



**DEPARTMENT OF  
NATURAL RESOURCES**

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December 29, 2016

The Honorable Kirk Pearson, Chairman  
Senate Natural Resources & Parks Committee  
PO Box 40439  
Olympia, WA 98504

The Honorable Brian Blake, Chairman  
House Agriculture & Natural Resources  
Committee  
PO Box 40600  
Olympia, WA 98504

Subject: Legislative Report for ESHB 2093

Dear Chairman Pearson and Chairman Blake:

I am writing to provide a report on Washington State Department of Natural Resources' (DNR) implementation of Engrossed Substitute House Bill 2093, which passed during the 2015 regular legislative session. The bill required the appointment of a local Wildland Fire Liaison, and the establishment of a Wildland Fire Advisory Committee (WFAC) to gain information about how the state can most effectively respond to wildfire seasons that are increasing exponentially in their size and destructive impacts.

The Wildland Fire Liaison and the Committee have provided a valuable service to the State of Washington and DNR's Wildfire Program this past year. Their work benefited efforts to more fully develop and integrate the local capability and expertise found in the over four hundred fifty local Fire Protection Districts throughout the State (collectively known as the Washington Fire Service) with the DNR wildland fire program. The Committee also provided valuable insights into the needs and issues of the Washington Fire Service. I am very appreciative of their work and dedication.

On December 1<sup>st</sup>, 2015 I appointed Gary Berndt to the Wildland Fire Liaison position. Mr. Berndt was well prepared for the position having recently served as a Kittitas County Commissioner, been a former Mayor of Cle Elum as well as having a long career in the Southeast Region of DNR as a fire manager and incident commander on a Washington Interagency Incident Management Team. The Liaison position provides information about local conditions during wildfire operations, serves as a point of contact with DNR leadership, and staffs the WFAC.

Shortly thereafter, I appointed the following individuals to serve on the WFAC pursuant to the representation outlined in ESHB 2093. The committee representatives included:

- Two County Commissioners: Commissioner Jim DeTro, Okanogan County and Commissioner Joe Gardner, Cowlitz County
- Two industrial landowners: Mr. J. D. Marshall, Hancock Timber Co., and Mr. Lee Hemmer, Douglas County rangeland owner
- Washington State Fire Marshal: Mr. Chuck Duffy, Washington State Patrol
- Two Fire Chiefs: Chief David Leitch, Yakima County Fire District 12 and Chief Dave LaFave, Cowlitz 2 Fire & Rescue
- A Fire District Commissioner: Mr. David Johnson, East Jefferson County
- A federal fire agency representative: Mr. Rodney Smoldon, Forest Supervisor, USDA Forest Service, Colville National Forest
- A tribal representative: Mr. Cody Desautel, Natural Resources Director, Colville Nation
- An environmental organization representative: Mr. Tom Bugert, The Nature Conservancy
- A representative of a state land trust beneficiary: Director Russ Pfeifer-Hoyt, Mount Baker School District 5 Board
- A small forest landowner: Mr. Tony Craven, Suncadia Resort

Twelve committee meetings were conducted within the past year. DNR created a website as a clearinghouse of information on WFAC, its meeting notices, meeting notes and other documents:

<http://www.dnr.wa.gov/WildlandAdvisoryCmte>

Section 2 of ESHB 2093 required the Liaison to submit a report to DNR by December 31, 2015 providing recommendations in three focus areas:

- Opportunities for the department of natural resources to increase training with local fire protection districts.
- The ability to quickly evaluate the availability of local fire district resources in a manner that allows the local resources to be more efficiently and effectively dispatched to wildland fires.
- Opportunities to increase and maintain the viability of local fire suppression assets.

As you recall, this report was completed and included six specific recommendations on the three issues. Each recommendation was either accomplished or in-process prior to the start of the 2016 wildfire season.

During its subsequent, additional meetings the committee discussed a wide-range of issues and items of common interest. From their deliberations fifteen issues were identified, with fifty seven recommendations. The majority of committee recommendations were developed late in the 2016 wildfire season or in the autumn.

Additionally the Liaison participated in fifty one other meetings and events, such as: County Fire Chiefs and Fire Commissioners, Kiwanis & Rotary Club, public and committee meetings hosted by legislators, WA Association of Counties, WA Cattlemen's Association, the Fire Defense Board, interagency fire training, industrial forest landowners, a Wildfire Leadership Forum, a

Forest Resiliency Roundtable, and an after-action review of a wildland fire. The outreach, discussion and listening accomplished on behalf of the DNR Wildfire Program was significant.

The committee's recommendations can be categorized into five topical areas:

- Fire Response
- Cooperative DNR / Fire District Relations
- Forest Restoration & Hazardous Fuels Reduction
- Increased Fire District Capability & Viability
- Safe & Effective Use of Public & Private Firefighting Resources

The following is a high-level summary of the recommendations and corresponding DNR actions.

### **Fire Response**

Fifteen recommendations were developed addressing issues related to: Adopting wildland fire qualifications standards; repositioning and staging firefighting resources; DNR initial attack capacity; helicopter pilot proficiency; helicopter support during firefighting operations; and inventorying firefighting resources. These all focused on ensuring a rapid and effective response to new fire starts and quickly suppressing large disastrous wildfires.

In response to these recommendations DNR took action to increase preparedness during the 2016 fire season. This included a more proactive posture of prepositioning (staging) initial attack resources in advance of heightened periods of threat. The department also has access to a statewide inventory of Washington Fire Service firefighting resources to expand the available resources for possible deployment. Addressing some of the recommendations such as enhancing DNR's firefighting capability and addressing firefighting qualification standards will require additional coordination with our cooperating Federal agency partners and the legislature.

### **Cooperative DNR / Fire District Relations**

Six recommendations addressed effective cooperation issues including: Impacts on fire districts of radio frequency changes made by wildland fire agencies; increased use of fire district knowledge and expertise; and incident command system training for executives.

In advance of the 2016 fire season, the department worked to improve dialogue and interaction with fire districts and local vendors. Fire district personnel were more actively involved in the interagency fire academies hosted by the department and assisted DNR in its work to assess local firefighting capability. To address radio frequency issues DNR published a "Public Cooperators Frequency Guide" which was posted on the agency website during the summer of 2016. DNR will also discuss the radio frequency change issue with members of the technical committee of the State Interoperability Executive Committee as well as our Federal agency wildfire partners.

### **Forest Restoration & Hazardous Fuels Reduction**

Ten recommendations addressed issues related to forest restoration across eastern Washington in order to protect healthy forests, streams and communities. The recommendations include improvements in areas such as: Mapping current conditions; analytical models and analysis

processes to close critical gaps of information; mapping and assessing quantitative fire risk; initiating multi-disciplinary teams to launch landscape restoration projects; improving accomplishment reporting; facilitating the improvement in knowledge and experience with prescribed fire; and establishing a competitive statewide grant program to support collaborative landscape projects to improve forest resiliency, reduce wildfire risk, and generate economic development.

The department has initiated work on a 20-Year Forest Health Strategic Plan to compile forest data, track treatments and forest changes over time, prioritize actions in high-risk areas and leverage large-scale improvements to forest conditions across multiple ownerships. This effort will provide one effective avenue to address the recommendations of the committee in this arena. DNR is also working with the US Forest Service on a Quantitative Wildfire Risk Assessment.

### **Increased Fire District Capability & Viability**

Thirteen recommendations were identified in 7 different issues, including: Adopting fire qualification standards; radio frequency changes; DNR grant administration and availability of funding support for local fire district volunteers to attend wildland fire training; improvements to fire weather prediction capability; information technology; geographic information system data and training support; wildfire training academy expansion; large fire simulation exercises; and enabling fire district personnel to observe or participate in prescribed fire operations.

In response, the department worked to address several of the recommendations with actions prior to the 2016 fire season. These included having all radio frequency changes completed and published by the end of January. Federal and State grants were awarded to train fire district personnel, acquire federal excess vehicles, and purchase needed equipment such as radios, personal protective equipment, and fire apparatus. In addition, DNR will work with partner agencies to conduct large fire simulation exercises as was done in 2016, and explore opportunities for fire district personnel to observe or participate in prescribed fire operations. Addressing some of the recommendations such as funding "scholarships" for fire district volunteers, improving fire weather prediction capability and information technology that supports incident management teams and wildfire operations will require additional resources and effort to craft workable solutions.

### **Safe & Effective Use of Public & Private Firefighting Resources**

Thirteen recommendations were identified in 4 different issues, including: Establishing "interagency peer review" committees at the DNR Region level to administer the incident qualifications process; clarifying qualifications system requirements and ensuring compliance with those requirements by July, 2018; ensuring compliance with equipment contracting standards and guidelines prior to mobilization; working towards a uniform set of contracting requirements between state and federal agencies; enabling temporary loaning of personal protective equipment by DNR field personnel to contractors as needed; developing an interagency master cooperative agreement to allow participation and resource sharing on prescribed fires; establishing qualification standards for prescribed fire personnel; and assisting local fire districts on radio interoperability issues.

As with many other aspects of the wildfire program, issues are interagency in nature and need to be addressed accordingly. The department is actively working on issues related to the administration of contracted equipment, and improving internal practices in the areas of equipment contracting and dispatching. The department currently enables many field level personnel to temporarily issue personal protective equipment to contractors. Work will be undertaken to ensure this practice is more widely known and available.

The department needs to work with our partners to address the recommendations related to incident qualifications and prescribed fire agreements. In the area of prescribed fire qualification standards, the department needs to review and evaluate adoption of the current interagency standards (NWCG 310-1).

### **Summary of Results on the Ground**

To assess the impact of actions associated with the issues and recommendations, the Liaison and committee members sought feedback from constituents on their observations and interactions with DNR during the 2016 wildfire season. The relatively smaller size of the 2016 season somewhat limited feedback on gaging the real changes on the ground. Responders looked favorably upon the work the department had done in the past year to more fully integrate the fire districts and local resources into the statewide Wildfire Program.

Active engagement of our fire district partners in activities such as preseason planning meetings, interagency fire training, and more frequent conversations during the fire season was viewed as positive and a significant improvement from the past. Fire Chiefs told us they thought the interagency relationship is as strong as it has ever been. It was noted that there was, "really good support to large land owners with land under multiple protections."

Local fire districts face many challenges, two of the biggest include the purchase and acquisition of equipment and the training and development of a largely volunteer workforce. On these fronts we heard that the availability of Federal and State grants was significant in helping them prepare for and fight wildfires in their districts. They expressed support for how the grants program was executed and managed. On workforce development side, they reported that the increased availability of wildfire training opportunities for their personnel such as the interagency training academies contributed to increasing the effectiveness of their wildfire response. During wildland fire operations they noted that "DNR overhead were very proactive in engaging FD personnel during emerging incidents and quick to offer or ask for assistance."

I am proud of DNR's successes and accomplishments this past year. I am also keenly aware of the work that is before us. Many of the recommendations require interagency solutions and additional budget resources. I am confident that the strengthened relationships with constituents, local government, landowners, contractors and the Washington Fire Service is positioning DNR to effectively address the work that is before us. I thank the legislature for its continuing commitment to protecting Washington's citizens, communities and natural resources from our ever-escalating wildland fire threats.

Senator Pearson et. Al  
December 29, 2016  
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Sincerely,



Peter Goldmark  
Commissioner of Public Lands

- c: Members of the Senate Natural Resources & Parks Committee
- Members of the House Agriculture & Natural Resources & Parks Committee
- Aaron Everett, Policy Director & State Forester
- Loren Torgerson, Interim Deputy Supervisor for Wildfire
- Jon Noski, Director of Legislative & External Affairs