

# Opinion: CalFire needs to go further with fire tax

By Ted Gaines

While I am pleased CalFire has decided to apply the brakes in order to sort this mess out, I will not give up the fight to repeal the fire tax altogether.

I just heard from a constituent this week telling me they were billed for two structures on a parcel of land that only had one home and the resulting battle it took to get CalFire to realize their mistake. It is absolutely unacceptable and another example of absurd government inefficiency.



Ted Gaines

According to news reports, CalFire has confirmed receipt of 87,000 petitions for reconsideration from homeowners who said they were billed in error. The agency plans to delay this year's fire tax bills while the challenges are investigated.

I have introduced three pieces of legislation this session that will provide relief for rural Californians forced to pay the fee.

Senate Bill 17 would altogether repeal the collection of the \$150 tax.

Senate Bill 125 would exempt a property owner of a structure that is located both within an SRA and within the boundaries

of a local fire protection district from having to pay the \$150 tax.

Senate Bill 147 would exempt any property owner located within an SRA who has an income of less than 200 percent of the federal poverty level (as determined by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Poverty Guidelines) from paying the \$150 fire tax.

This fire tax has been imposed on the owners of more than 825,000 properties in the state. According to Census and CalFire data, my largely rural district includes nearly 25 percent or approximately 200,000 of the properties whose owners are subject to the fee.

The billing is in complete disarray and CalFire has been accused of stashing away millions in a secret fund. I hope my legislative colleagues realize that charging rural Californians a \$150 illegal fire fee specifically to support CalFire operations, at the same time they are inappropriately billing for the tax and hiding millions provides enough justification to support my legislation.

I also strongly support the lawsuit filed this month against the state by the Howard Jarvis Taxpayers Association challenging the fee on constitutional grounds.

Property owners who believe they were billed in error have 30 days to appeal. Owners are encouraged to pay the "fee" while going through the appeals process. If the fee is late, steep penalties and interest are compounded monthly. Moreover, the fee is a lien on property, and failure to pay can result in foreclosure. For more information, call CalFire at 888.310.6447.

*Ted Gaines represents the 1st Senate District, which includes all or parts of Alpine, El Dorado, Lassen, Modoc, Nevada, Placer, Plumas, Sacramento, Shasta, Sierra and Siskiyou counties.*