

Lawmakers' proposed budget for fighting, preventing wildfires vexes officials

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OLYMPIA, Wash. — With forecasters predicting high wildfire danger in Central Washington again this summer, local and state wildfire officials are disappointed that lawmakers didn't propose more funding for wildfire preparedness and prevention.

At a Monday hearing on the House's proposed operating budget before the House Appropriations Committee, Public Lands Commissioner Peter Goldmark asked lawmakers for more funding for firefighting equipment and training.

The state Department of Natural Resources had requested \$4.5 million for firefighting resources, but the draft budget includes just \$2.5 million.

"We need more firefighters and equipment to be able to prepare for an increased chance of wildfire on both sides of the Cascades," Goldmark told lawmakers.

The proposed budget also includes \$47 million in fire suppression funding for the agency for the next two years. The cost of fighting last year's wildfires was nearly twice that.

The DNR had also requested \$20 million for forest health treatments to reduce the risk of catastrophic wildfires, including thinning programs on state lands and to help private landowners. But lawmakers only included \$5 million in the proposed capital budget unveiled by House Democrats last week.

State Forester Aaron Everett told the Yakima Herald-Republic last fall that the \$20 million request would help increase the pace of fuel reduction work to create healthier forests and reduce the risk of catastrophic wildfires. In the past five years, the state has spent \$31 million on forest health work and \$200 million on wildfire response.

The forest health funding includes money for fuels reduction work on state lands and for grants to provide training and cost-sharing support to help small private landowners reduce fire risks on their properties.

The Nature Conservancy's Eastern Washington forests director in Yakima, Reese Lolley, said that if the state spent more on improving forest health now, it would lighten the impact of devastating wildfires on communities, natural resources and the state budget in the future.

Suzanne Wade, the fire-adapted community coordinator for the Kittitas County Conservation District, said the funding is critical to helping landowners protect their homes.

"On the Taylor Bridge fire, we had worked with six landowners on perimeter of the fire and their houses survived. There would be one house sitting there where the landowner treated the whole property that survived and the homes on either side had burned to the ground," Wade said. "It's a system that works," Wade said.

Last year, with \$500,000, Kittitas County landowners thinned about 500 acres, she said. But she's got a long waiting list and was hoping that with additional funding more work could be done.

"Boy, with all the recent wildfires, my requests have gone way up. It's made people realize that it can happen here," Wade said.

Wade and Lolley both said that they hope lawmakers will find more funding for the forest health programs before budget negotiations conclude.

“We understand that it’s a difficult year, budget-wise, but it’s a surprise to see forest health work funded at just \$5 million,” Lolley said. “We’re hoping for more review from the Senate.” Rectangular Snip