



The latest on California politics and government

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State board approves maximum \$90 fee on rural homeowners

A state board responsible for rural fire protection on Monday approved a maximum \$90 fee per house in sparsely populated areas, significantly below the \$150 charge envisioned by state lawmakers in their June budget.

Under the emergency regulation passed by the **California Board of Forestry and Fire Protection**, the full \$90 fire prevention fee would apply to homeowners in extreme fire zones. Those living elsewhere in state responsibility areas would pay \$70 each year.

Monday's regulation includes \$65 in credits that would reduce those fees, including \$45 for those who already pay for local fire prevention through district fees or taxes.

The regulation appears to raise nowhere near the \$50 million that lawmakers are counting on this fiscal year, and certainly not the \$200 million projected annually thereafter.

Board executive officer **George Gentry** estimated that the regulation would generate about \$30 on average for each of the 850,000 homes in state responsibility areas. That would equal \$25.5 million before subtracting new administrative costs that could be as high as \$12 million annually.

The fee structure is far from final. Gov. **Jerry Brown** has called for clean-up legislation that would allow the state to apply funds to firefighting costs rather than fire prevention measures. Board members acknowledged that their fee proposal was essentially a first draft since they must follow up with a permanent regulation later this fiscal year.

Fiscal conservatives, meanwhile, have vowed to sue the state to block the fire fee from ever taking effect. They believe the law is unconstitutional and represents a tax that should have been passed on a two-thirds vote, rather than a majority.

"I think we're going to find out those areas that we need to come back and talk about in October because we're going to get an earful," said **Stan L. Dixon**, the board chairman and former Humboldt County supervisor, referring to anticipated public reaction. "I don't think anybody expects that this package could be anywhere near perfect."

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