

SENATE BILL REPORT

SB 5486

As Reported By Senate Committee On:
Government Operations & Elections, March 4, 2003

Title: An act relating to making appropriations to assist fire departments that have purchased thermal imaging cameras.

Brief Description: Making appropriations for the purchasing of thermal imaging cameras.

Sponsors: Senators Eide, Rasmussen, Franklin and Winsley.

Brief History:

Committee Activity: Government Operations & Elections: 2/14/03, 3/4/03 [DP-WM].

SENATE COMMITTEE ON GOVERNMENT OPERATIONS & ELECTIONS

Majority Report: Do pass and be referred to Committee on Ways & Means.

Signed by Senators Roach, Chair; Stevens, Vice Chair; Horn, Kastama and Reardon.

Staff: Ronda Larson (786-7429)

Background: In a burning building, the smoke often makes it impossible to see. Consequently, the standard practice of a firefighter is to crawl on his or her hands and knees and search in places that human victims tend to go, such as next to the walls. Where a fire begins inside a wall and people inside the building smell smoke, it is often impossible to know the where source of the fire is until it has broken through a wall to the air and begins spreading rapidly. In another context, where gasoline or another dangerous chemical is spreading through a lake or stream, it is impossible to know where it is spreading, other than through the sense of smell.

Thermal imaging cameras assist firefighters in these types of situations. Fire departments primarily use them to find people in a burning building and to rescue firefighters trapped in a collapsed building. The cameras work by identifying objects with different temperatures from the surrounding objects. For example, if a car accident victim is unable to tell rescuers whether there was anyone else in a car, the camera will show whether a car seat had been used within the past hour.

Currently, fire departments purchase such cameras on an individual basis by choosing to forgo purchases of other equipment during one year so that they can use the money for a camera. They also raise funds for cameras by asking community groups to sponsor the purchases.

The price of thermal imaging cameras varies depending on how many things a particular model can do. For instance, simpler models might cost \$10,000, while more sophisticated models cost \$25,000. Buying in bulk lowers the price. For example, buying 12 cameras can lower the price per camera from \$25,000 down to \$17,500. Fire districts in large urban

centers are more able to buy cameras using funds from their tax base, while rural fire districts often must look to fundraising.

Summary of Bill: Money is appropriated from the general fund for the current fiscal year to reimburse fire districts that have purchased thermal imaging cameras. The amount appropriated to the Emergency Management Division of the state Military Department is \$2,188,000. The Emergency Management Division must distribute the money through grants to city fire departments and fire protection districts based on actual documented costs incurred. The reimbursement shall not exceed 50 percent of the costs of purchase in a fire department or district. Unexpended funds are reappropriated for the fiscal year ending on June 30, 2004.

Appropriation: \$2,188,000 from the general fund.

Fiscal Note: Not requested.

Effective Date: The bill contains an emergency clause and takes effect immediately.

Testimony For: It is unbelievable what these cameras can do. The small fire departments cannot afford them, but could benefit greatly from them. In Graham, the fire department received a grant that allowed it to buy one. The day it received the camera, the department put it to use. If the state sets up a grant program, as this bill would, it would enable departments to consolidate their buying power and receive bulk rates, which saves thousands of dollars per camera. Because of the terrorist threat, the media has focused more on this than in the past, which has educated fire districts about the camera's uses and has increased their interest in buying them.

Testimony Against: None.

Testified: Senator Eide; Senator Rasmussen; Dale Kelley, Tony Judd, Pierce County Fire District #21.