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SPONSOR STATEMENT

HB 355: FIRE;FOREST LAND; CRIMES;FIRE PREVENTION

Most of the current Division of Forestry fire prevention laws were enacted in 1961. HB 355 updates and modernizes the wildland fire prevention and enforcement statutes, with the ultimate goal of reducing the number of human caused fires in Alaska. This bill reduces risks to human life, loss of homes and structures, extensive property damage, and fire suppression costs.

Current burning offenses are unclassified misdemeanors that require a mandatory court appearance and are punishable by a fine of between \$100-\$1,000 or 10 days to 6 months imprisonment. The bill replaces the current system with a tiered prevention and enforcement structure, similar to fish and game violations. Violations of regulations adopted under the bill that would be "bail schedule" offenses, allowing DOF prevention officers to issue citations for violations of these offenses. The bill also gives state fire prevention officers more flexibility in responding to burning violations and investigating wildland fires. "Knowing" violations of the bill provisions would be a class A misdemeanor, and resolution would require a mandatory court appearance.

The bill also addresses enforcement gaps in the existing arson and criminally negligent burning statutes in AS 11.46, makes technical changes to clarify the right of state fire prevention officers to enter land to investigate wildland fire and establishes a misdemeanor offense of interfering with this right of access, and corrects potentially conflicting statutory provisions..

Over the last 15 years, the length of the wildland fire season and amount of acreage burned each year—especially in and near communities—has increased dramatically. The statutes and regulations that guide our prevention and management of wildland fire need to keep pace with these changes which is why I hope you will join me in supporting this bill.