His district, which stretches from San Bernardino County to the Oregon border, is home to more than 9 million Californians.*