

**RCW 76.04.505 Finding—Intent.** (1) Over the last decade, forestland and rangeland wildfires have grown larger and increased in intensity and destructiveness throughout Washington state. The annual acres burned in our state illustrates this alarming trend. In the 1990s, an average of 86,000 acres burned annually. In the 2000s, the average annual acres burned increased to 189,000. In the last five years, the annual average grew to more than 488,000 acres burned. This trajectory of escalation continued last year, with wildfires burning more than 812,000 acres.

(2) Recent wildfires have devastated state, federal, tribal, and private lands, destroyed homes and property, and taken lives. These fires have also released greenhouse gases, destroyed critical fish and wildlife habitat, filled our skies with harmful smoke, polluted our waters, damaged our economy, increased the risk of flooding and landslides, created a critical need for reforestation, and threatened the natural resources needed for essential industries and rural economies.

(3) Catastrophic wildfires have significant negative impacts on fish and wildlife habitat, including the loss and degradation of places to shelter and feed, water quality and quantity, and soil nutrients. Washington's fish and wildlife are part of a fire-adapted landscape, but catastrophic wildfires threaten their health and recovery.

(4) The increase in these uncharacteristic wildfires are the result of a combination of climate change-driven drought, hotter temperature, and windstorms; human development patterns and land use planning and activities; and where uncharacteristic fires occur in forests, by past fire suppression and departures from native ecosystem structure and function. Uncharacteristic wildfire risk is addressed through scientifically informed landscape-level treatments designed to restore forest ecosystem and watershed resilience.

(5) Wildfires result in significant greenhouse gas emissions. Wildfires have become one of the largest sources of black carbon in the last five years. From 2014-2018, wildfires in Washington state generated 39.2 million metric tons of carbon, the equivalent of more than 8.5 million cars on the road a year. In 2015, when 1.13 million acres burned in Washington, wildfires were the second largest source of greenhouse gas emissions, second only to transportation.

(6) The legislature has recognized our forests, as well as the manufacturing and utilization of wood products, as a natural carbon solution and critical component of our state's carbon reduction strategy pursuant to chapter 120, Laws of 2020. Uncharacteristic wildfires threaten the ability of our forests to sequester carbon, and they threaten the stability and long-term viability of our forest products industry.

(7) The Washington state department of natural resources' 20-year forest health strategic plan and climate risk assessment finds that carbon emissions from wildfires are anticipated to increase if there is no change in forest management practices. Unless the state significantly increases active forest management across land ownerships to reduce the risk and intensity of wildfires, wildfire emissions will erode efforts to achieve our state's greenhouse gas emissions reduction goals. In addition to reducing fuel loads, many effective forest health treatments retain and restore older, large fire-resilient trees across the landscape that play an important role

in carbon sequestration, enhancing climate resilience and ecosystem services, and mitigating climate change.

(8) Wildfires inflict huge costs to the state budget, the budgets of partner agencies, and our economy. From 2014-2019, agencies in Washington annually spent nearly \$150 million fighting wildfires. In 2015, firefighting costs were more than \$342 million. In 2019, firefighting costs were more than \$172 million. And suppression costs are only a small portion of the full economic impact. According to a 2018 report by the nonprofit headwater's economics, suppression costs account for only nine percent of the total cost of wildfires when factoring in disaster recovery, lost business, lost infrastructure, and timber damage, and public health impacts.

(9) Over one-half of Washington is forested, providing significant environmental and economic value. Over \$4,900,000,000 in wages and \$200,000,000 in taxes are paid by the forest products' sector each year. Opportunities exist to boost our rural economies through wildfire preparation and preparedness that maintain and attract private sector investments and employment in rural communities.

(10) Wildfires are significant threats to life and property. Over the last five years, wildfires in Washington have taken five lives, including four firefighters and the life of a one-year old boy. In 2020 alone, 298 homes were destroyed by wildfires in our state. More than 1,100 homes have been destroyed this decade. Communities in every corner of Washington have felt the impact and devastation of flames and smoke. In 2020, the town of Malden, Washington was forever scarred by rangeland wildfire. Approximately 80 percent of the town's structures burned down in the Babb Road fire, including the city hall, post office, and fire station.

(11) Wildfire smoke has significant negative impacts on public health. For the second time in the last three years, Washington state had the worst air quality in the world due to wildfires. Communities in every corner of the state felt the impact. Exposure to particulate matter in wildfire smoke has been associated with a wide range of damaging health effects. The particulates in this smoke make those breathing the air wheeze, cough, shorten their breath, and experience sore eyes and throats, diminishing health and quality of life. Other adverse health outcomes are more severe, including increases in asthma-related hospitalizations, chronic and acute respiratory and cardiovascular health problems, and premature death.

(12) Historical forest management, legacy wildfire suppression responses, and a rapidly changing climate have increased the risk of catastrophic wildfires throughout the state. It is the policy of the state to encourage prudent and responsible forest resource management to maintain the health of forests and ecosystems in Washington state. Increasing the pace and scale of forest restoration through fuel reduction, thinning, and the use of prescribed fire on federal, state, tribal, and private lands pursuant to the 20-year forest health strategic plan, the wildland fire protection 10-year strategic plan, and RCW 79.10.520 will reduce the risk of catastrophic wildfires.

(13) In 2020, more than 1,300,000 acres of national forest system land in eastern Washington were considered in need of treatments to restore forest health and reduce the risk of wildfire hazard potential. Many of these lands are adjacent to populated communities, private lands, and state trust lands.

(14) In 2020, 166,000 acres of department of natural resources' land and 74,000 acres of other state-owned lands in eastern Washington

were in need of forest health treatment. These forestlands provide critical fish and wildlife habitat, natural and cultural resources, recreation, raw materials for the forest industry, and funding for counties and schools. From 2011-2020, 102,700 forested acres of department of natural resources' managed trust lands have burned.

(15) Tribal lands and communities have been significantly impacted by wildfires and unhealthy forests. Approximately 494,000 acres of tribal lands in eastern Washington need forest health treatments. These forestlands provide critical fish and wildlife habitat, natural and cultural resources, and economic opportunities.

(16) Washington state has nearly eight million acres of private forestlands. Forested acres are declining statewide with a loss of 394,000 acres between 2007 and 2019. Small forestland owners account for 15 percent of total forest acres. Small forestland owner forested acres declined 3.7 percent from 2,990,000 acres in 2007 to 2,880,000 million acres in 2019. The number of small forestland owners increased 8.5 percent from 201,000 in 2007 to 218,000 in 2019. The number of small forestland owner parcels increased 2.1 percent from 256,500 to 261,800. This rapid land use change creates significant challenges for implementing forest health and wildfire response actions in the wildland urban interface. In eastern Washington alone, approximately 288,000 acres owned by small forestland owners are in need of immediate forest health treatment. These forestlands provide critical raw materials for the forest industry, rural economic opportunities, fish and wildlife habitat, cultural resources, and recreation. A coordinated interagency response is needed to address the multifaceted challenge posed by increasing parcelization, forest fragmentation, loss of economic viability, and changes in landowner assistance needs.

(17) The legislature finds that increasing the pace and scale of science-based forest health activities to reduce hazardous fuels and restore fire resilient forests, including through mechanical thinning and prescribed burning, on federal, state, tribal, and private lands, will reduce the risk and severity of wildfires, protect cultural and archaeological resources, improve fish and wildlife habitat, expand recreational opportunities, protect air and water quality, create rural economic opportunities, provide critical wood products, and increase long-term carbon sequestration on our natural resource lands.

(18) Increased development in the wildland urban interface has also increased the number of people living in areas that are at risk of wildfire. In Washington, over 2,000,000 homes are currently at risk of wildfire. Communities and homeowners can take actions that reduce the risk of loss in the event of wildfire including, but not limited to, home hardening, creating defensible space, and building potential control lines or strategic fuel breaks.

(19) Long-term, sustainable investment in wildfire response, forest restoration, and community resilience is of utmost importance to the health and safety of our environment, our economy, our communities, and the well-being of every resident.

(20) It is the intent of the legislature to take immediate action to fully fund the wildland fire protection 10-year strategic plan. Strategies to accomplish these goals include, but are not limited to:

(a) Upgrading our capability to attack wildfires with critical air and ground resources;

(b) Providing needed wildfire resources to state wildfire response and local fire service districts;

(c) Working with each state utility, local publicly owned electric utility, and electrical cooperative to reduce wildfire risk

and develop consistent approaches and shared data related to fire prevention, safety, vegetation management, and energy distribution systems; and

(d) Improving wildfire detection in areas at risk of wildfire through new technologies and equipment.

(21) Furthermore, it is the intent of the legislature to take immediate action to increase the pace and scale of forest management across different land ownerships and fully fund the 20-year forest health strategic plan and activities developed to facilitate implementation of the Washington state forest action plan. Strategies to accomplish these goals include, but are not limited to:

(a) Restoring to health a minimum of 1,250,000 acres of forestland in need of immediate action to become more resilient and improve watershed health;

(b) Increasing prescribed fire and other fuel reduction projects through proven forestry practices and the operation of prescribed fire crews;

(c) Establishing potential control lines and strategic fuel breaks around communities with high wildfire risk;

(d) Increasing funding for the small forestland owner office for technical assistance and support for small forestland owners and funding an integrated small forestland owner forest health program in support of extending management and control of wildfire from homes through the wildland urban interface to small forestland owner holdings; and

(e) Monitoring forest health conditions and effectiveness of treatments throughout the state, including ecological function and reducing catastrophic wildfires.

(22) Furthermore, it is the intent of the legislature to take immediate action to help communities become more resilient to wildfire. Strategies to accomplish these goals include, but are not limited to:

(a) Increasing funding for cost share programs for home hardening, fuels reduction, and community resilience programs in communities at risk of wildfire;

(b) Reducing wildfire risk to wildland urban interfaces; and

(c) Ensuring our state's most vulnerable populations are not disproportionately burdened by the impact and consequences of wildfire.

(23) The legislature intends to provide \$125,000,000 per biennium over the next four biennia for a total of \$500,000,000 and that these investments will help protect the state's people, environment, and economy. [2021 c 298 § 1.]

**Short title—2021 c 298:** "This act may be known and cited as the wildfire response, forest restoration, and community resilience act." [2021 c 298 § 11.]