Wildland Fire Advisory Committee

Meeting minutes February 20th, 2025

Meeting Venue: Zoom

I. Attendance

a. Quorum met, see attached for meeting attendance.

II. Call to Order

a. Committee chair Allen Lebovitz called the meeting to order 1:03 pm February 20th, 2025.

III. Meeting Minutes Approval

a. Committee Chair Allen Lebovitz entertains motion to review and approve minutes from January 20th. Russ Pfeiffer-Hoyt motions to approve minutes, Carlene Anders seconds. All members vote yea and there are no abstains.

IV. Commissioner of Public Lands

a. Dave Upthegrove, Commissioner of Public Lands, DNR – I jumped at the opportunity to begin a relationship with this committee. I think a lot of the success and momentum this agency has is due to leadership of folks like Allen and the folks on this advisory Committee. I am familiar with the work you did to lead the development of the 10-Year Plan for Wildfire Protection. And I know you completed a 5-year update and have an addendum with additional priorities in there. I know you've played a role in helping make sure that equity was included, and how to best incorporate that into the work. My intent is to attend meetings regularly as appropriate, and time allows. I view this committee's role as vital, there is no more important role this agency plays than wildfire prevention and response. My first priority is maintaining momentum, we've retained 100% of the staff that serve at the pleasure of the commissioner, they won't change just because I'm the new commissioner. I believe in the importance of completing forest health work, using beneficial fire, fuel, reduction, thinning. We set some goals related to the use of beneficial fire. We've been facing some barriers to meeting those. I want to dig down and work with you on how we overcome those barriers. I'm interested in growing this work to the West Side and having a forest health plan that's statewide. I think we're increasingly realizing fire is an all-Washington problem. Central to our priorities to achieve our goals is to maintain the funding we have and fight to keep it. It's our number one priority in our ask to the legislature. I also prioritize building partnerships to implement these plans. These are not just DNR plans, they're Washington plans. DNR plays a critical role in leading the implementation of them, but if we're going to be successful, it's about having those strong, healthy, working relationships with fire districts, with counties, with cities, with tribes, with folks who do conservation work in the communities. And I want to continue to foster a spirit of collaboration and relationships. I am also concerned about the workforce of the future, ensuring that we have the skilled workforce pipeline we need. These are some tough times for our agency, the State budget shortfall will see cuts from the legislature. We are also still frozen out of $185 million in federal grant funds; we have no communication with federal partners to know when these funds will be unfrozen, and we cannot honor grant funding till that happens. Significant layoffs in federal partner agencies adds another challenge, these reductions at FS and USDA are

likely to impact capacity to respond to wildfires. So those are the things that are on my mind. I don't have solutions for them yet. I believe the best thing I can do is seek input from people like you to help develop them.

b. Allen Lebovitz – I think you did a good job of hitting some of the top priorities on the minds of committee members. One thing I'll highlight is that this committee is here to provide advice to you and one thing to be thinking about is what issues can you bring to this committee to get feedback on. And then, as you come up with solutions, this is a place to test those solutions out to get feedback on.

c. Russ Pfeiffer-Hoyt – Looking at report to legislature, it reflects how the investment has paid off and can help make the case that these are needed and argue for continued funding. We can show we either pay now or pay more later.

d. Tony Craven – Going back to overall history, one of the key things was that the Forest Health Committee was the brainchild for the WFAC. We looked at the problem in 2015 and saw the need; it would give us all the benefits of wildfire and wildlife. The biggest issue with talking to legislatures about funding and lack of staffing is the biggest bottleneck to work, and it has taken 8 years to get to a spot where we can start meeting needs. DNR has stabilized and losing that would set us back to rebuilding what we lost.

e. Carlene Anders – If there is anything community wise to push the message, we have spent the last decade rebuilding and dealing with recovery. If you have any needs for us to assist in showing work and need in the community recovery piece happy to do so. We have photographs over the last ten years showing the damage and how money has helped with recovery.

f. Allen Lebovitz – One issue I'll highlight is that the Committee has a strong interest in dealing with homeowner's insurance around Wildfire. There is a bill to establish a work group to help develop mitigation standards that are accepted by both the Insurance Commissioner's office and then insurance companies so that we can start making headway on preventing insurance companies pulling out. If the bill passes, you'll be one of the co-chairs, which is great, and the committee would very much like to be able to offer advice on that issue.

V. Legislative Update

a. Erika Odem, Deputy Director for Governmental Affairs, DNR – We have 4 bills that are agency requests this year, which went through the regular agency process for development. Those 4 bills are moving through well. 1421 HB and 5320 SB for Smokey Bear license plate, 1368 HB and 5444 SB omnibus bill that includes it has had a hearing, and it is our understanding that it will be the vehicle to pass it rather than the standalone bills. HB 1983 and SB 5385, definition of timberland real-estate excise tax, clarification for 1818, DNR and local governments and tribes are exempt from the tax. The title needed to be fixed; it was changed in committee. HB 1646 and SB 5334 smoke appeals, clarifying in statute that there is an appeal process and making it clear how that citation appeal process works. It is in Senate rules, and in the House they referred it to rules today. Surface mine fee increases bill, it is important that these fees increase and industry

agrees with the need for thi. Bills are moving along. HB 1539 is on our watchlist, we support this bill, there was an amendment on the makeup on the committee, but we expect it to move just fine. Wildfire BSA appropriations bill, tap into the budget stabilization account for cost incurred last wildfire season. Claims on prescribed fire fund bill HB 1563, passed and going to appropriations. HB 1048 rangeland pilot, currently in appropriations. Our position is neutral on it passing. Sheriffs' aviation 1969 bill, conditional support it needs amendments. It has a lot of concerns, it takes HB1498 which was very successful, we have doubts all the sheriffs can meet safety standards. If we are paying, then we are the operator, so we want to be sure safety standards are met before approval.

i. Chris Martin – DNR attached a fiscal note to HB1563, that has 3 FTE and 3 trucks. Given that an escaped prescribed is a wildfire and DNR is responsible for responding. Want to better understand why the fiscal note was added, seems like its away to publicly support the bill while ensuring its killed. It's a high priority for many of the conservation groups.

    1. Russ Lane – To uphold the standards, it is what we felt we need. Both Resilience and Wildfire looked at it. Anytime there is a bill that says DNR shall do this, we are very wary of being able to complete the work with existing funds. The bill creates a new investigation of the cause of prescribed fire damage, which is separate from our current wildfire investigation. It's not suppression cost funds. Can't have our wildfire investigators having a conflict of interest in this area. Getting clarity on the role DNR has in the bill specifically could help adjust those costs.
    2. Allen – What I'm hearing is that one of the challenges with the bill is not being clear about what DNR's responsibility will be. So one place to help resolve this, is to beef that up, to get clarity on what the role would be, so that it's more clear what it could cost.
    3. Erika – Our ledg. team has been in touch with Representative Birnbaum, the sponsor on this bill. He just reached out to us, and we're going to be talking again soon. So, if there is room for more clarification within the bill, or that he can add something so that they can narrow things for us, and we can lower that fiscal note. There will likely be conversations about this in the coming days that could provide an opportunity for that.
    4. Chris – Appreciate everybody's input. That was helpful.

ii. Russ Pfeiffer-Hoyt – How are you making sure HB 1168 funding is continued to be kept at appropriated levels?

    1. We have been having successful conversations with representatives emphasizing the importance of the funding and are hopeful of minimizing cuts. One concern we have been expressing is that we don't want to supplant that money, cutting it somewhere else and moving it over and saying we've funded it.

VI. HB 1539 Wildfire Mitigation & Resiliency Standards Workgroup

a. Allen Lebovitz, Committee Chair, DNR – Want to focus some time to discuss and see what you all see our role as. We will wait and see what happens with the bill. In the event it does pass we want to have one member representing the WFAC in that workgroup.

b. Tony Craven – I think it would be worthwhile to form a subgroup and invite the insurance companies to be part of that. My concern with the original bill is that it did not involve practitioners in this process, which is an issue to provide that advice to the process. Members from the small forest landowner community and rural community got added to that work group to give the public more informed feedback. We don't know what insurers need to give them more confidence. We don't know what their models are, for example we have done a lot of work around Roslyn and Cle Elum and that is not reflected in their models. For that steering committee, a need to develop messaging so that the last map that comes out is not a risk map.

c. Chris Martin – It's a very important topic we have been hearing about, people's rates increasing or policies canceled. We should have engagement in this process whether we are on that work group or have our own subcommittee. I spoke with an insurance representative, and it would be good to add an insurance representative to this committee. We don't want insurance companies to pull out of our state. I think it's important to have a company representative. They have up to date data, ours can be decades out of date.

d. Russ Pfeiffer-Hoyt – there are three groups that are part, agents that are doing policies, insurers that oversee, and reinsurers that insure those companies. The ideal outcome would be to have a synergistic effect between industry and state. The insurance industry should be one of our greatest allies to assess and reduce risk.

e. Trevor McConchie – I'd recommend that that the WFAC have an information session, inviting the insurance company representatives and others to provide information to the committee on the issue of wildfire insurance.

f. Russ Lane – I worry that some of these processes may scare homeowners from doing work because of increasing insurance premiums. What we are doing on SB 6120, we formed a steering committee to update a hazard and risk map. How do we get a sense of comprehensive assessment of risk for a homeowner? Each company has diverse risks so it's difficult to get them to have a statewide view. We are not risk assessment people; we are not here to evaluate risk to structures.

g. Cody Rohrbach – This is one of the biggest topics in wildfire right now, I fully support any effort to deal with this topic.

h. Melissa Gannie – Partnering with code officials is where you will pick up that expertise. Send me an invite to that committee, Bill Slosson is not the right person for that committee.

VII. Public Comment

a. Katie Fields – The sign on letter for support for full funding HB 1168 account. HB 1163, the community supports the prescribed fire claims fund.

   i. **Wildfire Response, Forest Restoration, and Community Resilience Account Funding Sign-On Letter**

VIII. Round Table

a. Allen Lebovitz – In our last meeting Wade brought up this topic on addressing this topic on the pause of legacy forest timber sales. We discussed keeping this discussion wildfire focused. Wade is still working on a letter addressing this for the committee to discuss and potentially forward to the CPL. I brought up this topic to the commissioner in a briefing, starting with engaging with the committee on defining legacy forests. Then discussing how work in these forests is necessary for wildfire prevention. Discussed workforce retention as well.

b. Russ Pfeiffer-Hoyt – Main thing I had was impact of pause on legacy forest timber sales, it impacts the flow of revenue and making payroll. DNR employees may work 2/3 year in trust management and 1/3 in wildfire, its important to keep trust management moving at pace. They are important for maintaining sustainable harvest.

   i. Trevor McConchie – We are subject to the same freeze; we have projects on hold because of the current executive orders.

c. K.C. Whitehouse – Concerned and want to be updated on federal funding side.

d. Kari Grover-Wier – Can't really share much as we hear things the same time the rest of the nation is. The pause on central Washington initiative work, pending on executive orders, unleashing Americas energy order that paused that funding. All those are happening at a higher level. Termination of probationary employees has really hit us hard; particularly as we felt we were finally getting to where we needed to be with staffing.

e. Melissa Gannie – We are not facing any budget cuts currently for the state fire marshal's office. Our appropriations hovers around 8 million dollars, preposition around 500K. It was around 20 million dollars and escalates from there, we get appropriations and then request supplemental funding. This is the program that allows the fire chief to make a request, emergency response only.
   i. Cody Rohrbach – How many were there covered and any standouts?
      1. 30 Fires covered; Pioneer fire was a standout.

   Melissa - We're offering community risk reduction courses as well as we are having a summit to work on risk assessment and creating a plan for how to work on community risk reduction. If anyone in this group has ideas of how you want to see that happen,

please reach out to us. At the national level the United States Fire Administration has entered into an agreement with UL to develop a new incident reporting system. State Fire Marshal's office administers the National Fire incident reporting system for Washington State. This is where we're supposed to partner with DNR to analyze the fire problem. I'm hopeful that this new system will give us more flexibility and analytics as we move forward.

ii. Tony Craven – Regarding the risk reduction work, have you reached out to Guy Gifford?
    1. Yes, we have, and he is in communication with Jim Crawford on this grant. If we get approved for our grant extension, then we will be putting together those panels and hopefully DNR will be joining us on those, making resources easy to find and available for homeowners.

f. Tom Smith – Really appreciate the conversation today. If you don't have space for defensible space due to the lot size, that is an elephant in the room that needs to be discussed.

g. Russ Lane – George and I have been talking about what has been going on with federal government. Spent time with PNWCG discussing this issue. We have positioned ourselves as a strong interagency partner. When partners get cut and lose resources, it is going to have a big impact. We have a bunch of hurdles to overcome. The probationary removals were completely arbitrary. There has a full circle effect, BLM can't do cost share as they don't have that position now to fulfill it. Contracting people we need to support things, may not be there. There is not much resilience in the federal system to absorb the impacts. There are a whole bunch of unsung positions that we rely on during fire season. Developing contingency plans, where do we rely on federal systems and equipment so we can plug those holes. It's a very challenging problem we are facing. One thing we haven't heard much about is that we are operating on continuing resolution. What do we do if the federal budget is not passed, we have reliance on federal partners for training coming up. Hopefully we can support our federal partners as best we can.

i. Russ Pfeiffer-Hoyt – Looking forward to this upcoming season, with fires on federal land will we have guarantees that someone will respond if federal resources are unavailable?

    1. We have agreements in place to respond as needed, but only we have the resources are available.

IX. Adjourn

a. Meeting is adjourned at 3:41 pm.

X. Appendices

a. Attendance
b. 1539 Wildfire Mitigation Workgroup

Draft minutes submitted by Bryan Perrenod, approved by Chairman Allen Lebovitz. Formal action to be taken to approve the minutes at the next general meeting.