
**Agriculture and Natural Resources
Committee**

HB 1578

Brief Description: Improving community preparedness, response, recovery, and resilience to wildland fire health and safety impacts in areas of increasing population density, including in the wildland urban interface.

Sponsors: Representatives Springer, Kretz, Reeves, Leavitt, Ramel, Lekanoff, Reed, Pollet and Kloba; by request of Department of Natural Resources.

Brief Summary of Bill

- Requires the Department of Natural Resources (DNR) to complete decadal assessments of areas at significant risk of wildfire, beginning with the decade between July 1, 2025, and July 1, 2035.
- Requires the DNR to cooperate with and provide support to various local entities to develop public safety evacuation strategies for incorporation into local emergency response plans.
- Requires the DNR to take certain actions to expand its community resilience programming and associated supporting programs within the wildland urban interface in areas of Western Washington where the DNR determines that risk of wildfires and smoke exposure exist.
- Requires the DNR to implement a Post-Wildfire Debris Flow Program by July 1, 2024, and establish a structure for a state-sponsored burned area emergency stabilization and response team by December 30, 2024.

Hearing Date: 2/8/23

Staff: Rebecca Lewis (786-7339).

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

Background:

The Department of Natural Resources (DNR) has direct charge and responsibility over all matters pertaining to forest fire services in the state. The forest fire-related duties of the DNR include enforcing all forest fire-related laws, investigating the cause of forest fires, and directing fire suppression efforts. In 2007 the Legislature designated the DNR as the lead agency in developing a comprehensive forest health program for the state. As part of that designation, the DNR was directed to gather and disseminate forest health information, coordinate forest health monitoring activities, and coordinate with universities and other agencies to provide landowners with technical assistance regarding forest health. In 2019 the DNR developed the 10-year Wildland Fire Strategic Plan that establishes goals and identifies strategies for wildland fire preparedness, response, and recovery. The DNR also coordinates with several agencies in other forest fire-related activities, including the departments of Ecology and Health, the United States Forest Service, and the National Weather Service on smoke monitoring. Generally, local law enforcement is responsible for carrying out evacuation strategies.

Summary of Bill:

Decadal Wildfire Risk Assessments.

By July 1, 2025, the DNR must submit a risk assessment of areas at significant risk for wildfire for the decade between July 1, 2025, and July 1, 2035, to the appropriate committees of the Legislature. The DNR must continue to provide decadal assessments to the Legislature every 10 years, with mid-decade interim reports due beginning July 1, 2030, and continuing every 10 years thereafter. The DNR must continue completing and submitting these reports for at least 30 years. Each assessment must include analysis of climate influence on wildfire risk in the state and provide enough detail for landowners, the public, local governments, and tribal nations to develop strategies to address wildfire risk.

Evacuation Plan Development.

In areas identified as facing significant risk of wildfire pursuant to the DNR's decadal assessments, the DNR must cooperate with local law enforcement, Indian tribes, county emergency managers, and local fire protection district to develop public safety evacuation strategies. The DNR must provide support to help incorporate evacuation strategies within existing regional and local emergency response plans. However, implementation of evacuation strategies remains under the authority of local law enforcement.

The DNR must lead a project to provide relevant emergency disaster evacuation plan messaging and information to the public at DNR-managed recreation and outdoor access sites, placing particular emphasis on accessibility and accommodating the needs of public visitors.

Smoke Monitoring and Air Quality.

The DNR must expand its community resilience programming and associated supporting programs within the wildland urban interface in areas of Western Washington where the DNR determines that risk of wildfires and smoke exposure exist.

The DNR must incorporate smoke readiness into community resilience programming, and coordinate with state, county, and federal agencies, and Indian tribes to share information for communities affected by wildfire smoke. This includes:

1. establishing a smoke monitoring and predictive services team to assess wildfire smoke risks and impacts;
2. working cross-agency to address public health concerns, smoke risk to transportation safety, and firefighter exposure to smoke; and
3. conducting community engagement and outreach related to wildfire smoke risks and impacts, particularly in regions of the state that experience disproportionately high levels of air contaminants and pollutants.

The DNR must also coordinate with state, county, and federal agencies, and Indian tribes to help identify smoke respite areas in high-risk communities and promote additional use of community buildings to serve as clean air and cooling centers. Information dissemination strategies must target vulnerable communities and those who may not receive electronic communication.

The DNR must leverage community resilience programming to ensure residents and community organizations are provided information about services and programs to improve air quality in the home, including connecting residents with local contracted weatherization agencies.

Post-Wildfire Debris Flow Program.

The DNR must implement a Post-Wildfire Debris Flow Program (Program) by July 1, 2024. As a part of the Program, the DNR must:

- identify areas prone to hazards from post-wildfire debris flows;
- assess burned areas to determine potential for increases in post-wildfire debris flow hazards;
- improve modeling to determine triggers for post-wildfire debris flow early warning for at-risk communities and infrastructure; and
- communicate to emergency managers, local governments, stakeholder, and the public for preparedness and response.

By December 30, 2024, the DNR must have established a structure for a state-sponsored burned area emergency stabilization and response team, in consultation with county emergency managers, the Military Department, and the Washington Conservation Commission. Burned area emergency stabilization and response teams determine the need for emergency postfire treatments for public safety and resource protection. In establishing the structure, the DNR must also make recommendations regarding:

- the appropriate number of teams needed;
- the funding necessary to support team deployments;
- the implementation of hazard mitigation; and
- provide capacity-building to local communities to establish local teams.

Appropriation: None.

Fiscal Note: Available.

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