



Senator Jeff Golden
State Senator, District 3

News Release

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**SENATOR GOLDEN PROPOSES PERMANENT FUNDING TO
PROTECT OREGON FROM CATASTROPHIC WILDFIRE**

State Senator Jeff Golden (Medford/Ashland) has introduced Senate Bill 502 to provide a permanent and stable source of funding for programs that would permanently protect Oregon communities from catastrophic wildfire. The proposal would distribute as planned approximately 70% of the pending \$5.5 Billion income tax kicker to Oregon Tax Payers and transfer the remainder, approximately \$1.7 Billion to a Permanent Wildfire Programs Trust Fund. The \$1.7 Billion would be held in trust into the indefinite future, while the interest it earns would be spent on programs to prevent, reduce, mitigate, suppress and offer recovery services for wildfire.

Senator Golden explained the proposal Wednesday in the following testimony to the Senate Finance and Revenue committee (video [here](#)).

For more information, contact Senator Golden at 503-986-1703.

SB 502 Testimony to Senate Finance and Revenue Committee

5/31/2023

Chair Meek, members of the committee, I'm Jeff Golden, a member of this committee and the Senator representing District 3 in the Rogue Valley, here to ask your favorable consideration of SB 502.

The foundation of this bill is a pair of stark facts. The first is that Oregon, along with the rest of the American West, is at ongoing risk of destruction from massive and intense wildfires, and if climatologists and forest scientists are right, will be for many many years to come. We're in the

midst of a grim reality that began years ago in Southern California and relentlessly moved northward through central and northern California and, in 2020, thrust into Oregon as far north as the Santiam Canyon.

The list of partially and completely destroyed communities grows longer every year. On it are cities in my District and increasingly in some of yours. Those that have escaped the flames are increasingly engulfed by toxic smoke for days or weeks at a time. Beyond the suffering of Oregon families, which could take the rest of this meeting and more to describe, the damage to infrastructure and community life is beyond imagination. The total quantifiable cost of every severe wildfire season to our state now runs into the billions of dollars, and without a robust, comprehensive wildfire program, we know there will be more of those seasons.

That's #1. Fact number 2 is that the robust, comprehensive wildfire program that we launched with Senate Bill 762 in 2021 was entirely paid for by the state General Fund. The same is true for the coming biennium. We haven't identified another funding source, and it's abundantly clear that the General Fund can't continue to shoulder this burden. The fact is, as we sit here today, **we don't have a path for protecting Oregon communities from devastating, monumentally expensive wildfire going forward.**

This bill would create that path. Senate Bill 502 proposes to use less than one-third of the pending income tax kicker to effectively protect Oregon communities permanently, or as close to permanently as anything we do can get.

Let me lay out a little speculative math. This year's personal income tax kicker is now estimated at \$5.5 Billion. As written, SB 502 would send a \$1000 check to every eligible Oregon taxpayer, but since the new revenue forecast came out I'd be interested in amending that to \$1500. Those kicker checks would spend around \$3.7 Billion of the total and leave about \$1.7 Billion for **a permanent Wildfire Programs Trust Fund**. The PRINCIPLE OF THAT FUND, the roughly \$1.7 Billion we put into it, would not be spent. We would fund our wildfire programs with the investment interest it earns each year.

An annual return on investment of 7% on \$1.7 Billion would yield about \$120 Million each year for wildfire programs. A 6% return would yield a little more than \$100 Million per year. As it happens that's almost exactly what the omnibus wildfire bill SB 762 invested this biennium—not coincidentally, we've had two mild and manageable wildfire seasons since we passed that bill. My rough estimate is that a solid, adequate wildfire program needs something like \$130 to \$150 million per year, but even if our Wildfire Programs Trust Fund yields less than that, we would get by and take enormous pressure off the General Fund.

So bottom line, here's the offer: in return for foregoing less than 1/3 of the projected kicker this one time and one time only, Oregon taxpayers will receive protection—not 100% guaranteed protection, which would be a false promise, but competent, reliable, at-scale protection—from wildfires that would very likely decimate communities, countless lives, and the quality of life for every Oregonian who likes to breathe—protection lasting for decades to come.

You'll notice that the bill as written calls for checks of equal amounts to all eligible Oregon taxpayers. To be candid, that part is a separate, and obviously controversial, conversation. I favor it because it's a tiny step towards tempering the staggering income gap at the root of so many problems in Oregon and across the country. But that's not what moved me to write this bill. The emergency purpose prompting this bill—one more time—is to protect our communities from catastrophic wildfire. In service of that goal, I'd accept an amendment that retains the kicker's current distribution method while separating out a third of the total for the Permanent Wildfire Programs Trust Fund.

Finally, Mr. Chair, a reality check. We're talking about the kicker here. I know the passion that many have for returning every single dollar to taxpayers, full stop. I'm getting the same mail you are on a couple of other bills from people warning us to keep our hands entirely off their kicker checks. This bill, SB 502, is different in that it simply redirects less than one-third of kicker dollars this year only. All the same, conventional wisdom would probably count the odds against it as insurmountable.

I don't know about that. What I know is that most summers ahead will bring imminent threat of monumental devastation of our forestland, rangelands and nearby communities. We no longer have to imagine what it would look like; we're seeing it again and again, a growing list of towns and cities that now reach deep into Oregon. Without adequate resources, we're guaranteed to see more.

To be honest, I'm not picky about where those adequate resources come from. If anyone has a better idea for protecting our state for many many years to come than redirecting a third of this year's kicker, please sign me up.

I'll close, Mr. Chair, by asking us all to reflect on how we'll look back on this moment if we don't act in (what science tells us) is the extreme probability that we lose more homes, communities and lives to mega-fires because we didn't invest what it takes to prevent, reduce and suppress them. The historically large kicker at hand gives us the unique opportunity to safeguard our state for decades. I ask you to look beyond the political land mines and conventional wisdom with me to seize it.

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