

Matt Aalto, Battalion Chief and Training Officer for the Estacada Fire department:

"We all have a mutual enemy in fire, regardless of location. The major fire storms of 2020 began in rural communities and this was the first time in memory that they transitioned into the neighborhoods of major populated areas causing millions in destruction and costing the lives of at least 9 people in the state as reported by OPB. Oregon is following the trend that California has been seeing due to long-term drought and high easterly winds. This is where we need to invest to mitigate wildfire. Since rural areas do not have the population to get the same tax dollars as highly populated areas for professionally-paid career firefighters, prevention and suppression in rural areas can save populated areas millions in property damage, state forest and wildlife conservation costs, and lives. It's important to remember that career departments have similar recruitment issues that volunteer departments have, as volunteer departments are the number one recruiting resource for career departments. Finding volunteers and providing the essential training they need to become a career firefighter is expensive, takes time, and when not shared among both volunteer and career pools, would be impossible. So, this isn't just about those who pay a higher or lower tax rate on a personal or geographic basis, this is a statewide concern that benefits everyone. This is about the men and women who choose to do this to protect not just their communities, but any community they are asked to mobilize to. In Oregon, under the direction of the Oregon State Fire Marshal's Office, Oregon firefighters will deploy anywhere in the state where the need is the greatest. This includes the major populated areas where volunteers set up tents in fields or rodeo grounds and provide fire service so that the existing members of their local departments can meet the needs of emergency calls. Support for volunteer firefighters and their communities is also support for career departments and those they serve. While a tax credit is a generous idea to support firefighting efforts, it doesn't create change or support a local department to provide personal protective equipment, training classes or equipment or any modernization. A shotgun approach to offer a tax incentive across the board doesn't support the efforts to recruit and retain on a local level, where the need is the greatest. A determined funded means to a department, would in itself, allow for direct, local retention and recruitment of its members and will better utilize tax payer funds. This will allow for more accurate tracking of success and can build upon those programs which might be facing additional stress from the upcoming OSHA regulations. This funding effort will bring more firefighters to the line in Oregon and help relieve the annual wildland firefighter shortage."

We believe this package will more than pay for itself in saved lives, reduced firefighting costs, minimizing property damages and insurance premium increases, as the climate continues to increase wildfire potential.

We hope you will consider this solution as an alternative to an annual tax credit to the recruit, because it is simple and direct and eliminates both delayed benefit to the recruit and DOR administration costs and solves the biggest impediment fire departments face in attracting and retaining a qualified firefighting workforce--training costs.

Thank you so much for the opportunity to provide comment.

Matt Aalto, MS

Battalion Chief/Training Officer

Estacada Fire District