

REPORT OF THE WILDLAND FIRE LIAISON
TO THE COMMISSIONER OF PUBLIC LANDS,
WASHINGTON DEPARTMENT OF NATURAL RESOURCES (DNR)

Background:

ESHB 2093, passed into law during the legislative session of 2015, became effective July 24, 2015 and created a statewide Wildland Fire Advisory Committee to be chaired by a Wildland Fire Liaison. The Liaison's duties are described in the statute and include the submittal of a report to the Commissioner of Public Lands by December 31, 2015.

Commissioner of Public Lands Peter Goldmark selected and appointed Gary Berndt to serve as the state's first Wildland Fire Liaison. Mr. Berndt also serves as a County Commissioner for Kittitas County and has previously served as Mayor of the City of Cle Elum. Mr. Berndt has accrued several decades of experience as a DNR, local wildland firefighter, and as an incident commander working in Washington's interagency wildland firefighting system. He has taught national level wildland firefighting courses for the National Association of State Foresters.

The Liaison appointment was completed in November, 2015, after the very busy 2015 wildfire season finally wound to a close. Concurrently and thereafter during December, 2015, Commissioner Goldmark selected his appointees to the Wildland Fire Advisory Committee. The roster of Committee members is attached to this report.

The following report is submitted by Mr. Berndt:

This report focuses on activities since my appointment as the Wildland Fire Liaison, and on the initial meeting of the Wildland Fire Advisory Committee in early December 2015.

In mid-November, I met with the Washington Association of Counties' Timber Counties program at their annual meeting in Skamania, accompanied by DNR Deputy Supervisor Mary Verner. The Timber Counties' representatives provided a number of issues that are pertinent for attention by the Committee throughout the upcoming year.

Deputy Supervisor Verner and I also met with a group of northeastern Washington County Commissioners who refer to their monthly meetings as "Quadco" (representing the four counties: Pend Oreille, Ferry, Stevens, and Okanogan). Their December meeting in Colville was focused on discussions about the fires of the summer of 2015. There was spirited discussion among the County Commissioners, Fire Chiefs, and emergency managers of those counties. There were a number of issues raised, including a concern that the 2016 fire season is approaching very quickly. The common question was, "What are we doing now to improve next year?" I have made arrangements to attend the January session of "Quadco" to discuss issues that the Committee can focus on prior to June 2016.

The Wildland Fire Advisory Committee held its initial meeting on December 18, 2015 in Yakima. Due to inclement weather, some committee members attended by phone, and the first half hour of the meeting was facilitated by Ms. Verner and our meeting facility host, Chief Dave

Leitch. Commissioner Goldmark attended a portion of the meeting to convey his thanks and express his “leader’s intent” for the Committee. The agenda (copy attached) allowed Committee members to meet and discuss EHSB 2093 from the perspectives of the Committee and of the Liaison. The members were informed that Committee meetings will follow the “open meetings” requirements and that meetings will be advertised, minutes will be taken, and the public will be welcomed and given an opportunity to speak. The Committee understands that it has no operational role and does not make policy decisions. The role of the Committee members is to represent their constituents, listen for issues and opportunities, research issues, and provide recommendations to me. I informed the Committee members that it is my intention to provide the Commissioner of Public Lands a monthly written update. Whenever possible, I will bring the recommendations from the Committee to Commissioner Goldmark in person to allow discussion and clarification as needed.

The Committee discussed issues that are important to review immediately. Four sub-groups emerged from the December 18 meeting. The first sub-group will focus on training and opportunities for improving response capacity of local fire districts. The second sub-group is focusing on an “ICS (Incident Command System) for Executives” seminar for county elected officials and emergency managers. The third sub-group is researching the issue of contracting, to develop recommendations that can improve contracts for local resources. The fourth sub-group will research opportunities to implement more prescribed burning as a long-term goal. The next Committee meeting is set for January 21, 2016. There was an agreement to meet once a month, at a minimum.

During my career, I was a training cadre member of a course sponsored by the National Association of State Foresters. The course is called Complex Incident Management (CIMC) and it is presented twice per year at various locations around the U.S. There is an opportunity for administrators to attend, observe, and receive an “administrator’s guide” to assist executives in understanding and managing Incident Management Teams. I have ordered a copy of this document from the CIMC cadre, and will provide it to you for review and discussion to see if there is value for local government officials.

On December 22, 2015, I met with the Washington State Cattlemen’s Association at their request. There were five members of the organization present in person or by phone. The discussions were from the perspective of landowners who are impacted by fire and have concerns about the loss of range for their industry. This was a very positive discussion with a number of questions about how response, cooperation, and assistance from landowners can be improved. The important message from this group was summed up with, “What can we do to help?” I will discuss their thoughts and ideas with DNR staff to support a continuing dialogue with the Cattlemen’s Association.

Section 2 of ESHB 2093 specifies that the December 31, 2015 report to the Commissioner of Public Lands must provide recommendations regarding three specific issues. The following initial recommendations regarding these issues were derived from my meetings with counties, fire districts, landowners, and the Wildland Fire Advisory Committee during the month of December. Following these recommendations, I have listed DNR activities already underway that are responsive to the issues.

(a) Opportunities for the Department of Natural Resources to increase training with local fire protection districts.

1. I recommend that DNR work more closely with fire districts in developing the training to be offered prior to the 2016 wildland fire season. Many fire district employees and volunteers have challenges attending courses that are needed; they cannot take time away from work to attend courses available on a Monday through Friday schedule. A sub-group of the Wildland Fire Advisory Committee is undertaking the task of identifying what training is planned and when courses are planned to be offered. This will allow districts to plan for their firefighters to attend classes that individuals need. There could be courses that the districts might host outside the normal work week, utilizing trainers from DNR, or some other configuration that facilitates district firefighters' training.
2. There is a great deal of opportunity for fire district personnel to be involved in actual fire duties, and see fire behavior firsthand, when landowners conduct prescribed burns. I recommend that DNR assist district personnel to be aware of and participate in prescribed burns. Advance knowledge of the planned activities allows district personnel to adjust their schedules. However, I acknowledge that prescribed burns have to be conducted when the burn prescription is within requirements.

(b) 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.

1. I recommend that DNR work closely with fire districts county-by-county to inventory engines, tenders and bulldozers in each county. This will provide a comprehensive list of resources by type and by location. This information will allow dispatch centers and 911 centers to deploy local equipment and local knowledge more rapidly.
2. I recommend that DNR develop local "staging areas" to pre-position initial attack resources when multiple lightning strikes are expected. Pre-positioning together will allow unassigned resources (including resources from outside the local area) to gather before going on the fire line to program radios and gain situational awareness. It also provides fire managers the ability to request and sequence the appropriate resource required.

(c) Opportunities to increase and maintain the viability of local fire suppression assets.

1. The viability of local suppression assets is dependent on the funding or programs available to local fire districts to extend their small operating budgets. Many districts have to use outdated equipment that can be undependable.
2. DNR might share its expertise in engine, pump and hose repairs with local districts.

3. Radio communications are becoming very complex and it is very difficult during fire operations or dispatches to ensure that communications are appropriate. I recommend that DNR assist local resources on issues of radio interoperability. The complexity of integrating air and operational resources has to be well planned, and resources have to be in communication immediately. Localized “caches” of repeaters and portable radios, along with training on their use, would be valuable contributions to local suppression assets.

As I immersed myself in my duties as Liaison and began hearing from constituents and Committee members, I engaged in discussions with DNR staff and Deputy Supervisor Verner. I discovered that there **are important actions already underway in the three categories described in the statute**. A key value I can bring in my role as Liaison will be to make this information more widely known among stakeholders, and facilitate communication and understanding.

In the category of **opportunities for the DNR to increase training with local fire protection districts:**

DNR regions already provide wildland firefighter training for fire districts on weekends, and fire district participation is supported by “ready reserve” and “volunteer fire assistance” grants administered by DNR.

DNR’s northeast and southeast regions already combine Type 3 Incident Management Team (T3 IMT) training with local fire district staff. Efforts are underway to enhance the state-local T3 IMT training in 2016.

DNR’s wildfire leadership sees potential improvement in:

- Working closely with local districts to promote structural firefighters’ training in wildland fire response and the national Incident Command System.
- Training local structural firefighters in topics such as friction loss when pumping water long distances, and drafting from a water source when hydrants aren’t available.

In the category of **allowing local resources to be more efficiently and effectively dispatched to wildland fires:**

DNR pre-positions suppression resources in the vicinity of expected lightning strikes when lightning is forecast. When unassigned and out-of-area resources arrive, they are either assigned directly to the incident team that ordered them, or sent to a designated staging area where those resources are briefed, given maps, provided radio frequencies (cloned radios), and informed of logistics arrangements.

In many counties, DNR has joint “incident communications plans” with local fire districts.

DNR’s wildfire leadership sees potential improvement in:

Improving the radio frequency cloning process when Incident Management Teams take fires for extended attack/project fires. (DNR and local districts already have each other's radio channels programmed for initial attack.)

In the category of **opportunities to increase and maintain the viability of local fire suppression assets:**

DNR has, for many years, provided federal surplus property and grants to local fire districts.

DNR actively encourages individuals to volunteer and sign up with local fire districts to enhance staffing and response capacity.

DNR's wildfire leadership sees potential improvement in:

- Supporting a new model of funding for rural volunteer fire departments, particularly in fire-prone areas.
- Working with interagency incident management teams to appropriately use the local-resource provisions of federal "best value/VIPER" contracts.

Regarding **rangeland owners' contributions to wildfire response:**

DNR's east-side regions maintain call-down lists of agricultural producers to act as liaisons to Incident Management Teams during fire suppression. It has been difficult for producers to keep the lists updated and current.

DNR's Wildfire Program has taken the following additional steps since the end of the most intense months of the 2015 wildfire season¹:

1. Developed a local fire district grant application form and preliminary criteria for grant eligibility, and circulated same to local fire districts via the Washington Fire Chiefs and Fire Commissioners organizations.
2. Included a request for \$6 million in grants for local fire districts in DNR's funding request to the legislature. DNR intends these funds to be available for local districts to meet federal grant match requirements, to upgrade surplus federal equipment, and to meet other essential equipment and facility needs of local districts.
3. Initiated the planning process for 2016 wildland firefighter training. The intended approach is to expand upon DNR's inaugural 2015 Wildland Fire Training Academy concept, to include interagency partners as both training cadre and student body for the 2016 academy. Expanded training for 2016 is intended to include local and tribal firefighters as well as federal partners and Washington National Guard soldiers. Special

¹ The 2015 wildfire season started with fires in January and February, included a fire requiring aerial bucket drops in April, and grew in intensity during May and June. July and August wildfires became the worst in Washington State history in terms of acres burned (@ 1 million), structures lost (@500), socioeconomic impacts, and the loss of life (3 young firefighters perished in the Twisp River fire). Large fires required continued firefighting, and new fires continued to start in September and October. The last new fire start of the season occurred on Thanksgiving weekend in November.

emphasis is being placed in training DNR-local Type 3 Incident Management Teams to deploy as interagency resources already trained together pre-season.

4. Initiated planning to host new vendor and refresher training for private contractors. In spring 2016 sessions, DNR will enter updated “call-when-needed” agreements (dozer/faller) and facilitate qualified vendors becoming signed up as federal “VIPER” contractors.
5. Included a request of almost \$7 million for interagency wildland firefighter training in DNR’s funding request to the legislature.
6. Requested the legislature provide \$3.2 million for DNR to hire more staff to support and manage local fire prevention and suppression efforts throughout the state.
7. Discussed with the USFS National Incident Management Organization (NIMO) an opportunity to present day-long simulations for local responders and elected officials, to improve agency relationships and increase understanding about rapidly escalating incidents.
8. Initiated preliminary planning for prescribed burn projects on DNR-managed state lands. Began coordination with the U.S. Forest Service for DNR staff to learn from prescribed burning activities on federal lands.

My first month serving as Wildland Fire Liaison has been very rewarding and very busy. I am impressed with the open dialogue that I have encountered and the willingness of county officials, fire districts, and organizations to look toward the future. The DNR staff have been exceptional in welcoming me and offering assistance of any kind to enable me to focus on issues. I am also impressed with the committee and the commitment the members have made to the future of wildland fire prevention and suppression in our state.

Respectfully submitted,

Gary Berndt
Wildland Fire Liaison

December 31, 2015