

MINUTES
JOINT MEETING

**HOUSE RESOURCES & CONSERVATION COMMITTEE
SENATE RESOURCES & ENVIRONMENT COMMITTEE**

DATE: Monday, February 15, 2016

TIME: 1:30 P.M.

PLACE: Lincoln Auditorium

MEMBERS: Chairman Raybould, Vice Chairman Gestrin, Representatives Moyle, Andrus, Shepherd, Wood, Boyle, Vander Woude, Gibbs, Miller, Bateman, Burtenshaw, Mendive, VanOrden, Youngblood, Pence, Erpelding, Rubel
Chairman Bair, Vice Chairman Vick, Senators Siddoway, Heider, Nuxoll, Bayer, Hagedorn, Stennett, Lacey

**ABSENT/
EXCUSED:** Reps. Wood, Boyle and VanOrden

GUESTS: Jane Green Post, AAUW; Cay Marquart, Transform Idaho; Ron Marquart, Transform Idaho; Andy Brunelle, USDA Forest Service

Chairman Bair called the meeting to order at 1:30 p.m.

Tom Schultz, Director, Idaho Department of Lands (IDL), said the presentation focus is on suppression costs, not only for the 2015 season, but for the cost of fighting fires and the different budgets IDL funds, both preparedness and suppression. He stated the 20 year average of suppression costs is just over \$20 million, and this year IDL spent over \$80 million with \$20 million coming back to the state in reimbursements.

Director Schultz introduced **David Groeschl**, Idaho State Forester and Deputy Director of Forestry and Fire Division, Idaho Department of Lands, who presented an overview of the 2015 fire season and an overview of how the fire program is funded. Mr. Groeschl stated there are 10 IDL forest protective districts and 2 timber protective association (TPA) districts that are part of the state's overall forest protective responsibility. IDL covers 6.3 million acres, mostly private and state, with approximately 70% within the wildland urban protective urban interface (meaning there are homes within the forest). There are user agreements in place with over 200 local and rural fire protection districts, whose primary responsibility is to provide structural protection. In the southern part of the state, IDL has six Rangeland Fire Protection Associations.

Mr. Groeschl pointed out that in the fire protection area, Idaho has offset agreements with the USDA Forest Service (Forest Service) and the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) that outline the fire protection districts and clear geographic boundaries that are easily identifiable. The Forest Service protects some state and private lands within their area, and Idaho (IDL/TPAs) also protects Forest Service and BLM lands in their forest protection districts. The purpose of the offset agreements is to promote efficiency of resources by using the closest available resources to address a fire. At times, they each protect the others' fire protection districts and incur the costs associated with that protection, but neither bills the other the costs of initial protection, considering it a wash both ways.

Mr. Groeschl said BLM has fire responsibility in Southern Idaho, and in 2012/13, IDL and BLM explored the development and establishment of Rangeland Fire Protection Associations (RFPAs). Clark County will have one in place for the 2016 fire season, and there will be 7 RFPAs with 230 trained ranchers to protect about 1 million acres of private land and provide secondary protection on approximately 5 million acres of state and federal range land. They have assisted in 30 fires, including the 2015 Soda fire. **Mr. Groeschl** explained in 2013/14, the Legislature provided start up costs for the RFPAs. There are no assessments on rangeland in Idaho, but RFPAs can self assess their own members to cover additional equipment and costs.

Mr. Groeschl addressed the 2015 fire season saying many factors came together to make it unique. There was a mild winter with a 50% of average snow pack coming off in April instead of June. It was an average of 11 degrees warmer in the spring, and almost all year, temperatures were 2 to 12 degrees above normal. Idaho was 10 inches short of water for the year, starting short in mid-February, with a record low soil moisture heading into the fire season. The Palmer Drought Severity Index showed all of Northern Idaho was under soil moisture stress. There were thousands of lightening strikes with unusual efficiencies because of the dry conditions. Typically for every 100 strikes there will be one fire start, but in 2015, there were 50 to 60 fire starts because of the dryness of fuel, and the probability of ignition was 95% in many places. Idaho faced resource shortages of hand crews, engine crews, smoke jumpers, hotshots and other resources in August and September because of fires nationally in Idaho, Washington, Oregon and California. It was a wet December and January, 2016, and the snow pack level 95% in Northern Idaho and 100% in the rest of Idaho. How quickly the snow pack comes off, spring temperatures and precipitation will determine what kind of fire season Idaho has in 2016.

Statewide, approximately 742,000 acres burned in 2015 across all protections, and **Mr. Groeschl** reviewed the breakdown of acres burned. **Mr. Groeschl** explained the total suppression costs for the 2015 Fire Season Calendar Year which spills across two years, 2015/2016, and IDL's preparedness costs for FY2016. 2015 expenditures were approximately three times that of previous years' costs. Approximately 78,571 acres burned in 321 fires in IDL protection which was about 100% of the 20 year average, with half being human caused and half lightening caused. Of 321 fire starts, 16 escaped initial attack and required the use of 27 incident management teams. Three of the fires were eligible for a fire Management Assistant Grant through FEMA: the Clearwater Complex fire, costing \$25.2 million and burning 68,000 acres, with 62 residences and 200 outbuildings lost; the Municipal fire (outside of Orofino) and the Cape Horn fire.

Mr. Groeschl explained that fire protection funding is grouped into two categories: preparedness and suppression. Preparedness is providing resources to be ready in advance of an actual fire. It includes hiring, training, tools, supplies and purchasing or leasing equipment such as fire engines. Preparedness on Idaho lands is funded by forest assessments on private land, 56%, federal funds, 13%, and Idaho General Funds, 31%. A forest land assessment is \$15 for parcels under 25 acres and 60 cents per acre for parcels over 25 acres with a surcharge of \$40 on forested parcels with structures. **Mr. Groeschl** discussed the endowment lands saying they have 940,000 acres assessed at 60 cents an acre, \$585,000, that represents approximately 10% of the entire forest assessment collected by Idaho and 30% of the acreage assessment. **Mr. Groeschl** set forth the reasons for Idaho's General Fund payment of fire preparedness.

Mr. Groeschl explained that suppression is the cost of taking action on fires when personnel and equipment are dispatched to initial attack fire starts or IDL project fires, and payment is made by the General Fund through deficiency warrant authority. From July 1 through December, 2015, IDL paid \$25 million in deficiency warrants and were left with a \$9 million dollar deficiency in the Deficiency Fund Account. IDL anticipates that \$16 million in bills for 2014 and \$37 million in bills for 2015 will be received which will bring the account to negative \$71 million. **Governor Otter** proposed \$50 million to reduce the deficiency in the Deficiency Fund Account.

Mr. Groeschl went over the audit procedures for incident fires. Addressing how other states allocate fire suppression costs, **Mr. Groeschl** stated assessment, General Fund and federal dollars are funding sources used by Montana, Washington and Oregon for fire preparedness. For fire suppression, Montana has a Wildlife Suppression Fund, which is mostly General Fund dollars plus some special tax funds, and it is capped at \$100 million. Oregon uses a combination of assessment and General Funds for the first \$10 to \$20 million, and then they have a fire insurance policy with Lloyds of London, which two years ago they had to bump up from \$25 million to \$50 million. It has again been bumped up to \$75 million because the suppression payout by Lloyds of London every year has been \$100-125 million. Oregon's premiums were quadrupled and their threshold level set higher. Oregon uses General Funds to pay for anything over the threshold amount. Washington uses General Funds for suppression costs.

ADJOURN: There being no further business to come before the committee, the meeting adjourned at 2:45 p.m.

Representative Raybould
Chair

Lorrie Byerly
Secretary