



THE STATE
of **ALASKA**
GOVERNOR MIKE DUNLEAVY

Department of Natural Resources

OFFICE OF THE COMMISSIONER

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February 9, 2022

The Honorable Mike Cronk
State Capitol, Rm 112
Juneau Alaska, 99801

Representative Cronk:

This letter is to support HB 209, which would allow non-emergency funds to pay for emergency firefighters (EFFs) to perform “non-emergency” fire mitigation work. This bill dovetails with the Department of Natural Resources’ strategic plan to increase public safety through workforce development, reducing hazardous fuels, and building capacity for wildland fire response (see attached briefing). The combination of HB 209 and fire academy training will rebuild our Alaskan EFF fire crews, the backbone of wildland firefighting, which will increase the safety of every Alaskan who lives in a fire-prone area.

Fire seasons are increasing in duration and intensity in Alaska and nationally. We need to prepare a self-sufficient Alaskan firefighting force to adapt to the changing conditions and complexity of wildland fires. The alternative is relying on Lower 48 firefighters which increases costs, are not immediately available for initial attack of fires, and are not reliably available because of increased wildland fire danger at the national level.

This bill will significantly increase the capacity of our Alaskan wildland firefighting workforce. It is important to note that this bill will not cost the state money; rather, it allows spending of both state and federal funds that have already been appropriated for hazardous fuels reduction. In addition, it will save suppression costs by rebuilding our fire crews that can attack fires quickly and effectively, keeping them small and reducing costs.

One of the greatest strengths of HB 209 is that it provides fire crews with opportunities to work on both fuels projects and wildland fires. The combination provides a more consistent work season that is not solely based on the whim of Alaskan weather. Currently, because of the prohibition on spending general funds for “non-emergency” work, EFF personnel are released from duty during periods of low fire danger and limited fire suppression activities. This essentially results in unpredictable part-time employment, especially during slow fire seasons. Because of the lack of reliable employment, many rural firefighters have sought jobs elsewhere. The result is the number of EFF fire crews declining from approximately 56 crews in 2000, to just six crews in 2021. This decline has created a public safety problem. Our firefighting capabilities have decreased while our number of fires and fire danger is increasing dramatically in Alaska.

And HB 209 has other important benefits, as well. Creating firefighting and fuels opportunities within communities builds local expertise, valuable leadership skills and opens a career path in wildland fire and forestry that many rural Alaskans have not had. It paves the way for a full-time

local workforce, which will stabilize and stimulate local economies. These job opportunities will build pride and ownership in community responses to fire. I strongly support the passage of this important bill. Thank you for your efforts to increase the public safety and economic opportunities of Alaskans statewide.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Corri Feige". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Corri" and last name "Feige" clearly distinguishable.

Corri Feige, Commissioner

Enclosures:

Division of Forestry's strategic plan to respond to an increased wildland fire reality
Alaska's Changing Wildfire Environment: Alaska Fire Science Consortium

Cc: Akis Gialopsos, Governor's Legislative Office, Director