

Washington Department of Natural Resources Fire District Assistance Program

DNR's Fire District Assistance Program (FDAP) is being significantly restructured and expanded using funding provided through HB 1168. The intent is to help increase local fire district capacity to respond during initial attack on local fires and also provide resources for extended suppression efforts on larger fires. Key needs for small, rural, largely volunteer fire departments include access to training, apparatus and fire suppression equipment, communications equipment, PPE, staff, and even basic operating funds as they have a limited tax base that supports them. The FDAP is designed to help meet these needs.

The Washington State Wildland Fire Protection 10-Year Strategic Plan (Strategic Plan) identifies and describes the important role local fire districts play in providing fire protection in the state, particularly during the critical initial attack phase when an effective response is the key to keeping fires small and controllable. The Strategic Plan emphasizes the need for enhancing local fire district capacity, particularly with small, rural, and often largely volunteer departments. Strategy 9 in the Strategic Plan directs "ESTABLISHING EFFECTIVE PROTECTION FOR ALL LANDS", emphasizing the need for improving protection for remote, rural areas. Strategy 10 calls for Washington to "IMPROVE RESPONSE PLANNING, OPERATIONS, AND INFRASTRUCTURE." Further, fire districts play an integral role in meeting Goal 3 of the Strategic Plan, "COMMUNITIES ARE PREPARED AND ADAPTED FOR CURRENT AND FUTURE WILDLAND FIRE REGIMES". And finally, the Strategic Plan emphasizes the need to prioritize improving fire protection and preparedness in the communities most at risk to wildland fire across the state which are located in Chelan, Okanogan, Spokane, Yakima, Kittitas, Klickitat, Stevens, and Asotin counties.

HB 1168 directs fully implementing the Strategy and meeting the needs of local fire districts to be the first line of defense and build local community resiliency to wildland fire. The plan developed for the expansion of the DNR FDAP is focused on the key actions needed to implement the Strategic Plan and meeting these needs to build community resiliency. Specific elements of the plan include the following, specifically identified in the HB 1168 Fiscal Note:

- Establishment of DNR Wildland Fire Program Coordinators
- Increasing the replacement rate of DNR fire engines to provide more and higher quality engines for surplus to fire districts
- Providing for the first time, operational grants for fire districts
- Increasing the amount of VFA matching grants for fire districts and reducing the required match

In addition to items to be incorporated into the fire district assistance program the following two elements were included in HB 1168 and are enhancements to the logistics and operational support provided to fire districts by DNR's overall wildland fire management programs during fire suppression activities:

- Exclusive use air tanker contracts for local response needs
- Creating fire cache trailers for state mobilization that are available to supply fire districts

Further, HB 1168 directs actions to increase fire district capacity, and fire protection in general, considering principles of environmental justice and social equity. This recognizes and emphasizes the need to focus more resources toward improving fire protection and increasing resiliency in communities that have been underserved in the past due to economic and social disadvantages and where there is

limited English proficiency (LEP). It also directs focus on increasing assistance to Highly Impacted Communities, as defined by RCW 19.405.020, which identifies communities highly impacted by climate change. The following is the description of the proposed components of the expanded FDAP.

Wildland Fire Program Coordinators

A dedicated staff position will be established and filled in each DNR Region to coordinate fire district assistance. Their sole task will be ensuring the successful delivery of the FDAP to the fire districts in their regions. Coordinators will also help to provide and ensure effective implementation of regional delivery of services such as training. The responsibilities of the Coordinators will include developing a strong relationship and understanding of their fire districts priorities, capacities, and resource needs so that they can most effectively coordinate access to the resources provided by the FDAP. As part of this, Coordinators will maintain a database of key fire district information that includes the contact information for the chief, details on the district's facilities, a list of the districts apparatus, and the best available information on the districts staff, including their status as paid or volunteer and their wildland fire qualifications.

Surplus of DNR Engines

HB 1168 funding will increase the rate of DNR engine replacement by 10 engines resulting in about 24 engines per year. This provides the ability to equip DNR firefighters with the latest technology while increasing the number and quality of engines that can be identified as surplus property and dispersed to fire districts to build their own response capacity.

Federal Excess Property Program

This includes the Federal Excess Personal Property (FEPP) and Firefighter Property programs (FFP) through which fire departments can acquire excess US Forest Service and US Department of Defense property to be used for firefighting and emergency services. While the FEPP property and equipment remains in a long-term loan status from the Federal government to the fire districts, certain property obtained through the FFP passes ownership to the districts after it has been in use for a specified period of time. Both FEPP and FFP property and equipment is available at no-cost to the fire districts. However, it is the financial responsibility of the fire districts to make repairs and modifications and maintain the items. This program is managed by the USDA Forest Service in partnership with the State Forester. Many of the small rural fire districts who make requests for FEPP/FFP equipment are challenged by the logistics of obtaining the equipment (shipping or travel costs, available personnel to travel, etc.), or lack the funding to make the necessary repairs and modifications required for the equipment to be put into service within one year of obtainment (a programmatic compliance measure). This can put FEPP/FFP equipment out of reach for many Districts. See ***Operational Grants***.

Operational Grants

HB 1168 provides funding to support small, rural fire districts with basic operations. Small, rural districts are dramatically underfunded due to small tax bases, and their preparedness suffers because of this. This grant program provides funding to support basic functions for these districts to build their capacity to be the first line of defense against wildland fires. A \$500,000 "equipment grant" category will be made available within this grant program that will provide for the acquisition, conversion, and/or refurbishment costs of FEPP, FFP and DNR Surplus Engine equipment. The remaining \$1.25 million will

mirror the 2016 Local Fire District Wildfire Preparedness grants which allocated funds for multiple project types. See Attachment A for specific considerations.

Also supported by operational grants is training to National Wildfire Coordinating Group standards, provided in a manner to best accommodate volunteers, such as by conducting wildland fire training on weekends and in the evenings, at their home facilities. Training includes tracking task book certification and qualifications in IQS.

Volunteer Fire District Assistance grants

The Volunteer Fire District Assistance (VFA) program is a federal grant awarded to the DNR by the US Forest Service for the disbursement to small rural fire districts with the purpose of wildfire prevention and suppression. The funds are intended to equip and train the Districts so that they may safely and effectively participate in the initial attack and incident management of wildfires located within or adjacent to federal landscapes. The DNR traditionally has awarded these funds in two separate programs, Phase I and Phase II, in an annual grant cycle. VFA funding requires a 50% match for each project (per \$1 VFA expended, \$1 is to be matched by the fire district). Phase I is awarded through purchases made through the DNR Fire Cache. PPE is offered at half cost to the fire districts, while VFA funding covers the other half of the cost (a 50% award/50% match ratio). Fire district award limit in Phase I is \$3,000 per district (\$6,000 total cost), and is made available on a first come, first served basis.

Phase II is intended to assist fire districts in funding projects such as equipment purchase and refurbishment, dry hydrant installation, communications, training, and fire prevention activities. The HB 1168 VFA match funding is focused on Phase II. HB 1168 provided \$600,000 in funding to leverage the federal Phase II VFA award, resulting in an increase in the number of funded projects and project award amount of grants provided. The maximum award amount is increased from \$12,000 to \$18,000. Additionally HB 1168 money allows a significant reduction of match required to be committed by the fire districts from 50% down to 10%.