

**OREGON
WILD**

To: House Committee on Revenue

From: Casey Kulla, Oregon Wild

Re: Oppose HB 4133

Date: Feb 16, 2024

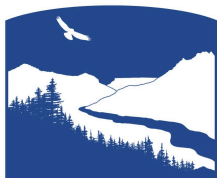
Chair Nathanson, Vice-chairs Walters and Reschke, and members of the committee,

For the past 50 years, Oregon Wild has been dedicated to protecting Oregon's wildlands, wildlife, and waters for future generations. On behalf of our 20,000 supporters, I offer relevant context on Oregon's response to wildfire, express opposition to HB 4133, and offer a path forward. But first, one declaration: budgets are policy. How we spend our money is both the direction we choose to go and how we show our values.

The executive summary from Earth Economics' report to the Oregon Legislature on the cost of wildfire preparedness and suppression on ODF-protected lands is an excellent primer on where money comes from and where it goes. What the report does not provide is the policy direction that governs ODF fire suppression activities; for that, you need to dive into Oregon's revised statutes, which state that the priority of ODF's suppression—except for life-safety—is forest values on the private forestland ODF protects. To be clear: all discussion, debate, and budgets revolve around this central point: ODF wildfire response is for protecting private trees, roads, and bridges.

It is true that wildfire is a problem for all Oregonians. Legislators have recognized that, over the years, by a policy that matches the contributions of landowners with general fund monies. Together, these two contributions make up the base fire budget for regional fire protection districts of ODF, and by policy, this budget must provide an adequate level of fire protection. Why? Because ODF requires private forestland owners to either pay into the base fire budget OR demonstrate that the landowner can effectively respond to a fire on their land. Due to SB 762 in 2021, the adequate level has increased, and House Bill 4133 proposes to reduce the landowner contribution to the costs of this adequate level of protection. While we don't know the total cost to taxpayers (because there has not been a fiscal analysis released), HB 4133 will increase the general fund contribution to base fire budgets.

So, let's return to "wildfire is a problem for all Oregonians." Right now (and there is no proposal to change this), if a wildfire exhausts the available resources of the ODF regional fire budget (remember that this is currently made up equally of forestland owner fees and general fund monies), the large fire fund kicks in and other regions can provide resources from their equipment and staff. Once the landowner contribution to this fund is exhausted, Oregon is on the hook for all additional costs. If the President declares a major disaster, some of the money expended can be reimbursed (albeit slowly), but this is an 'if.' House Bill 4133 proposes to eliminate the landowner contribution to the large fire fund and place all of these costs on the Oregon taxpayer.



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If you are still following me, you'll know that the budget for ODF's wildfire suppression also contains what budget writers have labeled the "admin pro-rate." This is about \$7.75 million that the general fund contributes to wildfire suppression on private land in recognition of the in-kind contributions of time and materials that landowners provide to protect their land. HB 4133 does not propose to change this contribution.

Oregon's wildfire funding strategy is complex. The proposals outlined in HB 4133 do not simplify this complexity, but they do reduce landowner contributions, especially for Oregon's largest landowners. All this will be at the expense of Oregon's already-stretched general fund.

Oregon Wild would like to see more emphasis on community risk reduction and the work of Oregon State's Fire Marshall in coordinating community fire response to conflagrations that burn homes and displace communities. While the workgroup that created this bill operated in good faith—though in secrecy—the result reflects the workgroup composition and not the whole of Oregon.

I urge the experts on wildfire to invite experts on community risk reduction, ecological forest management, insurance providers, fire chiefs, environmental justice, climate action, and fair budgeting to work during the interim on a comprehensive "wildfire in Oregon" solution. HB 4133 does not declare to be, nor is it, a comprehensive solution to an urgent problem. It merely moves more of the cost of protecting private forestland from the owners to the rest of us.

Respectfully, I urge you not to move HB 4133 forward **or** if you move it forward, amend it to sunset Jan 2, 2026 and use that time to seek a more fair, transparent, ecologically-justified solution for wildfire funding that recognizes the immediacy of climate change and the fires at our doorstep, the risk of which can be reduced with common sense strategies.

Thank you for your time and attention. Respectfully,

Casey Kulla
State Forest Policy Coordinator
Oregon Wild