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Nevada County to demand equity in Cal Fire fee

A unified Nevada County Board of Supervisors on Tuesday stood firmly behind a letter drafted by Supervisor Hank Weston demanding more fairness in a Cal Fire fee imposed on residents in the unincorporated areas.

“They called it a fee,” said Weston of the four-year-old annual \$117 payment made by about 29,600 county residents to Cal Fire for fire prevention. “A fee is supposed to equal services.”

Supervisors voted unanimously to send the letter to Cal Fire Director and Chief Ken Pimlott regarding the so-called State Responsibility Area Fire Prevention Fee, or SRA.

“Our residents have paid \$12 million in SRA fees over four years,” Weston added. “And we’ve not getting our fair value for what we’re paying.”

Weston said the fee, which is being challenged in court as an illegal tax because it did not have the required two-thirds majority vote in the legislature, is supposed to go for fire prevention — even though many people mistakenly thought it was for fire protection services.

“Nevada County pays about \$3 million, or 4 percent of the SRA FPF collected annually statewide,” Weston says in the letter. “Our research shows we see less than a 2 percent return in terms of fire prevention projects and services on the ground.”

Supervisor Nate Beason said he attended a homeowners association meeting in his district in recent weeks. Of about 75 people in attendance, “I don’t think any one of them was in favor of the SRA fees,” Beason said. “We need to try to get an accounting of where the money goes.”

Beason, recent chair of Rural Counties Representatives of California, said the group had repeatedly opposed the SRA fees, but has been unable to get them repealed.

“While the board of supervisors believes the SRA fee is really an illegal tax and continues to advocate for repeal of the fee entirely, until that happens we need to ensure the funds collected are administered appropriately, fairly and in compliance with state law,” Weston’s letter states.

Weston said he wondered why the SRA fund, which has a \$46 million surplus, didn’t allocate some of the surplus money for a team of fire prevention inspectors, since the region was approaching what’s expected to be one of the worst fire seasons ever.

“Someone said they need the (reserve fund) money in case they lose the lawsuit,” Weston said, referring to a pending class action suit brought by the Howard Jarvis Taxpayers Association.

Terry Ferguson, of the Nevada County Association of Realtors, presented a letter from her group supporting Weston’s letter to Cal Fire.

“The fee imposed affects individual property rights,” Ferguson said. “We think the funds received should be distributed fairly.”

Virginia Brunini of Grass Valley said the whole fee program was deceptive in that the money is only for fire prevention, but people thought it was for fire protection and fighting wildfires.

“Everyone expected more fire trucks, more money for fire protection,” Brunini said.

In addition to the fees themselves, Weston also said there were problems with a \$10 million grants program that was launched by the state with SRA fees two years ago.

He said there should have been more local vetting of the grant applications; as a result, some projects were approved that were not first priority locally.

For example, a defensible space clearing project in the Bear River Pines Association area near Rollins Lake was approved, but was either left off or low on the list of local priorities.

Jason Muir, president of the Bear River Pines Association, and Ryan Bellanca, of Bella Forestry professional forestry services, said the project would help a wide area by clearing fuel in a central connector spot.

Joanne Drummond, of Fire Safe Council of Nevada County, said her agency and a group of local fire officials tried to vet all the Community Wildfire Protection Plan grant applications based on the cost benefits and the number of homes served.

“We didn’t get the Bear River Pines application coming to our council,” Drummond said. “We didn’t know about it so we couldn’t rank it.”

Weston said the grant awards lacked the same kind of equity as the SRA fee services.

“Nevada County, which generates about \$3 million (in SRA fees) annually, will receive slightly over \$512,000 in grant funding from the \$9 million it has generated over three years,” Weston’s letter says. “Although that represents 5 percent of the statewide grant funds, it still represents less than 1 percent proportionately compared to Nevada County’s contribution to the statewide program.”

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