

SENATE BILL REPORT

SB 5447

As Reported By Senate Committee On:
Natural Resources, Parks & Shorelines, February 21, 2001
Ways & Means, March 7, 2001

Title: An act relating to funding for forest fire protection.

Brief Description: Modifying the forest fire protection assessment.

Sponsors: Senators Jacobsen and Oke; by request of Department of Natural Resources.

Brief History:

Committee Activity: Natural Resources, Parks & Shorelines: 2/5/01, 2/21/01 [DPS-WM].
Ways & Means: 2/27/01, 3/7/01 [DP2S, DNP].

SENATE COMMITTEE ON NATURAL RESOURCES, PARKS & SHORELINES

Majority Report: That Substitute Senate Bill No. 5447 be substituted therefor, and the substitute bill do pass and be referred to Committee on Ways & Means.

Signed by Senators Jacobsen, Chair; Spanel, Vice Chair; Constantine, Hargrove, Morton, Oke, Snyder and Stevens.

Staff: Victor Moon (786-7469)

SENATE COMMITTEE ON WAYS & MEANS

Majority Report: That Second Substitute Senate Bill No. 5447 be substituted therefor, and the second substitute bill do pass.

Signed by Senators Brown, Chair; Constantine, Vice Chair; Fairley, Vice Chair; Fraser, Kline, Kohl-Welles, Parlette, Rasmussen, Regala, B. Sheldon, Snyder, Spanel and Winsley.

Minority Report: Do not pass.

Signed by Senator Honeyford.

Staff: Richard Ramsey (786-7412)

Background: The Department of Natural Resources protects more than 12 million acres of state and private forests in Washington. The department works closely with local fire districts and other state and federal agencies. In 1997, the Legislature asked for an independent review of the program. The review found that while the department's program was effective, the program lacks sufficient, qualified personnel and equipment to manage large fires in the state of Washington.

Fire fighting costs have increased in recent years. It is more costly to both fight fires and to prevent fires. Urban spread in forested and range areas has increased fire danger. In

addition, the forests which have not had fires have woody debris and leaf buildups which are a contributing factor to fires. Current state funding for the fire program is a shared responsibility between the state and large and small, private landowners. An assessment of \$14.50 is charged to property owners of parcels of less than 50 acres, and on parcels more than 50 acres \$.22 per acre is charged. This annual fee is collected by the county assessors and transferred to the Department of Natural Resources. Present law allows that owners of more than one parcel of less than 50 acres can ask for a refund of their assessment so that they pay only \$14.50, no matter how many parcels they own as long as they pay the assessment on two parcels.

Summary of Second Substitute Bill: The Legislature recognizes that there is a shared interest between forest landowners and the public in protecting the forest and forest resources. It is therefore the policy of the state that the cost of fire protection must be equitably shared between the forest fire protection assessment account and the state general fund, so that both forest landowners and the public contribute to the protection in an equitable manner. The assessment of \$.22 on each acre exceeding 50 acres is increased to \$.25. The refund for multiple parcel owners is phased out so that each property owner pays only one \$14.50 assessment.

Second Substitute Bill Compared to Substitute Bill: The provision that the bill is null and void unless the budget includes \$4.4 million from the general fund is removed.

Substitute Bill Compared to Original Bill: An appropriation of \$4.4 million from the general fund with a null and void clause is included. The refund program for the \$14.50 assessment per parcel is phased out so that only one assessment must be paid regardless of the number of parcels owned. The legislative intent and the over 50 acre assessment increase from \$.22 per acre to \$.25 per acre remains the same.

Appropriation: None.

Fiscal Note: Requested on February 22, 2001 on proposed substitute.

Effective Date: Ninety days after adjournment of session in which bill is passed.

Testimony For (Natural Resources, Parks & Recreation): The fire program for forest lands has not been funded adequately and greater private forest and state contributions to the prevention program are needed.

Testimony Against (Natural Resources, Parks & Recreation): The refund program does not work and is not fair.

Testified (Natural Resources, Parks & Recreation): Randy Acker, Dept. of Natural Resources (pro); Bill Garvin, Washington Forest Protection Assn. (pro); Nels Hanson, WFFA (pro); Rose Bowman, Lewis County Treasurer (con).

Testimony For (Ways & Means): Refunds are administratively complex and some taxpayers aren't aware of the refund option.

Testimony Against (Ways & Means): This bill does not promote equity between the landowners and the general public in funding the fire protection program.

Testified (Ways & Means): Randy Acker, Department of Natural Resources (pro w/concerns); Bill Garvin, Washington Forest Protection Assn (con); Rose Bowman, Lewis County Treasurer (pro).