

Wildfire Matters Review Committee

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Wildfire Matters Review Committee

Committee Charge

Pursuant to Section 2-3-1602, C.R.S., the committee is charged with reviewing and proposing legislation or other policy changes related to wildfire prevention, mitigation, and related matters, including public safety and forest health issues. Senate Bill 13-082 created the Wildfire Matters Review Committee as an interim committee and Senate Bill 18-039 extended the repeal date of the committee to September 1, 2025. The committee did not meet in 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Senate Bill 21-012 requires the committee to review policy changes to maximize the utilization of wildland fire services through the inmate disaster relief program.

Committee Activities

During the 2022 interim, the committee held five meetings and took one field trip. The following subsections discuss the committee's actions during the 2022 interim. Entities that presented before the committee included:

- City of Boulder Open Space and Mountain Parks;
- Coalition for the Poudre River Watershed;
- Colorado Camps Network;
- Colorado Department of Agriculture;
- Colorado Division of Insurance;
- Colorado Fire Aviation;
- Colorado State Forest Service;
- Colorado Youth Corps Association;
- County commissioners;
- Department of Natural Resources;
- Division of Fire Prevention and Control, Department of Public Safety;
- Earth Force Technologies;
- Electric associations;
- Local firefighter departments;
- Local sheriff's offices;
- Lockheed Martin and United Rotorcraft;
- Virginia Modeling, Analysis, and Simulation Center;
- Westside Watch; and
- Northern Water.

Forestry and firefighting workforce issues. The Colorado State Forest Service (CSFS), Colorado Timber Industry, and the Department of Natural Resources (DNR) presented on workforce shortages in fire mitigation and timber operations. The presenters discussed challenges including aging workforce, compensation, and lack of training and internships for jobs in the timber and forestry industry. Fire departments expressed concerns related to attracting and retaining firefighters, including high cost of living and a demanding and unpredictable workload.

Forest mitigation and recovery programs. The committee heard from agencies and organizations regarding wildfire mitigation and recovery funding and programs. DNR discussed the status of state and federal grant funding for wildfire projects. Earth Force Technologies presented on a remote fire mitigation program. County commissioners and fire departments discussed their difficulties in applying for grants, and local governments expressed issues conducting mitigation on privately-owned land. The committee heard an update on watershed recovery projects following major fires in 2020, and an update on electric utility issues with fire mitigation and detection.

Wildfire response and technology. Demonstrations of manned fire detection aircraft, drones, and team awareness kits were provided to the committee during a tour of the Division of Fire Prevention and Control's Center of Excellence at the Centennial Airport. The committee also learned about new wildfire response aircraft and technological capabilities from United Rotorcraft and Colorado Fire Aviation. The committee heard a summary of the response to the Marshall fire, and the challenges associated with responding to the fire.

Evacuations, insurance, and wildfire investigations. The committee heard presentations on best practices for citizen wildfire evacuations and the importance of evacuation planning, and the Colorado Department of Agriculture discussed state procedures to evacuate domestic animals and livestock during a fire. The committee heard information on the Marshall fire's impact on homeowner insurance, and commercial insurance issues from the perspective of summer camp operators. Law enforcement officials discussed difficulties conducting wildland fire investigations.

Committee Recommendations

As a result of committee discussion and deliberation, the Wildfire Matters Review Committee recommends the following five bills for consideration in the 2023 legislative session.

Bill A – Forestry and Wildfire Mitigation Workforce. The bill creates and expands timber, forest health, and wildfire mitigation workforce development and education programs across multiple agencies including the Department of Higher Education, the DNR, and CSFS. The bill directs CSFS to develop educational materials related to career opportunities in forestry for high school students, and creates the Timber, Forest Health, and Wildfire Mitigation Industries Development Program in CSFS to partially reimburse timber and forest health entities to hire interns. The bill also creates a new forestry program in the community college system, creates a program to recruit wildfire educators, and provides for the acquisition of a training simulator.

Bill B – Wildfire Detection Technology Pilot Program. The bill requires that the Center of Excellence for Advanced Technology Aerial Firefighting in the Department of Public Safety (DPS) create one or more remote camera technology pilot programs to detect wildfires. The camera programs must be implemented by April 2024, and DPS is required to annually report to the Wildfire Matters Review Committee on the program beginning in August 2024.

Bill C – Timber Industry Incentives. The bill creates the Timber, Forest Health, and Wildfire Mitigation Industries Workforce Development Program in the Colorado State Forest Service to partially reimburse timber and wildfire mitigation entities for hiring interns. The bill also creates an income tax credit for equipment used in the timber, wood product manufacturing, forest health, and

wildfire mitigation industries.

Bill D – Updates to State Forest Service Tree Nursery. The bill requires CSFS to upgrade and improve its seedling tree nursery in Fort Collins to expand capacity and contribute to reforestation efforts. Specifically, CSFS must upgrade bare-root tree and shrub fields, purchase a new seed storage cooler, and purchase two refrigerated box trucks.

Bill E – Fire Investigations. The bill requires that the DPS conduct fire origin and cause investigations and creates the Fire Investigation Fund to support investigation costs and analyze and share data. Eighty percent of the money spent from the fund must be used for investigating wildland fires. DPS may adopt rules to implement the fund, and must report annually to the Wildfire Matters Review Committee on the number and status of wildland fire investigations conducted in the previous calendar year.