HOUSE BILL REPORT
HB 1048

As Reported by House Committee On:
Agriculture & Natural Resources

Title: An act relating to a rangeland fire protection association pilot project.

Brief Description: Concerning a rangeland fire protection association pilot project.

Sponsors: Representatives Dent, Griffey and Nance.

Brief History:
Committee Activity:
Agriculture & Natural Resources: 1/22/25, 2/7/25 [DPS].

Brief Summary of Substitute Bill

- Directs the Department of Natural Resources to conduct a rangeland fire protection association (RFPA) pilot project.
- Establishes criteria for RFPAs.

HOUSE COMMITTEE ON AGRICULTURE & NATURAL RESOURCES

Majority Report: The substitute bill be substituted therefor and the substitute bill do pass. Signed by 11 members: Representatives Reeves, Chair; Morgan, Vice Chair; Dent, Ranking Minority Member; Engell, Assistant Ranking Minority Member; Bernbaum, McClintock, Nance, Orcutt, Richards, Schmick and Springer.

Staff: Lily Smith (786-7175).

Background:

Department of Natural Resources and Forest Fires.
The Department of Natural Resources (DNR) is responsible for forest fire prevention and response on both private and state-owned forestland in Washington. The DNR may

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cooperate with any agency of another state, a federal agency, or any county, town, corporation, person, or Indian tribe. The DNR may also contract and enter into agreements with private corporations, including wildland fire suppression contractors, for the protection of forestlands within the state.

Fire Protection Service Agencies.
A fire protection service agency is a public entity responsible for the provision of firefighting services, to include, among others, fire protection districts, regional fire protection service authorities, and the DNR.

Rangeland Fire Protection Associations.
Rangeland fire protection associations (RFPAs) are volunteer-based groups organized for local fire protection. Structurally, RFPAs are independent, generally nonprofit, organizations governed by their members. Washington does not have a structure for recognizing or incorporating rangeland fire protection associations into the existing scheme of public fire protection services.

Summary of Substitute Bill:

Between 2026 and 2029 the Department of Natural Resources (DNR) must conduct a rangeland fire protection association (RFPA) pilot project (pilot) in Eastern Washington to assess measures needed for the safe and effective operation of RFPAs. A nonprofit or unincorporated RFPA may be formed under the pilot in areas outside the boundaries of fire protection service agencies and may enter into agreements with those agencies for wildfire detection, prevention, and suppression. No person may form or participate in an RFPA outside of the pilot.

An RFPA formed under the pilot must:
- be named as such;
- identify its service boundaries;
- have liability insurance;
- use appropriate personal protective equipment (PPE) during fire suppression; and
- have members meeting age and training requirements.

The operations of an RFPA may extend onto DNR-protected lands on a limited basis for the purpose of wildfire suppression.

In implementing the pilot, the DNR:
- must develop and publish recommendations concerning the formation and other aspects of an RFPA; and
- must review and inspect an RFPA for certain structural and operational elements.

The DNR must report to the Legislature on the pilot by December 1 of each year. The

authority for the pilot and to form an RFPA expires June 30, 2030.

Substitute Bill Compared to Original Bill:

The substitute bill makes the recommended wildland firefighter 2 level training for rangeland fire protection members a minimum required training level.

Appropriation: None.

Fiscal Note: Available.

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

Staff Summary of Public Testimony:

(In support) This bill would provide a proof of concept for a situation where the parties were not getting along. Other community initiatives have shown success despite initial resistance from the DNR. People near fires will fight them anyway, so a framework for cooperation, communication, and expanded resources once official responders establish command increases effectiveness. Local landowners have familiarity with the landscape and can provide critical information about the microclimate and the location of fences, gates, and cattle. This bill increases opportunities to respond to new fires when they are still small and manageable and prevent massive destruction. The bill creates important standards such as liability insurance, training, and personal protective equipment.

(Opposed) None.

(Other) The impetus for the bill is understandable, as we need more people fighting fires. Property owners are currently authorized to engage in fire suppression on their own land. However, there are concerns with the training standards provided by the bill. Currently firefighters need to have a red card along with training. It should be required that anyone in an RFPA, or at a minimum, anyone who participates beyond the initial attack phase, holds a red card. There are concerns with the lack of required coordination with local fire districts, which are adjacent to most of the rangeland covered by the bill. All fires eventually involve multiple jurisdictions, and under the current scheme, there is close coordination when this happens. Fire mobilization programs could be impacted by how an RFPA operates, and all viewpoints should be considered in authorizing RFPAs. Protection of rangeland, which has experienced highly destructive fires, is important.

Persons Testifying: (In support) Representative Tom Dent, prime sponsor; and Jay Kehne, Conservation Northwest.

(Other) Seamus Petrie, Washington Public Employees Association; and Leonard Johnson, Washington Fire Chiefs Association.

Persons Signed In To Testify But Not Testifying: None.