



THE STATE
of **ALASKA**
GOVERNOR BILL WALKER

Department of Natural Resources

DIVISION OF FORESTRY/FIRE & AVIATION

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March 14, 2018

Chairman Matt Claman, Vice Chair Jonathan Kreiss-Tomkins and members of the House Judiciary Committee:

The Division of Forestry supports CSHB 355 (RES), "An Act relating to the crime of criminally negligent burning; relating to protection of and fire management on forested land; relating to prohibited acts and penalties for prohibited acts on forested land; and providing for an effective date." This bill is directed to state statutes in Title 41. Public Resources, Chapter 15 Forests, Article 1. Protection of forested land, originally authored in 1961. These statutes are directed at regulation, prevention, and suppression of activities to reduce the threats of wildland fire while still allowing activities such as cooking, warming, or debris clearing.

Since these statutes inception, Alaska has seen a significant increase in population and related growth in the wildland urban interface. This is where Alaskans enjoy both desirable homesites and direct access to recreation. It is also where we have seen a steady increase in human caused wildfires that are expensive and catastrophic.

The Division of Forestry works cooperatively with federal and local governments to protect citizens from wildland fire on land that is owned privately, by the state, or by a municipality, per AS 41.15.010. Our suppression responsibilities are primarily the southern half of the state with the populated and developed communities. The Division's protection areas see wildland fire starts that are around 79% human and 21% natural caused. These fires can be expensive and catastrophic, for example, cost wise:

- Hastings Fire (Fairbanks) - \$20 million,
- Funny River Fire (Kenai) - \$13 million,
- Parks Highway Fire (Nenana) \$10 million,
- McHugh Fire (Anchorage) \$6 million.

Wildland fires with extensive loss of improvements, businesses, and homes:

- Miller's Reach (Wasilla, 1996) – 344 structures, estimated \$15 million loss,
- Caribou Hills (Kenai, 2007) – 88 structures, estimated \$8.2 million loss,
- Sockeye (Willow, 2015) – 60 structures, \$10 million lost.

These human caused fires are all started by a single ignition point and have resulted in the loss of cabins, homes, and businesses. In many parts of Alaska, affordable insurance is not practical and structures are often not insured. Replacement becomes the responsibility of the homeowner. Preventing even one destructive, expensive, long duration fire would be well worth the collective effort of the citizens, the legislature, and the Division of Forestry. We support the intent of CSHB 355 (RES) to coalesce this effort.

Thank you,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Tom Kurth".

Tom Kurth,

Chief, Fire & Aviation

Alaska Division of Forestry

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<http://forestry.alaska.gov>