

ALASKA STATE LEGISLATURE
HOUSE COMMUNITY AND REGIONAL AFFAIRS STANDING COMMITTEE

April 1, 2025

8:04 a.m.

MEMBERS PRESENT

Representative Rebecca Himschoot, Co-Chair
Representative Donna Mears, Co-Chair
Representative Carolyn Hall
Representative Ky Holland
Representative Justin Ruffridge

MEMBERS ABSENT

Representative Mike Prax

COMMITTEE CALENDAR

CS FOR SENATE BILL NO. 50 (L&C)

"An Act relating to the comprehensive plans of first and second class boroughs."

- MOVED CSSB 50 (L&C) OUT OF COMMITTEE

HOUSE CONCURRENT RESOLUTION NO. 3

Establishing the Joint Legislative Task Force on Artificial Intelligence.

- HEARD & HELD

HOUSE JOINT RESOLUTION NO. 15

Urging the Governor, the Department of Natural Resources, division of forestry and fire protection, the Department of Public Safety, municipalities of the state and relevant wildfire planning and response agencies, and the Alaska delegation in Congress to prepare for the 2025 wildfire season.

- HEARD & HELD

PREVIOUS COMMITTEE ACTION

BILL: SB 50

SHORT TITLE: MUNICIPAL COMPREHENSIVE PLANS: HOUSING

SPONSOR(S): SENATOR(S) DUNBAR

01/17/25 (S) PREFILE RELEASED 1/17/25

01/22/25 (S) READ THE FIRST TIME - REFERRALS
 01/22/25 (S) CRA, L&C
 02/04/25 (S) CRA AT 1:30 PM BELTZ 105 (TSBldg)
 02/04/25 (S) Heard & Held
 02/04/25 (S) MINUTE(CRA)
 02/11/25 (S) CRA AT 1:30 PM BELTZ 105 (TSBldg)
 02/11/25 (S) Moved CSSB 50(CRA) Out of Committee
 02/11/25 (S) MINUTE(CRA)
 02/12/25 (S) CRA RPT CS 2NR 2DP SAME TITLE
 02/12/25 (S) NR: MERRICK, YUNDT
 02/12/25 (S) DP: DUNBAR, GRAY-JACKSON
 03/03/25 (S) L&C AT 1:30 PM BELTZ 105 (TSBldg)
 03/03/25 (S) Heard & Held
 03/03/25 (S) MINUTE(L&C)
 03/07/25 (S) L&C AT 1:30 PM BELTZ 105 (TSBldg)
 03/07/25 (S) Moved CSSB 50(L&C) Out of Committee
 03/07/25 (S) MINUTE(L&C)
 03/10/25 (S) L&C RPT CS 3DP SAME TITLE
 03/10/25 (S) DP: BJORKMAN, DUNBAR, YUNDT
 03/17/25 (S) TRANSMITTED TO (H)
 03/17/25 (S) VERSION: CSSB 50(L&C)
 03/21/25 (H) READ THE FIRST TIME - REFERRALS
 03/21/25 (H) CRA, L&C
 03/25/25 (H) CRA AT 8:00 AM BARNES 124
 03/25/25 (H) Heard & Held
 03/25/25 (H) MINUTE(CRA)
 04/01/25 (H) CRA AT 8:00 AM BARNES 124

BILL: HCR 3

SHORT TITLE: AI LEGISLATIVE TASK FORCE
 SPONSOR(s): REPRESENTATIVE(s) RAUSCHER

02/26/25 (H) READ THE FIRST TIME - REFERRALS
 02/26/25 (H) CRA, STA
 03/27/25 (H) CRA AT 8:00 AM BARNES 124
 03/27/25 (H) Heard & Held
 03/27/25 (H) MINUTE(CRA)
 04/01/25 (H) CRA AT 8:00 AM BARNES 124

BILL: HJR 15

SHORT TITLE: WILDFIRE PREPAREDNESS
 SPONSOR(s): REPRESENTATIVE(s) HOLLAND

03/24/25 (H) READ THE FIRST TIME - REFERRALS
 03/24/25 (H) CRA
 04/01/25 (H) CRA AT 8:00 AM BARNES 124

WITNESS REGISTER

ARIELLE WIGGIN, Staff
Senator Forrest Dunbar
Alaska State Legislature
Juneau, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Gave a recap of CSSB 50(L&C) on behalf of Senator Dunbar, prime sponsor.

CRAIG VALDEZ, Staff
Representative George Rauscher
Alaska State Legislature
Juneau, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Gave a recap of HCR 3 on behalf of Representative Rauscher, prime sponsor.

CORBIN MORRISON, Staff
Representative Ky Holland
Alaska State Legislature
Juneau, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Presented HJR 15 on behalf of Representative Holland, prime sponsor.

DREW DEMBOWSKI, representing self
Juneau, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Gave invited testimony during the hearing on HJR 15.

JONATHAN GLOVER, Chief
Wildfire Division
Anchorage Fire Department
Anchorage, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Gave invited testimony during the hearing on HJR 15.

CINDY KINARD, representing self
Anchorage, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in support of HJR 15.

NORM MCDONALD, Deputy Director
Fire Protection Program
Division of Forestry and Fire Protection
Department of Natural Resources
Palmer, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Answered questions during the hearing on HJR 15.

REPRESENTATIVE JULIE COLOUMBE
Alaska State Legislature
Juneau, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Offered comments on HJR 15.

ACTION NARRATIVE

[8:04:34 AM](#)

CHAIR DONNA MEARS called the House Community and Regional Affairs Standing Committee meeting to order at 8:04 a.m. Representatives Ruffridge, Hall, Holland, Himschoot, and Mears were present at the call to order.

SB 50-MUNICIPAL COMPREHENSIVE PLANS: HOUSING

[8:06:05 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR MEARS announced that the first order of business would be CS FOR SENATE BILL NO. 50(L&C), "An Act relating to the comprehensive plans of first and second class boroughs."

[8:06:26 AM](#)

ARIELLE WIGGIN, Staff, Senator Forrest Dunbar, Alaska State Legislature, on behalf of Senator Dunbar, prime sponsor, said CSSB 50(L&C) adds the phrase "housing development plans" to Title 29 to encourage local municipalities to turn an eye towards the serious lack of adequate housing in Alaska's communities and include that in their comprehensive plans.

[8:07:37 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR HIMSCHOOT opened public testimony on SB 50. After ascertaining that no one wished to testify, she closed public testimony.

[8:08:16 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR HIMSCHOOT moved to report CSSB 50(L&C) out of committee with individual recommendations and the accompanying fiscal notes. There being no objection, CSSB 50(L&C) was reported from the House Community and Regional Affairs Standing Committee.

[8:08:45 AM](#)

The committee took an at-ease from 8:08 a.m. to 8:10 a.m.

HCR 3-AI LEGISLATIVE TASK FORCE

[8:10:40 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR MEARS announced that the next order of business would be HOUSE CONCURRENT RESOLUTION NO. 3, Establishing the Joint Legislative Task Force on Artificial Intelligence.

[8:11:17 AM](#)

CRAIG VALDEZ, Staff, Representative George Rauscher, Alaska State Legislature, on behalf of Representative Rauscher, prime sponsor, said HCR 3 creates a 7-member task force to explore artificial intelligence (AI) and its impact on Alaska.

REPRESENTATIVE HOLLAND asked how the work performed by the Joint Legislative Task Force on Artificial Intelligence would connect with national AI legislative groups, like the National Conference of State Legislatures (NCSL).

REPRESENTATIVE RAUSCHER said it's important that the taskforce stays abreast of how AI is being used in the Lower 48.

[8:14:24 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR MEARS opened public testimony on HCR 3. After ascertaining that no one wished to testify, she closed public testimony. She announced that the concurrent resolution was held over.

[8:15:07 AM](#)

The committee took an at-ease from 8:15 a.m. to 8:21 a.m.

HJR 15-WILDFIRE PREPAREDNESS

[8:21:22 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR MEARS announced that the final order of business would be HOUSE JOINT RESOLUTION NO. 15, Urging the Governor, the Department of Natural Resources, division of forestry and fire protection, the Department of Public Safety, municipalities of the state and relevant wildfire planning and response agencies, and the Alaska delegation in Congress to prepare for the 2025 wildfire season.

8:21:44 AM

CORBIN MORRISON, Staff, Representative Ky Holland, Alaska State Legislature, on behalf of Representative Holland, prime sponsor, presented HJR 15. He paraphrased the sponsor statement [included in the committee packet], which read as follows [original punctuation provided]:

House Joint Resolution 15 underscores the critical need for enhanced wildfire preparedness a Alaska faces increasingly severe fire seasons due to rising temperatures and reduce precipitation. The resolution urges the Governor, state agencies, municipal governments, and Alaska's congressional delegation to take proactive measures to mitigate wildfire risks, increase community preparations, and strengthen response capabilities ahead of the 2025 season for Anchorage, Fairbanks, Kenai, Soldotna, and other high-risk zones.

Specifically, HJR 15 calls for the development of comprehensive wildfire response plans, expanded public education initiatives, improved fire suppression resources, and the implementation of advanced early detection and emergency notification systems. It also highlights the necessity of securing additional water sources, improving evacuation planning, and enhancing interagency coordination to protect high-risk communities.

By prioritizing these efforts, the state can reduce the impact of wildfires on Alaskan residents, infrastructure, and economic stability. Wildfire preparedness is not just a seasonal concern but a long-term necessity for protecting lives, property, and natural resources. Taking proactive steps now will strengthen our ability to respond effectively, minimize damage, and ensure that communities are equipped to handle wildfire threats.

House Joint Resolution 15 reinforces the importance of collaboration between state, local, and federal agencies to implement strategic mitigation efforts and emergency response improvements. Supporting this resolution is a commitment to safeguarding Alaska's future against the growing risks of wildfires.

[8:23:03 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE HOLLAND, as prime sponsor, shared contextual details on House District 9, a Wildland-Urban Interface (WUI) area, and background on HJR 15. He began a PowerPoint presentation, titled "Preparing for the 2025 Wildfire Season" [included in the committee packet]. He referred to slide 2, "The Growing Wildfire Threat in Alaska," which read as follows [original punctuation provided]:

- Unusually dry conditions in South Central Alaska
- Increased wildfire risk due to rising temperatures & lower precipitation.
- High -risk communities in WUI areas: Anchorage, Fairbanks, Kenai, Soldotna, and others.
- Challenges: Limited water sources, difficult terrain, single -access roads.
- Benefits of Action: Reduce firefighting costs, economic damage, and loss of lives and homes.

[8:28:40 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE HOLLAND continued to slide 3, "Strengthening Interagency Communication & Coordination," which read as follows [original punctuation provided]:

Key Recommendations in HJR 15:

- State and local agencies review and update wildfire response plans.
- Fire departments, forestry officials, and public safety officers collaborate on equipment, drills, and evacuation plans.
- Pursue investments in aerial firefighting resources, water reservoirs, and critical road ROW maintenance.
- Federal support is crucial—We urge Congress to increase funding for Alaska's wildfire prevention efforts.

[8:30:13 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE HOLLAND turned to slide 4, "Community Engagement & Public Preparedness," which read as follows [original punctuation provided]:

Key Recommendations in HJR 15:

Proactive Community Actions:

- Expand Firewise USA participation & homeowner education.
- Promote "Ready, Set, Go!" evacuation preparedness program.
- Increase early detection efforts and emergency notifications.
- Organize community wildfire drills and evacuation route planning.

[8:33:17 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE HOLLAND concluded on slide 5, "Call to Action," which read as follows [original punctuation provided]:

2025 Wildfire Season has started!

- State & Local Leaders: Implement wildfire mitigation strategies now.
- Residents: Take part in preparedness programs & report risks.
- Congress & Federal Agencies: Support Alaska with funding & resources.
- First Responders & Public Safety Officers: Participate in interagency training & drills.

[8:35:59 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR HIMSCHOOT asked how fire evacuation planning is different from other emergency planning.

REPRESENTATIVE HOLLAND said this type of planning is appropriate for any emergency situation. He added that wildfire related preparation makes a dramatic difference in how much people's homes are affected.

[8:38:18 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR MEARS opened invited testimony.

[8:38:49 AM](#)

DREW DEMBOWSKI, representing self, spoke to the impact of the Eaton Fires in Altadena, California. He said countless homes and 1900 small businesses burned in the fire, which was caused by a Santa Ana wind event hitting energized power lines and a

particularly dry hillside. He said preparation is the only solution and urged support for HJR 15.

[8:44:22 AM](#)

JONATHAN GLOVER, Chief, Wildfire Division, Anchorage Fire Department (AFD), said the Wildfire Division is prepping for an early fire season, which has the potential to be a great threat to Southcentral Alaska. He said preparation is critical for areas like Anchorage where over 86 percent of the housing is in a WUI intermix area. Anchorage has multiple areas of single egress and access that pose a real threat to the public, especially with regard to evacuation and fire response. Posturing for this season has involved coordination with stakeholders, agencies, and suppression partners. In addition, focus has been placed on community messaging to prepare the public for evacuation in the case of a serious wildfire. He spoke to collaboration between state and federal partners and said the region's preparedness is at unprecedented levels. The division has worked hard on the community wildfire protection plan - a major effort that would showcase the vulnerabilities of the Municipality of Anchorage (MOA) and ensure preparedness for the onset of this and future wildfire seasons.

[8:50:52 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR MEARS asked Chief Glover to speak to the Solid Waste Services Wood Lot program.

CHIEF GLOVER said based on the community's receptiveness and positive feedback, the program was stood up again this year. It is currently active out of the Highland Landfill and will become active at the Central Transfer Station on May 1, 2025. He said the program would be fully staffed 6 days a week at no cost the public for MOA residents.

[8:53:34 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR HIMSCHOOT recalled that Chief Glover had stated that the [Wildlife Division] was unfunded for 10 years and is now grant funded. She asked when the funding was reinstated and whether its state or federal funding.

CHIEF GLOVER said funding became active in 2023 and expires in quarter 1 of 2028. The program is currently funded through a U.S. Forest Service grant.

CO-CHAIR HIMSCHOOT asked whether Southeast Alaska should be standing up a similar program.

CHIEF GLOVER encouraged Co-Chair Himschoot to reach out to his office or the U.S. Forest Service for further information.

[8:56:41 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR MEARS opened public testimony on HJR 15.

[8:57:09 AM](#)

CINDY KINARD, representing self, testified in support of HJR 15. She opined that early detection and rapid aerial suppression are the two most important actions proposed by HJR 15, as most of the other fixing actions are only needed if detection is too late or if the aerial response is delayed. Using tax valuation alone, she calculated that \$5 million in funding for early fire suppression in Anchorage is "miniscule" by comparison. She implored the committee to approve HJR 15 and to enact the detection and suppression capacity immediately.

CO-CHAIR MEARS closed public testimony. She asked Mr. McDonald to respond to Co-Chair Himschoot's prior question.

[9:01:10 AM](#)

NORM MCDONALD, Deputy Director, Fire Protection Program, Division of Forestry and Fire Protection, Department of Natural Resources (DNR), suggested that [if Southeast Alaska were to enact a similar plan], the place to start would be with a community wildfire protection plan to provide a funding source, answer questions, and provide a planning platform for evacuation, community outreach, and public safety. He added that the Division of Forestry and Fire Protection ("the division") could help support this in conjunction with the U.S. Forest Service for Southeast Alaska in particular.

[9:02:55 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE HOLLAND referred to the map on slide 2, which showed Southeast, Southwest, and Southcentral Alaska as high-risk areas for wildfires. He asked about the wildfire risk in the Interior this year.

MR. MCDONALD clarified that the map shows projections for April and May. Outlooks for May and June would be more relevant to the Interior, which usually has the highest fire activity.

[9:05:13 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE JULIE COLOUMBE, Alaska State Legislature, co-sponsor of HCR 15, expressed her support for the legislation and voiced concern about the management of Chugach State Park in terms of fire mitigation. She emphasized the importance of communication and said the primary goal is to save lives. She said she was impressed with all the coordination between the state and the municipality.

CO-CHAIR MEARS questioned the communication plan if a fire were to break out in Anchorage with the possibility of spreading.

CHIEF GLOVER reiterated that the Ready Set Go platform would help with preparedness. His division is also working with partner agencies and other departments to discuss this very topic. He indicated that communication planning involves the rave alert systems, Smart911, social media, and general broadcasting. He indicated that in preparing for the 2025 fire season, the community should be in the "set" position of "ready set go" and be prepared with a plan.

[9:09:59 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR HIMSCHOOT highlighted the reference to "emergency news sources" on page 3, line 11, which means public broadcasting for Southeast Alaska. She questioned what that means for urban areas.

REPRESENTATIVE HOLLAND agreed and recalled that in 2018, there was mass confusion that highlighted the importance of offering an authoritative, clear news source. He noted that the Office of Emergency Management's (OEM's) website has a dashboard for notifications and asked about the strategy for Smart911, the Rave Alert system, and Pulse Point, as places for timely authoritative information.

CHIEF GLOVER acknowledged that all three communication methods are utilized, adding that the primary focus is to send a unified message.

[9:17:18 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE RUFFRIDGE pointed out that HCR 15 establishes a deadline of May 1, 2025, for multi-agency tabletop exercises and live evacuation drills. He questioned the possibility of meeting that deadline and the cost associated with those exercises.

REPRESENTATIVE HOLLAND characterized the deadline as a "call to action" to speed up ongoing efforts and an acknowledgment of the early 2025 wildfire season.

MR. MCDONALD stated that smaller tabletop exercises are the most effective way to prepare and communicate information, as well as being low cost.

CO-CHAIR MEARS questioned the timeline for these exercises.

MR. MCDONALD said pre-season begins in April with preparation by May 1.

CHIEF GLOVER added that AFD has been meeting with the department on a regular basis since January. He reiterated that the level of coordination and communication this year is unprecedented. He agreed that large drills look impressive to the public but low-level operational exercises are more functional and applicable to a real-world response.

REPRESENTATIVE RUFFRIDGE questioned the meaning of "advanced fire detection technology" and how that might be implemented in preparation for the 2025 wildfire season.

[9:27:47 AM](#)

CHIEF GLOVER said AFD is pursuing various technologies to support the municipality in early detection. He shared several examples.

CO-CHAIR MEARS asked for more context from the state perspective.

MR. MCDONALD explained that the state uses four primary detection models: 911 dispatch; two satellite systems, Planet and Visible Infrared Imaging Radiometer Suite (VIIRS), for heat signatures and mapping; and the use of aircraft post lightning events to track ground strikes and look for signs of smoke.

[9:31:34 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE RUFFRIDGE suggested that page 3, lines 29-31 may need to be amended for the 2025 season. He shared concerns from his district about the consolidation of dispatch services to a central office in Palmer and the delays that might bring. He expressed further concern about the ability to direct assets in an appropriate manner and fulfill the requests outlined in HJR 15 in the next 30 days.

REPRESENTATIVE HOLLAND welcomed clarifying language regarding the 911 response center and coordination to ensure that the resolution has the broadest possible impact. He acknowledged the difficulty of accomplishing everything in the next month but hoped the resolution would change the trajectory and emphasize the importance of the work.

REPRESENTATIVE RUFFRIDGE questioned what the agency thinks about the request for aerial assets, what it would cost, and what that might look like.

MR. MCDONALD said the division's goal is to be at preparedness level 3 and spoke to the ability to import resources to support that mission through several avenues, such as the Northwest compact.

[9:42:00 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR HIMSCHOOT shared several observations and questioned the time between Palmer and Anchorage for an aerial response.

REPRESENTATIVE HOLLAND said its surprisingly quick to deliver aerial assets from Palmer to the Hillside area in Anchorage and recognized the advantages of holding assets in a central location. He deferred the question to Mr. McDonald.

[9:45:22 AM](#)

MR. MCDONALD said the division has 7 helicopters prepositioned during fire season, 2 contracted air tankers, and the ability to import additional aircraft to support the mission as fire behavior dictates. Flight time from Palmer to Anchorage is 25 minutes, so early detection and response is critical. He addressed the state's relationship with Canada and their commitment to the compact.

[9:47:47 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE HALL viewed the resolution as a communication vehicle to enable elevated conversation about the issue. She spoke to her experience with reporting on wildfires in her broadcast journalism career and stressed the importance of taking proactive measures to mitigate devastation. She opined that the HJR 15 reflects a degree of micromanagement and suggested broadening its scope. She expressed additional concern about the May 1, 2025, timeline and reiterated her support for the conversation.

CO-CHAIR MEARS asked about the risk maps and whether there are other high-risk areas to call attention to this year.

MR. MCDONALD answered black spruce is the highest risk fuel type especially when adjacent to residential areas. He commented on the history of fires in the Hillside neighborhood and identified certain high-risk conditions in Homer with its grassy pre-season, as well as black spruce areas in Fairbanks.

[9:54:49 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR MEARS asked how [the fire season] is shaping up for Alaska's out of state partners.

MR. MCDONALD indicated that horrific storms have hit the Southeast U.S. creating a huge fuel load and an early, higher activity fire season.

CO-CHAIR MEARS announced that HJR 15 was held over.

[9:58:15 AM](#)

ADJOURNMENT

There being no further business before the committee, the House Community and Regional Affairs Standing Committee meeting was adjourned at 9:58 a.m.