

HOUSE BILL REPORT

SHB 1483

As Passed Legislature

Title: An act relating to the prevention and suppression of forest wild fires.

Brief Description: Revising provisions on the prevention and suppression of forest wild fires.

Sponsors: By House Committee on Natural Resources (originally sponsored by Representatives Pennington, Elliot, Stevens, Huff, Mielke, Johnson, L. Thomas, McMahan and Sheahan).

Brief History:

Committee Activity:

Natural Resources: 2/8/95, 2/24/95 [DPS].

Floor Activity:

Passed House: 3/9/95, 96-0.

Passed Legislature.

HOUSE COMMITTEE ON NATURAL RESOURCES

Majority Report: Do pass. Signed by 15 members: Representatives Fuhrman, Chairman; Buck, Vice Chairman; Pennington, Vice Chairman; Basich, Ranking Minority Member; Regala, Assistant Ranking Minority Member; Beeksma; Cairnes; Elliot; G. Fisher; Jacobsen; Romero; Sheldon; Stevens; B. Thomas and Thompson.

Staff: Linda Byers (786-7129).

Background: The Department of Natural Resources is responsible for prevention and suppression of forest fires on over 12 million acres of state and privately owned forest lands.

Current law acknowledges that forest lands within the state are increasingly being used for residential purposes. Current law also establishes that it is the department's primary mission to protect forest land and suppress forest fires and that a primary mission of rural fire districts and municipal fire departments is to protect improved property and suppress structural fires. However, this distinction grows more difficult to implement on the ground as more people build residences in the forest and forest fires threaten these structures.

The department's firefighting priorities are to first save human lives, then real property, then natural resources.

Summary of Bill: A new section reiterates current law with regard to the respective firefighting missions of the department and of rural fire districts and municipal fire departments. The department's firefighting priorities are changed such that protecting forest resources and suppressing forest wild fires is second only to saving lives. The most effective way to protect structures is for the department to focus its efforts and resources on aggressively suppressing forest wild fires.

The Legislature also acknowledges the natural role of fire in forest ecosystems and finds it to be in the public interest to use fire under controlled conditions to prevent wild fires by maintaining healthy forests and eliminating sources of fuel.

Appropriation: None.

Fiscal Note: Available.

Effective Date of Bill: Ninety days after adjournment of session in which bill is passed.

Testimony For: This bill will clarify the department's priorities and also recognize the role of fire in ecosystems to help avoid massive wildfires. The department should put out forest fires and not protect structures; right now they are trying to do both and can't do either. Giving the department a clear mandate to put the fire out will protect structures.

Testimony Against: The bill would put the department in the position of having to let a house burn if they had to choose between the house and forest resources. This could affect agency cooperative efforts with other firefighters. In the urban wildland interface, this may affect cooperative agreements.

Testified: Representative John Pennington, prime sponsor; Wade Boyd, Longview Fibre; Bob Gustavson, Washington Forest Protection Association (all in favor); Art Stearns, Department of Natural Resources; and Otto Jensen, Washington State Association of Fire Chiefs (opposed).