

Napa County puts wildfire prevention tax on June ballot

Barry Eberling, March 8, 2022



About a third of the homes in the Berryessa Highlands rural community burned during the 2020 LNU Lightning Complex fire, as seen in this 2020 photo. Napa County voters during the June 7 election will consider passing Measure L, a quarter-cent sales tax for wildfire prevention.

Napa County voters will decide in the June 7 election whether to pass a quarter-cent sales tax aimed at trying to prevent huge wildfires from wreaking extensive damage.

The county Board of Supervisors on Tuesday decided that Measure L will go on the ballot. If voters pass it by a two-thirds vote, the tax would raise an estimated \$10 million annually for the county and its cities and town.

Measure L supporters point to the Glass and LNU Lightning Complex fires of 2020 and the Tubbs, Atlas and Nuns fires of 2017. Those blazes combined burned much of the county, destroyed more than 1,500 structures, created smoke taint in grapes and cast smoky palls over wine country.

If Napa County doesn't get ahead of wildfires, wildfires will get ahead of the county, Supervisor Brad Wagenknecht said.

"I grew up with flood days in the 80s," Supervisor Belia Ramos said. "I never thought my kids would end up with smoke days."

Tax revenues could be spent on fuel management, a wildfire detection alert system, maintenance of bulldozer lines installed during wildfires, enhanced fire services, defensible space promotion and critical infrastructure protection, among other specified expenses.

"I think this is a fair question to ask our citizens and taxpayers — will you help us pay for that?" Board of Supervisors Chairperson Ryan Gregory said.

No one at Tuesday's meeting promised Measure L would end wildfires in Napa County. Rather, county Fire Chief Jason Martin said the aim is to reduce impacts on communities so firefighters can concentrate more on perimeter control than on evacuations and protecting structures.

"What this measure is, we need to be able to live with fires, and we need to be able to protect our communities," Martin told supervisors.

Napa Communities Firewise Foundation supports Measure L. The nonprofit group works with Fire Safe Councils in local, rural communities and on vegetation management projects.

To make Napa County safer, there needs to be a reliable funding source to reduce fuels, said Christopher Thompson, board president for the foundation.

"What I tell people, either we do the work ourselves or Mother Nature will do it for us, as she did in 2020," Thompson said.

By that, he meant the out-of-control Glass and LNU Lightning Complex fires reduced fuels by burning them and leaving burn scars.

Soda Canyon resident Amber Manfree, whose family home survived the 2017 Atlas Fire, endorsed having controlled burns to reduce fuels. That's probably one of the best tools to deal with the wildfires the county is starting to see, she told supervisors.

Thompson later responded that he's a huge advocate of controlled burns. Controlling fuels that feed wildfires changes the behavior of wildfires, he said.

Also, Manfree said the large wildfires of recent years are part of broader climate change threats that range from sea level rise to heat waves. She talked of addressing a bigger picture.

"There's more to it," she told supervisors.

The Napa County Farm Bureau Board of Directors has already endorsed Measure L. In a letter to the county, it said "wildfire prevention and mitigation efforts are a top concern for our organization."

In addition, the Farm Bureau again asked that the county study having a county-run fire department. The county contracts with Cal Fire for fire protection in the unincorporated area outside of cities.

Rex Stults of Napa Valley Vintners noted Napa County voters in 1998 passed the Measure A flood control tax.

"We did it for flooding; now it's time to do it for wildfires," he told supervisors.

A survey of 600 likely voters done by EMC Research on Measure L found that 68% of respondents support a quarter-cent fire tax. To pass, the measure must garner at least two-thirds of the vote, or 66.6%. The phone poll's margin of error is plus-or-minus 4%.

Ninety-one percent of respondents saw either a great need or some need for additional funding to help with wildfire prevention and protection. Sixty-nine percent agreed it is crucial to have high-quality fire protection services, even if it means raising taxes.

Measure L has its roots in the April 6, 2021 county Board of Supervisors meeting, when the Board created the fire preparedness ad hoc committee. Members were Supervisors Gregory and Alfredo Pedroza, the county fire

chief, Napa Firewise, the sheriff, county public works director and various county officials.

On June 8 2021, the Board of Supervisors heard the ad-hoc committee's recommendation [that a wildfire tax ballot measure be created](#). Supervisors authorized staff to gauge public opinion on such a measure and create draft language.

The sales tax in Napa County is 7.75 cents per dollar — the statewide 6 cents and a statewide mandatory local 1.25 cents, plus the county's half-cent Measure T road maintenance tax. The exception is St. Helena, where the tax is 8.25 cents.

Should Measure L pass, city of Napa residents would see their sales tax on a \$100 purchase rise a quarter, from \$7.75 to \$8.

How big a share each jurisdiction would receive from the sale tax would vary over time. For the first five years, Napa County for the unincorporated areas would receive 75%, the city of Napa 14.28%, American Canyon Fire Protection District 4.72% and Yountville, St. Helena and Calistoga each 2%.

By year nine, this would shift to 60% for the Napa County, 26.56% for the city of Napa and 7.44% for the American Canyon Fire Protection District. Yountville, St. Helena and Calistoga would remain at 2%.