

HOUSE BILL REPORT

HB 1941

As Reported by House Committee On:
Rural Development, Agriculture, & Natural Resources

Title: An act relating to conducting a comprehensive review of the impact of catastrophic wildfires on communities as a means of improving government responses for the future.

Brief Description: Conducting a comprehensive review of the impact of catastrophic wildfires on communities as a means of improving government responses for the future.

Sponsors: Representatives Kretz and Blake.

Brief History:

Committee Activity:

Rural Development, Agriculture, & Natural Resources: 2/19/19, 2/22/19 [DP].

Brief Summary of Bill

- Directs the Department of Natural Resources and Washington State University to conduct a comprehensive analysis of the impacts of the 2014 Carlton Complex and 2015 Okanogan Complex wildfires on affected communities.
- Requires the analysis to be submitted to the Legislature by September 1, 2020.

HOUSE COMMITTEE ON RURAL DEVELOPMENT, AGRICULTURE, & NATURAL RESOURCES

Majority Report: Do pass. Signed by 14 members: Representatives Blake, Chair; Shewmake, Vice Chair; Dent, Assistant Ranking Minority Member; Chapman, Dye, Fitzgibbon, Kretz, Lekanoff, Orcutt, Pettigrew, Ramos, Schmick, Springer and Walsh.

Staff: Robert Hatfield (786-7117).

Background:

Department of Natural Resources: Firefighting Authority and Responsibility.

This analysis was prepared by non-partisan legislative staff for the use of legislative members in their deliberations. This analysis is not a part of the legislation nor does it constitute a statement of legislative intent.

The Department of Natural Resources is responsible for forest fire prevention and response on both state-owned and private forestland in Washington.

Carlton Complex Fire.

The Carlton Complex Fire burned over 250,000 acres in north central Washington in July 2014. The fire destroyed over 300 homes and required over 2,000 people to evacuate.

Okanogan Complex Fire.

The Okanogan Complex Fire consisted of five wildfires which started in north central Washington as a result of lightning strikes in August 2015. Combined, the five fires are estimated to have burned more than 300,000 acres near the communities of Twisp and Omak.

Summary of Bill:

The Department of Natural Resources and Washington State University, in consultation with a range of specified state agencies and other entities, must complete a comprehensive analysis of the impacts of the 2014 Carlton Complex and 2015 Okanogan Complex wildfires on affected communities.

The analysis must address multiple categories of costs, impacts, and effects, including:

- health impacts, including rates of respiratory illness and mental health impacts;
- impacts to housing, including housing affordability and supplies of farmworker housing;
- fire suppression costs;
- infrastructure repair, including repairs to roads, power lines, and irrigation canals;
- long-term landscape rehabilitation, including soil rehabilitation and erosion response;
- impacts on commercial activities;
- property losses;
- hydrologic impacts, including impacts to instream flows and impacts to water storage capacity;
- impacts to state and local revenues; and
- greenhouse gas emissions.

The analysis must be submitted to the Legislature by September 1, 2020. A preliminary draft of the analysis must be submitted to the Legislature by November 1, 2019.

Appropriation: None.

Fiscal Note: Preliminary fiscal note available.

Effective Date: The bill takes effect 90 days after adjournment of the session in which the bill is passed.

Staff Summary of Public Testimony:

(In support) Washington has a long history of performing environmental analysis on many projects and actions that occur in the woods. It is now time to look at the cost of doing nothing. People in Eastern Washington have been living with the effects of smoke and wildfire for some time, which is the result of not taking action with respect to wildfires. It is important to look at what is being put in the air by wildfires; in 2015 approximately 24 percent of Washington's carbon emissions came from wildfires. Fire suppression costs are the obvious cost, but there are many other costs that are harder to see, such as housing impacts and decreased water retention in forest soils after a fire. This bill represents an attempt to look at things a bit differently, and to collect information so that the state can make more measured decisions about heading off wildfires and promoting forest health.

This bill aligns with the 10-year strategic fire protection plan put out by the Department of Natural Resources. There is a concern that the current due date for the report may be too soon, given the comprehensive nature of the information that would go into the analysis.

(Opposed) None.

Persons Testifying: Representative Kretz, prime sponsor; Loren Torgerson, Department of Natural Resources; and Seamus Petrie, Washington Public Employee Association.

Persons Signed In To Testify But Not Testifying: None.