


July 17, 2017

MEMORANDUM

TO: Gerry Day, Deputy Supervisor for Wildfire

FROM: Gary Berndt, Chair, Wildland Fire Advisory Committee (WFAC) 

RE: Review of a Wildland Fire Protection Program for Washington, 2006

At the February 22, 2017 meeting of the WFAC you asked that we review the contents of A Wildland Fire Protection Program for Washington completed by the department in April 2006.

You asked the WFAC to review the plan because it is the most recent wildfire protection plan of a strategic nature currently in use by the department; the plan had an expected duration only through 2020; and the plan was developed with input from an advisory group formed from a broad number of stakeholders similar to WFAC. In reviewing the contents of the plan, you tasked WFAC to address the following elements:

- Review the 2006 Strategic Plan and develop a recommendation to the scope of a strategic plan for wildland fire management in Washington State. (e.g. limited to the DNR wildland fire program, a state-wide wildland fire program, or something in between)
- Review the Strategic Plan for Wildland Fire Protection (phase I and II) dated April 2006, and describe and provide a report on the strengths and weaknesses of the Plan.
- Review the list of organizational entities who provided expertise or inputs to the Plan and recommend additions [entities] to a new proposed plan.

What follows is the Committee's response to those work tasks.

Review the 2006 Strategic Plan and Develop a recommendation to the scope of a strategic plan for wildland fire management in Washington State. (e.g. limited to the DNR wildland fire program, a state-wide wildland fire program, or something in between)

The WFAC recommends that any future plan should be broader in scope than the 2006 plan, which again, was primarily focused on DNR protection responsibilities. The committee feels that it is now necessary to develop a strategic approach that addresses protection of all wildlands in the state, and includes more of the interagency partners that jointly respond to Wildland Fire occurrence.

Change in the environment, changes in land management practices, and other factors including drought and climate change have led to poor forest health conditions. Increasingly so, similar conditions in non-forested areas of the state have resulted in larger, more intense wildfires and lengthening of fire seasons.

Wildfires under these conditions often spread through multiple jurisdictions, impact more homes and communities than ever, and require significant resources (people, equipment and dollars) to suppress. No

one entity has the available resources to meet the demands. Strong inter-agency partnerships are more important than ever. This effort should include partnerships that cross state boundaries. The general public is concerned only with suppressing the fire. They are not concerned with issues of jurisdiction or land management boundaries in most cases. They see the wildland fire community as one entity and have high expectations of service.

Review Strategic Plan for Wildland Fire Protection (phase I and II) dated April 2006, and describe and provide a report on the strengths and weaknesses of the Plan.

There are no glaring weaknesses to the 2006 Plan, aside from the single agency focus on DNR protection. The committee believes it will be increasingly important to address wildfire protection on all wildlands in the state, recognizing that individual agencies and departments are governed by laws and policies that will influence their involvement.

In 2006, the department identified several inter-related factors or concerns that were the basis for the investment in developing a strategic plan. WFAC conducted an analysis of these key factors and concerns and found all of the concerns were still valid, but felt that certain concerns may need additional clarification and/or updated language to capture current thinking.

In addition to those concerns that were identified in the previous plan, WFAC identified additional factors or concerns that may strengthen the future development of a strategic wildfire protection plan. These include:

- Human caused fires are increasing
- Understanding by the public of the risks of wildfire is fading
- The metrics for measuring success have become outdated; (suppression costs versus resources protected)
- Loss of milling infrastructure has affected the ability of landowners to address the forest health issues that are a factor in increasing the size, intensity and costs wildfires
- Forest health continues to decline, but the cause and effect between forest health and wildfires is not clearly understood
- Declining fire budgets are hampering the use of “on call” firefighting resources
- Relevant data is increasingly important to support decisions on resource allocation for prevention and suppression
- Wildfires as the result of drier conditions and longer fire seasons, are more costly and more damaging across all areas of the state
- Overlapping jurisdictions present barriers to effective communications and suppression tactics.
- Training requirements are becoming more complex
- Prescribed burning will increase exposure for firefighters
- Agency specific requirements must be saved
- Current strategic plan is overly prescriptive

Under the 2006 plan, the identified factors and concerns were synthesized to produce eight key policy questions that the plan attempted to answer. Again, WFAC believes these policy questions are still valid but will require some updating. Based on the additional new concerns and factors identified above, the committee developed what it believes are additional relevant policy questions to consider. These include:

- Where will the required funding for a complete protection program wildland fire prevention and suppression come from, and who should share the cost?
- How will the wildland fire community continue to ensure wildland firefighter safety, as well as the necessary knowledge, skills, and abilities, as wildland fires increase in complexity and there is a shift in the demographics of the workforce?
- What opportunities or incentives can be created to accomplish forest health projects faster?
- What legislation can be brought forward to improve the current situation and give management flexibility?
- How will wildfire concerns be addressed in the unprotected non-forested areas of the state that have annual re-burn potential?
- What opportunities can be created to enhance forest and fire management infrastructure to meet the current and future needs?

Review the list of organizational entities who provided expertise or inputs to the Plan and recommend additions [entities] to a new proposed plan.

“The 2006 Strategic Plan for Wildland Fire Protection” was collaboratively developed with the help of an external Advisory Committee. This committee was made up of invited members of the Washington Legislature, and representatives of state and federal agencies, tribes, environmental organizations, local fire protection districts and others. WFAC believes that at that time these organizations represented a good cross-section of stakeholders that would be affected by the Plan.

In the event the DNR chooses to revise the current plan, or develop a new plan, WFAC believes that it will be important to develop a process that provides for input of the broader wildland fire community, the legislature, and other organizations that may be affected. WFAC could serve a core advisory role in the interest of time efficiency and focus.

Future Trends

In addition to review of elements of the plan, WFAC spent time discussing what the potential future of wildfire in Washington may look like, in order to provide context to a revision of the 2006 Plan or in developing a new plan. Some of these future conditions may include:

- The increasing growth of the Wildland Urban Interface will continue to be an area of concern
- Technology will continue to change i.e. information technology and communications
- Budgets will continue to be constrained, and partners will need to depend on each other
- Fire agencies will continue to be pressed to provide services
- There may be more consolidation of fire service entities
- Forest health will continue to decline in the state
- Fires will continue to increase in severity, complexity, size, and cost
- There will be fewer resources to respond to fires
- More contracted resources will be utilized
- Community acceptance/attitude of wildfire will stay the same
- Catastrophic wildfires will make insurance harder to obtain
- The public will continue to expect a level of service that is inconsistent with budgets

- Climate change will continue to impact numbers, intensity and size of fires.
- The public will be more engaged and less tolerant of smoke
- Adjacent states, partners will face the same issues. Resources will be limited.
- Longer fire seasons will impact resource availability
- Firefighter safety will become increasingly difficult to provide for as values at risk continue to rise.
- The focus should be to accomplish work where the benefits are strategic for values at risk

Summary

The facilitated discussions of the Wildland Fire Advisory Committee were kept at a high level regarding the scope of issues, concerns, and trends. The committee considered a large range of topics and concerns that have developed since 2006, including the record seasons of 2014-15 and the growing number of “state mobilization” responses to support local fire agencies.

Given the current and predicted trends of a hotter and drier climate, declining forest health and limited resources and budgets, it is appropriate for DNR, in its role as the wildland fire agency for the state, to reevaluate the strategic direction of wildland fire suppression in Washington. It will be critical to develop a framework that addresses the capacity to protect the public, firefighters and communities, and at the same time reduce the losses from wildfires.