



Proposed Final Report

Forest Fire Protection Assessment

September 2017

DNR can improve consistency of
landowner assessments by clarifying
definitions and coordinating with
county assessors

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Data analysis

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parcels may
be treated
differently

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DNR lacks
guidance for
counties

Forest Fire Protection Assessments are annual fees landowners pay on forest land parcels

Imposed by State Department of Natural Resources

Landowners pay \$17.50 per parcel plus 27 cents for each acre over 50

Supports fire protection activities

Expenditures over 10 years

Program	Amount (millions)	Description
Preparedness	\$42	Planning, equipment maintenance, fire detection, fire weather, administering the assessment
Training	\$10	Wildfire training for DNR staff
Smoke Management	\$7	Activities required to deliver the smoke management program
Education	\$4	Activities to educate the public about fire prevention
Fire District Assistance	\$2	Provide training and equipment to fire districts
All other	\$28	Includes administrative overhead
<i>Total expenditures over 10 years</i>	<i>\$92</i>	

Source: JLARC summary of data from DNR. Total may not match the sum of individual parts due to rounding.



Answers to the Legislature's questions

JLARC staff compiled a database
of 2.8 million parcels

**486,000 parcels are
subject to the
assessment out of
2.8 million total
(17%)**

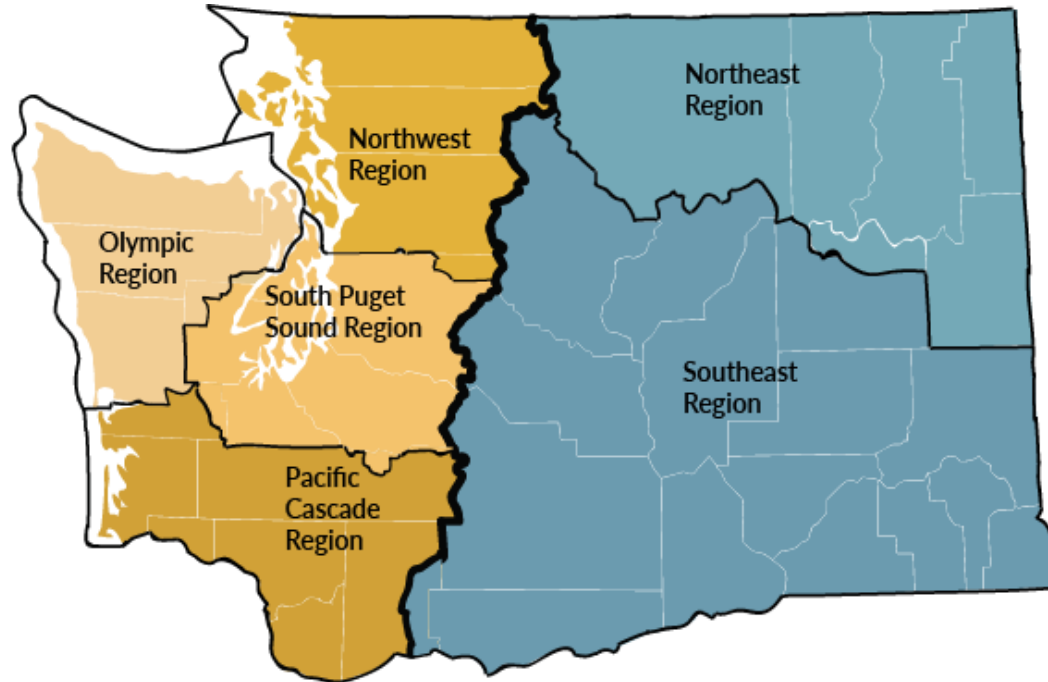
**DNR collected
approximately \$104
million in assessment
fees in the past 10
years**

Collections exceed spending in westside regions, while spending exceeds collections in east

Westside

64% of total collections

38% of total spending



Eastside

28% of total collections

47% of total spending

Remainder

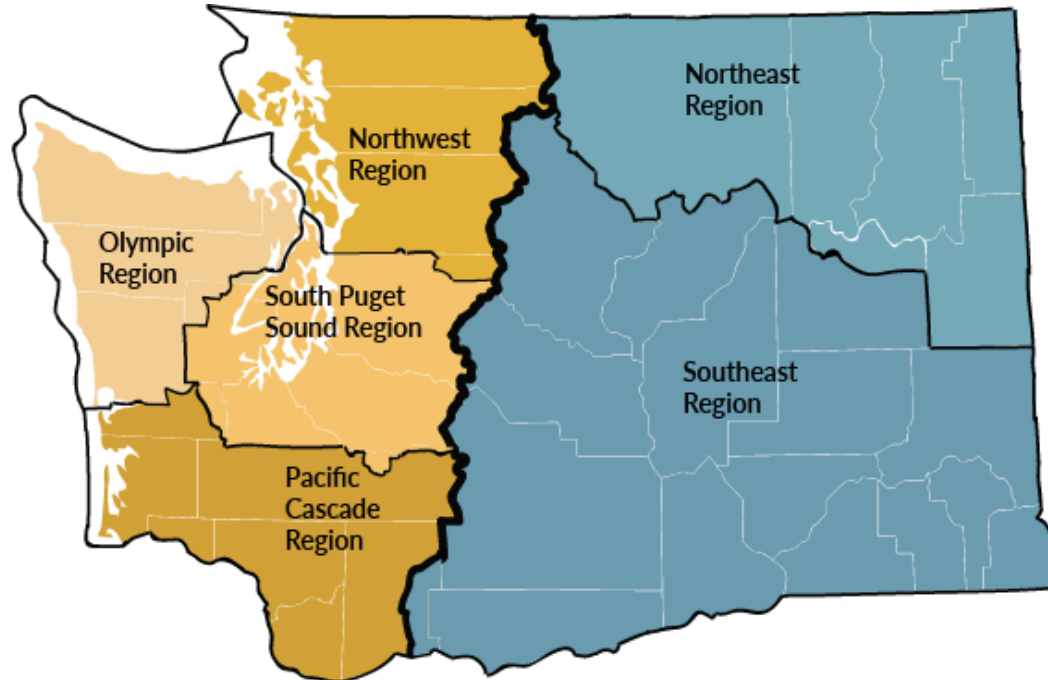
8% of funds collected directly by DNR

16% of funds spent on centralized DNR functions

Fires and acres burned on the eastside exceed westside

Westside

33% of fires



Eastside

67% of fires

> 90% of acres burned

5,455

PARCELS TAXED AS FOREST THAT
DO NOT PAY THE ASSESSMENT
(116,920 ACRES)



Some likely should be subject to the assessment

JLARC staff estimate these parcels could generate up to \$179,000 in annual assessment fees

20,135

PARCELS NOT CHARGED THE
ASSESSMENT OR LOCAL FIRE LEVIES
(679,219 ACRES)



Sometimes referred to as
“no-man’s land”

68% of the parcels are on
the westside

[Breakdown by county
available in report](#)



DNR partially fulfills program responsibilities

Responsibility	Met?	Explanation
Determine which properties are eligible for assessment, and notify county assessor	Not since 2010	Discussed next in presentation
Authorize county assessors to levy assessment	Yes	DNR sends letter to each county assessor authorizing them to levy the assessment
Communicate guidelines and standards to county assessors	No	Discussed later in presentation
Process and disburse refunds	Yes	DNR processes and disburses refunds to landowners who own multiple parcels in the same county
Bill tax-exempt and publicly-owned properties (if county chooses not to do so)	Partially	DNR maintains database, but records are incomplete and it may not bill some tax-exempt landowners correctly



Similar parcels may be treated differently

DNR lacks agency-wide definitions, criteria, or guidelines for determining which parcels should be assessed

Statute provides broad definition of lands subject to the assessment



Unimproved land that has enough trees or flammable material to constitute a fire hazard, including:

- Sagebrush and grass lands in eastern Washington that are adjacent to or intermingled with areas supporting tree growth
- Parcels that are unimproved or partially improved

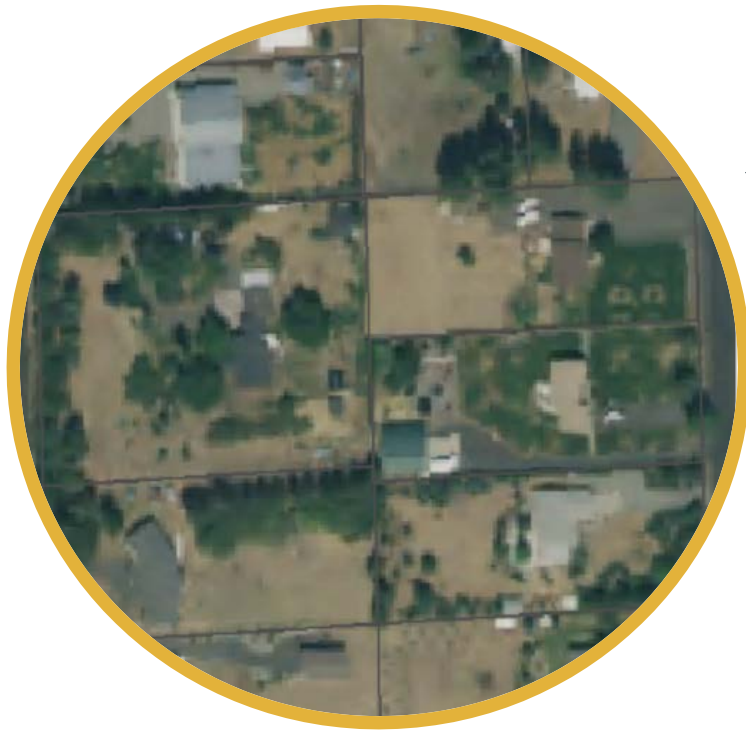
Staff at the six regional offices were responsible for applying the definition to determine which parcels should be subject to the assessment



DNR has not issued administrative rules or published guidelines to clarify which parcels meet the statutory definition

- Regional staff used their own informal criteria when they reviewed parcels and did not coordinate with other regions
- In 2010, DNR stopped reviewing parcels after it received negative feedback regarding inconsistent determinations

Determinations about parcel eligibility are inconsistent



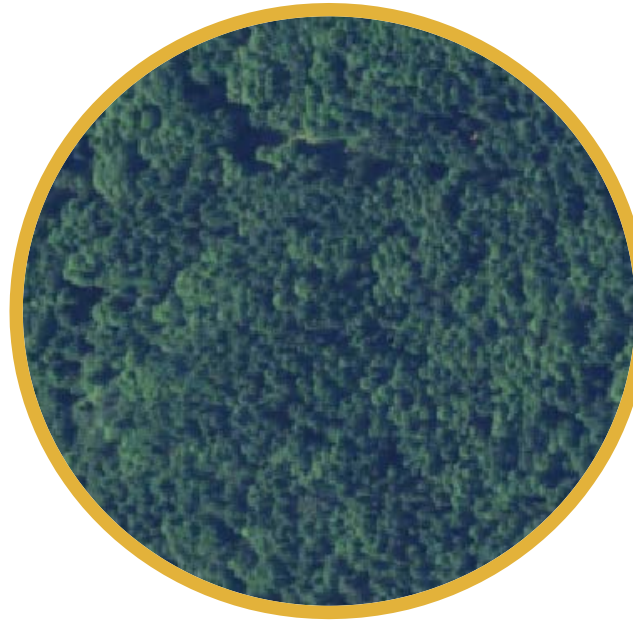
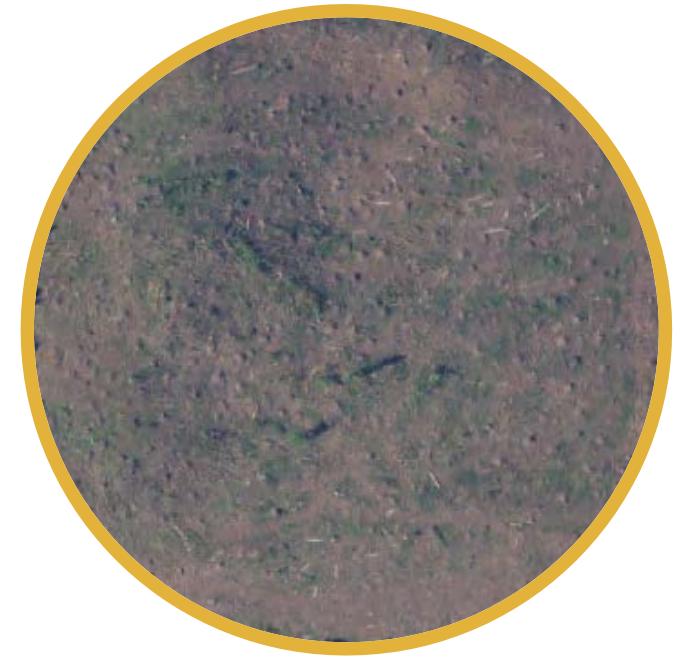
Not paying assessment,
DNR NE region

Paying assessment,
DNR SE region



Since 2010 there have been changes in the landscape, parcel boundaries, and ownership that impact the assessment

Subject to assessment, cleared since last review



Not subject to assessment, regrowth since last review

Legislative Auditor Recommendation #1

DNR should clarify the definition of forest land and implement a process to consistently apply the definition across the state

- Clarify the definition of forest land, either through rule-making or by proposing requested legislation
- Develop agency-wide policies to ensure consistent determinations of which parcels should be assessed
- Develop training for staff members who are responsible for determining whether parcels should be assessed



DNR lacks guidance for counties

In the absence of systematic guidance from DNR, county officials use different processes to apply the assessment

County assessors play a key role in administering the assessment

- Each county uses separate processes and data systems
- Assessors commonly handle changes to parcels that impact the assessment
- Until 2010, DNR regional staff reviewed parcels and provided information to assessors

DNR does not provide systematic guidance to county officials



DNR does not routinely communicate updates or news about the program to county officials.



Some county assessors told JLARC staff that they did not know DNR had stopped reviewing parcels.



DNR's primary contact with assessors is through annual form letters sent to each county.

In the absence of guidance, county officials approach common scenarios differently

Does the county...	Yes	No	Other
Remove or change the assessment when land is cleared or developed?	9	22	0
Add assessment to new parcels after a parcel is subdivided?	29	1	1
Tell DNR when the county removes, or changes the assessment, or adds it to a parcel?	9	20	2

Results of JLARC staff survey of 31 county assessors.

Legislative Auditor Recommendation #2

DNR should coordinate with county officials to create consistent policies for administering the assessment

- Develop consistent guidance for county officials to address parcel changes that impact the assessment
- Solicit input from county officials to ensure that they can efficiently and effectively implement the guidance
- Develop a policy regarding communications with county officials

Legislative Auditor Recommendations

- 1. DNR should clarify the definition of forest land and implement a process to consistently apply the definition across the state. **Implement by December 2018.****
- 2. DNR should coordinate with county officials to create consistent policies for administering the assessment. **Implement by December 2018.****

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Full Report

<http://leg.wa.gov/jlarc/reports/2017/forestFireProtectionAssessment/pf/default.html>

