

## FAQ: Wildfire & Forest Health Funding Bill

### **What does the bill do?**

First and foremost, this bill sets Washington state on a proactive course to be self-reliant in the face of the wildfire crisis. It focuses on three critical areas:

- **Wildfire response:** Ensuring we have the tools, tech and training capacity we need to adequately respond to wildfire. (does not include wildfire “suppression” costs)
- **Forest restoration:** This bill would allow DNR to increase the pace and scale of forest health treatments across all landscapes. This would ensure the resources needed to double down on our efforts across all lands – state, federal and private.
- **Community resilience:** When we focus on wildfire prevention through forest health work, we also create jobs in rural communities.

### **How much will the bill raise?**

As written, the bill asks the Legislature to appropriate a dedicated fund account in the amount of \$125 million per biennium, the same amount as the previous bills. The funds would be placed in a dedicated account and subject to legislative appropriation.

### **Why should this bill be a priority this year?**

As we saw this year, wildfire affects all of us – west side and east side, urban and rural. Last year, the 1,692 fire starts, over 800,000 acres and nearly 300 families lost their homes. The season rivals the catastrophic wildfires of 2015. Here are the facts:

- This bill has widespread support from statewide organizations.
- A full 2.2 million homes are at risk of wildfire. But, even if your home is not at danger from flames, we all suffer from acrid smoke, environmental degradation, and economic impact.
- Last year, for the second time in three years, Seattle had the worst air quality in the world due to wildfire smoke.
- We are all already paying. Now, we react and use emergency funds and the general fund to cover the massive costs associated with suppressing catastrophic wildfires.
- As the rain falls and snow covers the ground, we cannot forget the scars left on the ground across our state from this year’s wildfires. We must be proactive and forward thinking.
- DNR’s 20-year Forest Health Strategic Plan and 10-year Wildland Fire Prevention Strategic Plan together provide a blueprint for healthier and more resilient forests and

lay out what we can do as an agency and as residents to better plan for and prevent wildfires.

- Both long-term plans require long-term investments be built into our state budget, not given to us only when the budget allows for it.

### **What will you buy with this money and how will it help prevent wildfires?**

Lower intensity wildfires are a natural part of forest and shrub-steppe landscapes in the northwest, but these uncharacteristically large and destructive fires are not.

With long-term, smart investments, we'll be able to add additional firefighters, technology, aircraft and equipment, and finance our 20-year plan to support healthy, resilient forests that can better resist and recover from wildfire.

We have the blueprints – clear, science-based strategies: DNR's 20-year Forest Health Strategic Plan and the Wildland Fire Prevention 10-year Strategic Plan.

### **In the first two years, critical investments would include:**

#### **WILDFIRE RESPONSE (\$83 million)**

- **100 more firefighters, including:**
  - 3 hand crews (20 people each)
  - 20 dozer operators
  - 2 post-release hand crews (10 people each)
  - Additional firefighters to cover unprotected lands
- **Expanding our air fleet and new technology:**
  - 2 new fixed-wing planes
  - Upgrading and modernizing our aging Huey helicopters
  - Adding infrared/night vision technology and advance fire detection systems to detect fires earlier and respond faster

#### **FOREST RESTORATION (\$31.4 million + \$8.5 million for workforce training)**

Building up our forests' natural fire resistance requires treating them and keeping them healthy.

This account will:

- Fully fund – and accelerate – DNR's 20-Year Forest Health Strategic Plan, which calls for us to restore natural wildfire resistance to 1.25 million acres of forest.
- Bolster local fire districts – often the ones who are first to arrive on the ground -- with funding for training, equipment, and personnel.

- **An additional \$8.5 million** for workforce training is included in this bill to support long-term boots-on-the-ground forest health work.

Because fire doesn't stop at property lines, we must restore forests on federal, state, tribal, and private land. This work is underway – we treated 256,000 acres from 2017 to 2019 -- but it's slow and difficult due to sporadic and unpredictable funding, and the challenge ahead of us is immense.

### **COMMUNITY RESILIENCE (\$12.6 million)**

We know which communities in our state are at risk. We know where we need to target our investments to protect these communities and strengthen their defenses.

For example, three towns in Washington have a higher risk than Paradise, Calif.: Roslyn, Leavenworth, and Twin Lakes.

This bill would help us make investments at the home, neighborhood, and community level to reduce wildfire risk and protect our communities. That means:

- Investing in defensive strategies at the community level, like fuel breaks, prescribed fire, and creating defensible green space.
- Direct assistance to home owners to secure their property and neighborhood with programs like FireWise.

### **Does this funding supplant suppression dollars?**

No. Suppression costs are not included in the items that are paid for out of the dedicated account, avoiding setting up a “fire-borrowing” scenario.

“Fire-borrowing” is a case where funds are spent on suppression costs before any other activities that reduce future fire costs, such as prevention and preparedness, can be accomplished.

The dedicated fund is focused on new investments and fully implementing the wildfire and forest health strategic plans, rather than supplanting base funding amounts.

The account is focused on a group of important, proactive, priorities, consistent with the 10-year Wildland Fire Prevention Strategic Plan and the 20-year Forest Health Strategic Plan, supporting an all-lands, all-hands approach, as opposed to a strict, ranked set of priorities with suppression at the top.

### **Why isn't there a funding source specified for this bill?**

Our priority is to secure dedicated funding so we can effectively confront this growing problem.

We know this will take significant resources, but we must act now. I'm committed to working with legislators to identify a funding source that provides them the latitude and flexibility they need, and can be broadly supported.

We know what resources our firefighters need to fight these fires. We just need the funding and the political will to make it happen.

We will work alongside lawmakers, stakeholders and others will work alongside us to achieve our goal of long-term, dedicated funding of \$125 million every biennium.

### **Are you backing away from your insurance tax proposal from last year?**

Our priority is to secure dedicated funding so we can effectively confront this growing problem. We know this will take significant resources, but we must act now.

Last year, our strategy was to offer our proposal for where we could find the money. This year, our strategy is to give the legislators the latitude and flexibility to identify a funding source that can get a majority in both chambers.

We believe we can get there this year – we must find a way to make our communities more wildfire resistant and resilient and we have to make the long-term commitment to that work now.

### **In the midst of a recession and a pandemic, how do you respond to the idea that Washington doesn't have the money to spend on this right now?**

We understand the concern, and we are sympathetic to the hardships, but wildfires won't stop because of the pandemic. The losses from wildfires are as real as the pandemic, and we must act now to avoid even greater losses in the future.

This year's wildfires compounded the economic impact of the pandemic. As we move forward, I would like to create more certainty for rural communities, which are impacted the most, will not be dealt the hand they were dealt this year with wildfire.

In the long run, funding these resources will cost a lot less money than not funding them.

On average, we spend \$150 million fighting wildfires each year. Suppression costs make up only 9 percent of the total costs of wildfires once you factor in disaster recovery, lost business, infrastructure and timber damage, and health impacts.

### **What is causing these fires – climate change or poor forest management?**

Both climate change and forest health play a role in the damaging wildfires we're seeing.

As we experience prolonged warmer temperatures, fuels on the ground are drier and catch with a single spark.

Whether you are in Darrington or Omak, the risks for wildfires is higher. Preventing wildfire catastrophes will require healthy, resilient forests and it will also require action on climate change trends that are making our weather warmer and drier.

Getting this crisis under control will require a "both and" strategy, not an "either or." Reducing the losses from wildfires will require action on climate, too.

Our firefighters and our forest health experts are doing everything they can with the resources and funding available to them, but we can't keep asking them to do more with less and expect a different result.

This bill says to residents we're committed to do more. And, we're ready to do more to prevent and prepare for the impacts of climate change through forest health work, but that takes time, money and the workforce to get it done.

### **Why not fund this with the carbon tax legislation being proposed?**

Our priority is to get the dedicated wildfire and forest health funding – and we're open to any funding source that provides it.

What is important is to see action this year. Our communities clearly can't afford another year of inaction.

For our part, we've got years of work ahead of us and we want to ensure it is funded year-after-year. We want to keep the commitment we make to residents when this bill passes.

### **Did you try to get this included in the governor's budget? If not, why not?**

We were reluctant given the pandemic, knowing the hardship everyone was going through.

As everyone is aware, the agency has put forward dedicated funding proposals for the past two legislative sessions. But it has been a tough sell. Everyone knows we need to make these investments.

But when the smoke clears, and when other priorities emerge, it's hard to get legislators to prioritize wildfire and forest health.

Instead, we put forward a \$25 million capital ask for forest health work, which we are glad was included in the governor's budget.

So what changed since August? The reason is simple:

Labor Day weekend changed everything. In just 72 hours, more than 600,000 acres burned across our state. In all, 58 fire starts occurred that weekend, 13 of them were large fires that required all our resources, spreading our teams thin for weeks.

After visiting Malden, Omak and Amboy, it's clearer than ever that we can't wait to act. Fires won't stop because there is a pandemic. We're convinced we must act now.

Couple that with the reality that both California and Oregon were experiencing catastrophic wildfires at the same time and it meant calling for assistance from our federal government and neighboring states was no longer an option.

We need to ensure our state is as self-reliant as possible in the face of wildfires because we know our neighbors may not be there to help us with extra and refurbished air assets, firefighters and technology.

This bill is our effort to get ahead of this issue, to ensure we invest in the resources, from top to bottom, so we can fight wildfires efficiently and effectively and make sure our forest health work is funded over the long-term.

### **Last time, this didn't pass. Why do you think this time will be different?**

One reason why we believe this time will be different is because everyone agrees that we can't afford to have another wildfire season as devastating as last year's.

We need to begin to change the trajectory. So we don't commit our children and grandchildren to more destructive fires and losses.

And it's clearer than ever that out-of-control wildfire is now a threat to every Washingtonian, on both sides of the Cascades. Unfortunately, when it comes to the changing climate creating hotter and drier conditions on the ground across Washington, everyone is at risk of a wildfire.

And for two of the last three years, Seattle has had the worst air quality in the entire world.

We must change the trajectory of our wildfire crisis and we should have some urgency about it.

### **Can groups aside from DNR access the dedicated fund?**

Yes. We look at this effort as one that will increase overall capacity across the state.

Groups who are doing work that aligns with our forest health plan and wildfire plan are supporting our efforts on the ground.

We are all in this together and this component of the bill ensures that we truly have an "all-hands, all-lands" approach to wildfire response and forest health.

**This bill has a workforce development component. Why is this important?**

Our forest health and wildland fire prevention plans are long-term strategies – 10 and 20 years. And they are job creators.

To accomplish this work – 1.25 million acres of forest health restoration -- over that period of time, we need a continuous stream of trained and skilled workforce.

More foresters and more mills. Which means more product to build our cities and towns. This is a win-win.

We need investments today in boots on the ground, but we want to be sure that we are opening up our natural resource work as a career pathway.

Working with the Department of Commerce, our community colleges and the business community, I believe we can ensure we have the workforce we need for years to come.

In particular, we want to call out one innovation: Our partnership with the building trades to develop a program to train construction workers to respond to wildfires – providing us valuable surge capacity to respond to devastating fires.

**Who did you work with to develop this bill?**

A bipartisan group of legislators, industry leaders (AFRC/WFPA), environmental organizations (TNC & WEC), firefighters and fire chiefs, public health organizations (American Lung Association), tribes, and dozens of additional stakeholders.

Our goal was to have a collaborative process that takes into account all those impacted by wildfire and how we can best address the forest health work that needs to be done to lessen wildfire severity and the impacts on our communities across the state.