

Washington

Bills rise from ashes of wildfires

Fight fire with fire, some state lawmakers say

By **DON JENKINS**
Capital Press

OLYMPIA — Washington’s legislators are picking through scores of ideas for preventing and fighting wildfires, though many proposals face opposition and even modest policies are projected to cost hundreds of thousands of dollars.

The million-acre fire season in 2015 was Washington’s worst ever and cost the state \$164 million in unanticipated suppression costs. The fires also have inspired more than a dozen bills.

Proposals include more controlled burns, letting local fire agencies spend state money without prior approval, and raising taxes to train and equip more firefighters.



Courtesy of TVW

Washington state Sen. Linda Evans Parlette, R-Wenatchee, holds up a copy of the Wenatchee World newspaper while testifying Feb. 3 in front of the Senate Natural Resources and Parks Committee. Parlette and many other legislators have introduced bills responding to last summer’s wildfires.

“In the end, because there are so many bills, I bet there be will one giant bill,” said Sen. Linda Evans Parlette, R-Wenatchee.

The Department of Natural Resources, the state’s fire department for wildlands, has asked lawmakers for \$24 million for various programs, including training, equipment,

fire prevention and grants to fire districts.

Here are some legislative proposals:

- Send help or send money: If a local fire agency asks for state help to attack a new wildfire, DNR would be required to provide an answer within 30 minutes, according to one proposal.

If DNR couldn’t send firefighters, local fire officials could muster available resources at the state’s expense.

Proponents say the policy would give fire districts, especially small ones, the capabilities to douse small fires before they escape.

Skeptics question whether 30 minutes is long enough for DNR to have an answer and how much leeway local fire districts should have in spending state money without oversight.

DNR estimates that administering the program — responding to calls for help, reimbursing districts — would cost \$957,000 the first year. That would be in addition to whatever the state spends actually fighting fires.

- Controlled burns: Several bills are intended to encourage more controlled fires to thin blaze-fueling undergrowth.

This would require, in some cases, relaxing air-quality

and outdoor burning rules.

Supporters of the idea reason that a little more smoke from controlled burns is better than massive amounts of smoke from raging wildfires.

But to authorize more controlled burns, DNR says it will have to revise the state’s smoke management plan, which hasn’t been updated since 1998.

DNR warns reopening the plan could have unintended consequences. Federal air-quality rules are more strict than in 1998 and changing the plan will invite scrutiny from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.

Also, rewriting the plan will require a consultant and cost \$1.5 million, DNR estimates.

- Fire prevention: Legislation would encourage counties to adopt uniform building codes for rural structures. The codes require features such as in-home sprinklers and on-site water tanks.

Lawmaker: Let ranchers save animals from fires

Law association opposes bills

By **DON JENKINS**
Capital Press

OLYMPIA — A law enforcement association Wednesday said ranchers shouldn’t be allowed to risk their lives to rescue livestock from wildfires — to which a legislator responded, yes, they should.

“Many times the rancher knows the country — knows the draws, knows the ravines — better than anyone else there, including law enforcement,” said Rep. Tom Dent, R-Moses Lake. “We need to allow them some latitude.”

House Bill 2925, introduced by Dent, would free ranchers to venture onto burning public lands to retrieve or care for their animals without official interference.

Dent, whose occupations include crop duster and rancher, said he’s heard complaints over the years from ranchers who were blocked from reaching their livestock.

He told the House Agriculture Committee that the ranchers were trying to save a financial investment and fulfill a moral commitment.

“Good animal husbandry practices dictate that I care for my animals,” Dent said. “That’s a responsibility that we have.”

The state Department of Natural Resources, the state’s firefighting agency, was cool to the idea. The Washington Association of Sheriffs and Police Chiefs



Dan Wheat/Capital Press

A cow killed in the Carlton Complex fire in July 2014 lies dead near Twisp, Wash. A Washington legislator has proposed that ranchers be allowed onto public lands to rescue their animals from wildfires, even if officials think it’s too dangerous.



Don Jenkins/Capital Press

Rep. Tom Dent, R-Moses Lake, shown here during a House Agriculture and Natural Resources Committee meeting in 2015, has proposed that ranchers decide for themselves whether they will risk rescuing their animals from wildfires.

was outright opposed.

“When it’s not safe, we want to be able to prevent folks from going into the danger zone,” the association’s policy director, James McMahan, said.

“The challenge with this bill is it allows access, re-

gardless of the danger, and that not only puts the livestock owner in danger, but also the first-responders who will have to rescue them if something goes bad,” he said.

McMahan said he knows ranchers have a lot at stake

when fire threatens their livestock. But, he said, “none of that is worth a human life.”

Responded Dent: “I understand your position — it’s not worth a human life. My position is — it is, if (the animals) were mine. ... I’ve been charged with their care.”

Dent’s bill would hold authorities blameless if a rancher was hurt or killed while trying to save his livestock.

Washington Cattlemen’s Association Executive Vice President Jack Field said the bill is important to livestock producers.

“It makes legal the actions that every cattleman I’ve ever talked to who’s been involved in a fire takes, regardless of permission from the sheriff, the fire boss. They go in and try to get their livestock,” he said.

“I understand the need and absolute importance of protecting human health and safety, but if a livestock producer is aware of the risks associated with trying to gather his or her livestock, I certainly think we need to give them the ability to do that,” Field said.

Okanogan County Commissioner Ray Campbell, himself a rancher, also asked lawmakers to support the bill.

“It’s natural for us to want to protect our livestock and animals. If there’s a fire, we’re going to be out gathering (our animals), regardless,” he said. “We’d like to without breaking the law.”

The bill may have support from the House Agriculture Committee, but with sheriffs and police chiefs opposed, the legislation could have a hard time passing.

Low wheat prices to continue, economist predicts

\$5 a bushel seen as average price

By **MATTHEW WEAVER**
Capital Press

SPOKANE — Northwest wheat farmers will have to rethink the definition of a “good” price during the next few years, a Washington State University economics professor says.

Farmers were not happy with wheat priced at \$5.99 per bushel last year, said Randy Fortenbery, professor and small grains economist at WSU.

However, USDA forecasts average wheat prices at roughly \$5 per bushel this year.

“When you see prices much above that, even if they may not be the kind of price you would have taken two or three years ago, that might actually be a sales opportunity,” Fortenbery said. “When you see prices below that, you might want to be more patient, because if USDA is right, the price should average \$5. Something below that could be beaten sometime during the marketing year.”

The problem is a large global supply of wheat, plus a strong U.S. dollar in comparison to competing countries’ currencies, putting the U.S. at a disadvantage on the export market, Fortenbery said.

“In many cases, we are the most expensive person selling wheat in the world market,” he said.

Fortenbery expects prices to remain low for the next two years. If weather proves to be beneficial for national and global production, it will negatively affect prices, Fortenbery said, because it will add to the supply while demand is low.

Farmers are storing their wheat in hopes of seeing higher prices, Fortenbery said, but any increases aren’t likely to cover the cost of storage.

“This is the year where that’s probably not going to pay,” he said. “You’re not going to get rewarded for storage unless something really unexpected happens.”

A weather problem, animal health crisis or political issue would potentially create selling opportunities for U.S. producers, Fortenbery said.

Fortenbery recommends farmers consider selling wheat they store during brief price rallies.



Fortenbery

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7-4/15

Vegetable oil bill barely clears low hurdle

By **DON JENKINS**
Capital Press

OLYMPIA — A bill to exempt vegetable oil from new railroad safety rules narrowly slipped through a Senate committee last week, but the close vote indicated substantial support among Democrats and state agencies for regulating shipments of canola oil along with crude oil.

The Republican-led Energy, Environment and Telecommunications Committee passed Senate Bill 6576 on Feb. 4 along party lines.

The bill would stop the Department of Ecology from mandating railroads that haul vegetable oils to develop spill-response plans, which will be required from crude oil carriers.

If approved by the full Senate, the bill would still have to pass the Democratic-controlled House and be signed by Gov. Jay Inslee. The Senate energy committee’s hearing on the bill foreshadowed opposition from both Democrats and Inslee’s administration.

The committee’s Democrats agreed with DOE and the



Don Jenkins/Capital Press

A bill to exempt vegetable oil from new railroad safety rules stemming from the crude oil boom faces substantial opposition in the Washington Legislature.

Department of Fish and Wildlife that vegetable oil spills are a danger to fish and birds.

“This is a significant hazard and there should be contingency plans as this product moves through,” the committee’s top Democrat, John McCoy of Tulalip, said.

The Legislature in 2015 moved to regulate the movement of crude oil by trains,

vessels and pipelines.

The multi-part law responded to a study by DOE on the hazards of potentially explosive crude oil coming from North Dakota.

The law’s provisions regarding vessels and pipelines applied only to petroleum products. The rail portion, however, referred simply to “oils.”

The energy committee’s chairman, Doug Ericksen of Ferndale, said no one brought up vegetable oil last year.

“During the whole course of this ongoing debate on crude (oil) by rail, this never came up,” said Ericksen, who negotiated the bill with House Democrats.

“Nobody ever came up and testified saying, ‘Yeah, we have ... very volatile canola oil that we have to regulate more,’ he said. “I’m concerned it didn’t come up at all last year, and all of a sudden, people find themselves in the middle of it.”

A DOE official noted that vegetable oil released in a warehouse fire killed tens of thousands of fish last summer in southwest Washington.