

CalFire fee backlash gains momentum

By Kathryn Reed

This year's rural fire bills have been delayed because CalFire is still trying to figure out who should receive them.

"CalFire found a number of problems with addresses that should no longer be in state responsibility areas," George Runner, who is a member of the state Board of Equalization, said April 2 during a teleconference. His agency sends the bills based on the addresses provided by CalFire.

Runner is a strong opponent of the fee that charges people \$115 for living in an area serviced by CalFire. Last month the Howard Jarvis Taxpayers Association formally served the California Board of Equalization, CalFire and state Department of Justice with a lawsuit challenging the constitutionality of the state's Fire Prevention Fee. Runner plans to join the lawsuit by filing an amicus brief on behalf of the California taxpayers he represents.



CalFire at times has a truck at the Lake Valley station on Lake Tahoe Boulevard. Photo/CalFire

Besides the lawsuit, there are six bills in the Legislature that would either alter who pays, how much is paid or repeal the fee completely. Three of those bills are sponsored by state Sen. Ted Gaines, R-Roseville, who represents Lake Tahoe.

On Tuesday night Runner said, "The problem is state responsibility areas were never well defined. They were never meant to be as an overlay for taxing. That is why (CalFire is) backing off a bit as they are doing this year's review."

In El Dorado County, Runner said 1,300 properties are supposed to be removed from the fee list.

Runner said the plan by CalFire is to clean up the list, but a removal does not mean a refund is forthcoming. It means no bill will come in future years.

The fee was initiated last year as a way for the state to backfill CalFire's coffers. The \$85 million that was supposed to be raised was never designed for new programs or fire prevention. The governor and Legislature took that sum to balance the state budget and used the fee to keep CalFire whole.

To date, \$73.8 million has been collected. About \$1 million of that has been refunded to people who protested.

Runner is hosting a series of meetings with constituents throughout the state, with a particular area's lawmaker to be on the line as well.

In the inaugural call people from one end of the state to the other complained about how the fee is really a tax – which becomes taxation without representation.

Another issue brought up is how owners of dwellings are charged, not property owners. This has impacted mobile home owners and those with more than one structure on a parcel.

Susan, a disabled senior from Grass Valley, told Runner a

collection agency came after her because she was paying the fee in installments and the money drastically cut into her food allowance.

Ronny lives on 40 acres in Cottonwood. He said he has no idea why he should be charged the fee when he uses a tractor to cut his own fire lines and has been taking care of his property for years.

Janelle in Santa Cruz said CalFire does nothing for her, which frustrates her considering she had to pay the fire fee.

Robert, a truck driver, called from the road. He spoke about how he pays a fee for the volunteer fire department that is less than a quarter mile from his house. He called it silly to pay the CalFire fee when the state services his area three or four months a year, and then it can take 90 minutes for crews to arrive in an emergency.

While Runner agrees with the callers believing the fee is absurd, he recommends everyone pay it because otherwise it could get messy. He also says everyone should protest it.

“There is a view in the Legislature that folks in rural areas are responsible for fire. I like to remind people about the whole concept of conservation,” Runner said. He said CalFire wasn’t set up to protect properties, but instead to protect watersheds – that’s why CalFire will go into the backcountry. “Watersheds are primarily for people who live in the cities, not for the people paying the fee.”

David, who lives in the town of El Dorado, said then he didn’t understand why he was being billed instead of others farther west of him in more metropolitan areas. Plus, he added, he has a fire hydrant on his street, lives six doors from a fire station, and pays for fire protection via other taxes.

“I don’t think the average legislator down the street understands watersheds,” Runner said from his Sacramento

office. "They don't understand the relationship of fire protection and watersheds. They just turn on the tap."

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Notes:

- More info about the fire fee is online.
- State Sen. Ted Gaines will participate in a tele-townhall May 7 from 6-7pm with Runner. To register, call (916) 324.4970.
- Runner's number: (916) 445.2181.