

## Interim Legislative Fire Suppression Committee

January 30, 2008 Solicited Comment

### Members & Interested Persons:

Lincoln County is my home and apart from times away for schooling at UCLA and a brief time following job opportunity in Alaska, almost all my adult life I have been privileged to live adjacent to the Kootenai National Forest. My husband before his disability retirement, served as fire control officer on the Murphy Lake District on the Kootenai, and because of his dedication to his job, our family life during fire seasons revolved 24 hours a day around fires and fire suppression. Early on we learned that early response determines the size and eventual cost of any fire. That is reality.

In recent years too many fires, because of federal policies, including let burn policies, and locked gates restricting access when fires were small, have been allowed to grow until virtually uncontrollable. I have communicated with some of the committee members before, but want to reiterate and emphasize the fact that Montana needs to re-examine any existing memorandums of understanding with the federal agencies to ascertain that policy differences will no longer contribute to excessive suppression costs. There must be an assumption that liability must be assessed when bad policy decisions of agency personnel allow fires to grow to catastrophic size, increase the costs of suppression and endanger the public.

Before leaving the regular session this year I requested information on the origin of fires and associated costs. I have a report from the fiscal analyst's office, which though incomplete, indicates that cost of fires originating on federally managed lands in Montana is costing the state millions of dollars annually. In the four year period reported, the chart details costs in excess of 61 million dollars on these

Specific fires, alone. If cost statistics are now available, the committee should examine carefully the cost to Montana of federal "let burn" policy fires which start in wilderness or on federal property and wreak destruction in their paths when burning their way on to private or state owned property.

In 2007 two fires in the Bob Marshall, though reported in early July, were permitted to burn unrestrained until one had jumped boundaries on the Front, caused evacuations of property owners, and escalated the costs of fighting them to in excess of 20 million dollars. I have not seen the final statistics as yet although my request should be on record, and I am still interested in seeing the final report.

It is past time for federal policy makers to examine their own definitions of "Wild Land Fire Use" and the new term "fire use fires" to determine their worth in the overall scheme of things. It is time for them to not only count the cost, but also face

related liability when use of fire as a tool results in out of control fires spreading to other jurisdictions.

Another concern is that of public safety and perhaps that should be added to our constitutional protection of a guaranteed clean and healthy environment. I want to make two points, here. One is the need to place the safety of citizens and fire fighters as our highest priority. That means when a decision is pending, **human safety and property protection must be placed ahead of alleged endangered species considerations.** We must not allow a reenactment of the Washington state tragedy in Montana. Our firefighters should be held blameless and be given immunity to prosecution in any takings assessed by federal agencies, relative to alleged infractions of federal law or administrative rules. Decisions should always reflect the safety and well-being of Montanans. Inasmuch as the Department of Natural Resources has set in motion a plan on state lands to protect itself from “unintended takings,” I can think of no more fitting application for claiming that immunity. It will be costing us a lot.

It is important that the committee should also be sensitive to **resource utilization as a way of defraying costs,** as they view the challenge of dealing with the small dimension and ladder fuels components of the massive fuel build-up which is of grave concern to us all. **Pilot projects and studies done indicate there are better ways than fire to rid ourselves of these materials and new economics offer ways to replace negative returns from thinning costs, to a positive investment offering monetary returns.** Current drought conditions alerting us to more consciousness of better protecting our water sheds should be a strong deterrent to solving problems with fire, only to be faced with erosion and water shortages caused by fire. I strongly urge the committee to investigate methodology to make possible the utilization of the harvested wood fiber as a renewable and non-polluting fuel source with economic benefits to rural communities. New options surface as on-going research is making available even newer technology.

Many resources are available to facilitate compliance with the recommendations of the July 07 Legislative Audit recommendations relative to “Promoting Proper Forest Practices” and “Prioritizing Forest Fuels Reduction Projects.” I strongly recommend that members access the **College of Forest Resources website** to acquaint themselves with facts and figures which prove that utilization of the excess fuel waste is a far more cost effective way to go in the long term than what has been acceptable practice. This web site reflects cooperation between the College of Forest Resources at the University of Washington, Washington State University and USDA State and Private Forestry efforts. [ruraltech.org](http://ruraltech.org) offers invaluable information on what is being done and the potential to be achieved by availing forest managers of the best technology. Click on RTI Fact Sheets and review Fact Sheets 10 and 28. You may be surprised.

Continued use of fire and tolerance of “let burn” policies, in light of the recent race to control carbon emissions, certainly raises the question of double standards being

observed in setting state fire policy. Information provided from a California pollution study reported amazing statistics relative to catastrophic fire emissions. Information collected from a model developed by the **California Air-Resource Board Department to estimate emissions from forest fires indicated “burning one acre of coniferous forest emits on average 9 tons of CO, 0.6 tons of hydrocarbon particulates, 0.25 tons of nitrous oxide.”** It was calculated that it would take 1040 new cars driving 1250 miles(an average for one month of driving) to equal a one acre fire. In 2003, about 500,000 acres burned in Flathead County. From that model we can only guess at the volume of contaminants which were, and still are being released upon an increasingly angry Montana public.

There is no way to assess the monetary cost accrued because of environmental damage, watershed devastation, wildlife casualties, charred timber and rendering forests susceptible to insect infestation. **Montana can, and must do much better!**

Thank you for the opportunity to comment.

Sincerely,

Senator Aubyn Curtiss, SD 1

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