

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 2021 interim, the committee held five meetings and took two field trips. The committee heard from a number of federal, state, local, and non-governmental entities involved in wildfire prevention, mitigation, suppression, and recovery. The committee visited with officials in Boulder and Larimer Counties to tour areas affected by wildfire in 2020. Entities that presented to the committee include:

- Colorado Association of Home Builders;
- Colorado Correctional Industries;
- Colorado Counties, Inc.;
- Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment (CDPHE);
- Colorado State Forest Service (CSFS), Colorado State University;
- Colorado Timber Industry Association;
- Department of Atmospheric Science, Colorado State University;
- Colorado Department of Natural Resources (DNR);
- Division of Fire Prevention and Control (DFPC), Colorado Department of Public Safety (DPS);
- Division of Insurance, Colorado Department of Regulatory Agencies (DORA);
- Healthy Air and Water Colorado;
- Housing and Building Association of Colorado Springs;
- Larimer County Sheriff's Office;
- Rocky Mountain TSG;
- Rocky Mountain Insurance Association;
- United States Forest Service (USFS);
- various electric utilities (e.g. Xcel Energy, Colorado Rural Electric Association);
- various Fire Protection Districts (e.g. Grand Fire Protection District); and
- various water utilities (e.g. Denver Water, Northern Water).

The following subsections discuss the committee's actions during the 2021 interim.

Forest management efforts. The CSFS and the USFS discussed management of Colorado forests, and the unmet need for mitigation to prevent large-scale wildfires. The committee heard from DNR and CSFS about 2020 state and federal grant funding for mitigation, and the timber industry presented on the importance of wood products in managing forests. During a field trip, the committee learned about forest thinning and prescribed burns on county land. Presenters also discussed challenges managing forests, including beetle kill, inconsistent funding sources, stigma around prescribed burns, and climate change.

Wildfire response. While on the two field trips, the committee learned about the evacuation strategies that local fire districts and sheriff's departments employed during recent wildfires. During committee meetings, DPS discussed technological capabilities to detect and respond to wildfires. DPS also reviewed its methods of collaborating with local and federal agencies to respond to wildfires across the state.

Homeowner and utility issues. The committee learned from fire professionals, homebuilders, and other experts about the issue of creating defensible spaces for homes in the Wildland-Urban Interface (WUI). Experts from the insurance industry presented to the committee on insuring homes in the WUI, incentivizing creating defensible spaces, and challenges that face the industry in terms of insuring homes at risk of wildfire damage. The committee also heard the importance of utility mitigation and the importance of utility right-of-way mitigation from various electric utility groups.

Wildfire workforce issues. Fire chiefs presented on the difficulties hiring and retaining paid and volunteer firefighters, including the aging population and high cost of living. The committee learned about firefighter mental health and support programs from DFPC and Healthy Air and Water Colorado. Colorado Correctional Industries discussed a program to train inmates as wildland firefighters.

Environmental impact of wildfire. CDPHE presented to the committee on the negative impacts of wildfire on air quality and water quality. Denver Water and Northern Water discussed how the aftermath of wildfire can cause mudslides and flooding, and described recovery efforts following large wildfires. The committee learned about how climate change contributes to the cause and severity of wildfires from CDPHE and Colorado State University.

Committee Recommendations

As a result of committee discussion and deliberation, the Wildfire Matters Review Committee recommends the following five bills for consideration in the 2022 legislative session.

Bill A – Wildfire Mitigation and Recovery. The bill creates the Wildfire Mitigation and Recovery Grant Program within the Colorado State Forest Service (CSFS). Grants are available to counties with forested areas to help them prevent and recover from wildfires by removing wildfire fuel and debris in a manner that reduces the amount of carbon that enters the atmosphere. The CSFS must submit an annual report to the General Assembly on the grant program beginning January 1, 2023. The grant program is repealed September 1, 2028, following a sunset review.

Bill B — Increase Wildfire Risk Mitigation Outreach Efforts. The bill directs the CSFS to convene a working group to develop and implement an enhanced wildfire awareness month outreach campaign in 2023 and 2024, in partnership with the DFPC and the U.S. Forest Service. The State Forester is required to report to the Wildfire Matters Review Committee during the 2023 and 2024 legislative interims on money expended and efforts to increase outreach and awareness of wildfire risk mitigation.

Bill C — Resources for Volunteer Firefighters. The bill expands eligibility for certain state emergency wildfire response cash funds to fire departments. Specifically, fire departments that rely primarily on volunteer firefighters to provide fire protection services can receive reimbursement for fire suppression activities from the cash funds if certain conditions are met. The bill also allows the Local Firefighter Safety and Disease Prevention Fund (fund) to be used for behavioral and mental health services for wildland firefighters. The funds are distributed through a needs-based grant program, and the bill requires priority to be given to fire departments that rely primarily on volunteer firefighters and that demonstrate a loss in tax revenue due to wildfires. Finally, the bill requires a \$5.0 million annual appropriation to the fund.

Bill D — Assistance Landowner Wildfire Mitigation. The bill creates the Wildfire Mitigation Resources and Best Practices Grant Program in the CSFS to be used to conduct outreach among landowners regarding wildfire mitigation best practices. The grant will be available to local governments, tribal agencies, and nonprofit organizations beginning January 1, 2024. The CSFS must submit a report to the Wildfire Matters Review Committee on the grant program beginning in 2025. The grant program is repealed January 1, 2029. The bill also replaces the current state income tax deduction for wildfire mitigation expenses with a state income tax credit, beginning in tax year 2023 through tax year 2025. The credit is available to landowners who meet income requirements, and is equal to 25 percent of the taxpayer cost for wildfire mitigation expenses, up to \$625 per year.

Bill E — Wildfire Incentives for Local Governments. The bill creates the Wildfire Mitigation Incentives for Local Government Grant Program in the CSFS to provide matching funds to local governments that raise dedicated revenue for forest management and wildfire mitigation activities such as forest thinning, wildfire fuel reduction, and outreach to property owners and the public. Beginning November 1, 2024, the CSFS must publish an annual report on the grant program.