

## Guest Opinions “Related” To Primary PSS Tax Measures

### September 2, 2014. Robert Hirning. *Wildfires an issue for national defense* (Guest Opinion)

- Robert Hirning. September 2, 2014. *Wildfires an issue for national defense* (Guest Opinion). The Grants Pass Daily Courier. Grants Pass, OR.

#### ROBERT HIRNING

Rising numbers of intense wildfires during the past decade have triggered a national debate over the strategy to be used in fighting these fires, particularly in the West. We hear that regular low-intensity ground fires historically kept forests healthy and that years of suppressing them led to buildups of understory fuels.

We hear that it is not fair to the majority of taxpayers to have to pay for defending rural communities that have allowed people to live in the "wildland/urban interface." Smokey the Bear says, "Only you can prevent forest fires," but now adds, "and if you people choose to live there, it's your own fault when your house catches fire." Americans are being told that rural residents should be responsible for taking care of their own wildfire problems.

Since when do people affected by natural disasters have to pay for their own rebuilding? Did New Orleans have to bear the cost of Katrina? Did New Jersey and New York have to cover the cost of Hurricane Sandy? In our country, we agree to share the cost of defending our nation against enemies domestic and foreign. I use the word enemies because — unlike disasters such as tornadoes, floods, earthquakes and hurricanes — wildfires can be fought.

We used to be very effective in stopping fires early. In the 1970s, we had commanding federal forces stationed right here in the valley: the Siskiyou Smokejumper Base, a helicopter crew based at the station, a 40-person suppression crew with 20 people standing by and other personnel available on-call.

Mountaintop towers on Sanger, Waldo, Serpentine, Bolan, and Pearsoll Peak were all manned lookouts. There were many fires, but none that got away and we took pride in that. More than 40 years later, there is hardly a brush truck in the district. Crews dispatched from Grants Pass need an extra hour to get to a fire. For example, one lone Forest Service rig showed up at the Four Corners fire, and only after state and local crews had already set up a command post and gone to work. This fire was not on federal land, but when I worked on initial attack 40 years ago, we cut line anywhere under mutual-aid agreements.

Now the burden is on state and local forces, which have been beefed up and are doing a good job. Anyone who witnessed the Four Corners Fire in 2013 or the Reeves Creek Fire in 2014 knows what can be done with a well-equipped, dedicated firefighting force. We pay state and local taxes

and certainly get excellent protection from these agencies. However most of the land in the West is federal and that is where the catastrophic fires have raged in recent decades.

The U.S. Forest Service doesn't make money anymore selling timber, and a stingy, urban-centered Congress refuses to appropriate adequate funds. Fire crews have been largely privatized through contracts, important aircraft bases have been regionalized and smaller ones closed. The Siskiyou Smokejumper Base was closed in 1981 to save \$45,000 annually, yet the 2002 Biscuit Fire cost nearly \$500,000.

Where would the money come from to pay for federal aircraft, jumpers and ground troops at 1970s levels? Much of it should come from the bloated defense budget. Unlike other natural disasters, wildfires are fought like military campaigns.

The defense budget includes staggering expenditures for unnecessary military hardware. The Pentagon plans to buy 2,443 F-35 aircraft at a projected cost of \$400 billion. This is several times the cost of all wildfire fighting costs combined for the next generation.

Instead, we should build a fleet of hundreds of aircraft specifically designed for wildfire fighting, capable of short-runway take-off, and station them at airports around the West. Sure it will cost money, but it will create just as many jobs as wasteful military spending. Win-win!

The suggestion that rural folks in wildfire-prone areas should pay for their development policies in rural areas is not only coming from anti-expenditure Tea Party types, it's coming from progressives, too.

Rachel Cleetus, an economist with the Union of Concerned Scientists writes, "A lot of the firefighting money is coming from federal sources like the Department of the Interior and the Forest Service, whereas a lot of decisions around development are being made at the local level ... where the folks who make those decisions are not paying the firefighting cost."

She could not be more wrong. We do pay for state and local firefighting costs through taxes, and if a fire starts on federal land it is their obligation to put it out. Remember the first smokejumpers were 555th Airborne soldiers and only after World War II became a civilian Forest Service crew. Shouldn't wildfire fighting again be part of our national defense policy?

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