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REPRESENTATIVE MIKE CRONK

Sponsor Statement for House Bill 209

“An Act relating to emergency firefighters; and providing an effective date.”

HB 209 authorizes the Commissioner of the Department of Natural Resources to hire emergency firefighter personnel using general fund appropriations.

By amending AS 41.15.030 (b), allowing the use of general funds to pay EFF personnel, they would be able to perform nonemergency work, such hazardous fuels reduction, fuel break development, fire prevention, habitat restoration or improvement activities in fire-prone areas. In addition, this would provide economic opportunities for Alaskans and empower rural Alaskans, for the department to responsibly manage the state’s natural resources, and to enhance public safety to protect and save human lives.

Such nonemergency work could reduce the likelihood, intensity, and damage of wildland fires near populated areas and could bring significant reductions in the state’s costs to fight future fires. By employing EFF during non-emergency would provide training, fitness, and readiness for when a wildfire does occur. The number of EFF personnel that may be interested in applying for a permanent DNR job would increase, which would help with recruitment.

Based on the legislative history, amending AS 41.15.030(b)’s last sentence does not appear to yield and constitutional or legal problems. In 1996, the legislature added the last sentence to address concerns of conflict with the Alaska Personnel Act; specifically, that short term non-permanent employees would become full time employees. However, in 2000, the legislature amended the APA to allow for long term nonpermanent employees. Due to that amendment, the apparent concerns expressed by the legislature in 1996 warranting the inclusion of the last sentence no longer exists.