

HOUSE BILL REPORT

SB 5179

As Reported by House Committee On:
Natural Resources, Ecology & Parks

Title: An act relating to forest health.

Brief Description: Studying forest health issues.

Sponsors: Senators Morton, Jacobsen, Sheldon and Stevens.

Brief History:

Committee Activity:

Natural Resources, Ecology & Parks: 3/17/05, 3/31/05 [DPA].

Brief Summary of Bill
(As Amended by House Committee)

- Directs the Forest Health Strategy Work Group to hold a minimum of five meetings at diverse locations throughout the state to gather public input regarding a legislative proposal developed by the work group.

HOUSE COMMITTEE ON NATURAL RESOURCES, ECOLOGY & PARKS

Majority Report: Do pass as amended. Signed by 6 members: Representatives B. Sullivan, Chair; Blake, Dickerson, Eickmeyer, Hunt and Williams.

Minority Report: Do not pass. Signed by 5 members: Representatives Upthegrove, Vice Chair; Buck, Ranking Minority Member; Kretz, Assistant Ranking Minority Member; DeBolt and Orcutt.

Staff: Jason Callahan (786-7117).

Background:

The Forest Health Strategy Work Group (work group) was created by the Legislature in 2004, and assigned the task of submitting their findings and recommendations to the Legislature by December 30, 2004.

The legislation that created the work group asked its members to study opportunities to improve various forest health issues facing the state. This charge included formulating recommendations for certain issues, such as the proper incentives for helping landowners maintain healthy forests, alternatives for funding, amendments to the current forest health laws, and reviewing the current legal structure for noxious weeds to decide if it is an

appropriate model to use in the forest environment. Finally, the work group was asked to recommend whether their existence should continue into the future.

The work group was comprised of 14 members of diverse backgrounds. Among others, the work group was served by representatives of the Department of Natural Resources, the United States Forest Service, academic experts, private foresters, tribal interests, and small forest landowners. Most of the members were appointed by the Commissioner of Public Lands, and the Department of Natural Resources provided staff support.

The work group completed its task on time and delivered the written report to the Legislature. Unless further legislative action is taken, the work group will cease to exist on June 30th of this year.

Summary of Amended Bill:

The expiration date for the work group is extended from June 30, 2005, until June 30, 2006, and the work group is directed to hold a minimum of five meetings at diverse locations throughout the state to gather public input regarding a legislative proposal developed by the work group. The findings and recommendations submitted to the Legislature in 2004 must be updated to reflect the outcome of the public meetings.

Amended Bill Compared to Original Bill:

Requires the Forest Health Work Group to amend their recommendations and findings to reflect the public process in the bill.

Appropriation: None.

Fiscal Note: Available.

Effective Date of Amended Bill: The bill takes effect 90 days after adjournment of session in which bill is passed.

Testimony For: There are serious forest health problems across the Western United States on state lands, federal lands, and private lands. This includes in Washington, where over two million of the state's 22 million forested acres are damaged each year. Problems occur in the form of fungus, insect infestations, and fire hazards. In some areas there are more trees than is sustainable. This loading is the legacy of past management, and can lead to localized drought conditions that make the stand vulnerable to infestations and catastrophic fires. Without action, Washington forests will be vulnerable to larger fires and greater resource losses.

The work group needs to continue its work, and involve the public, to find the right solutions. There is enough information to know that there is a problem, but not enough information to know what regulations should look like that will address the problem. The work group found that the timelines it had to work with did not accommodate moving forward with legislative

language this session. The work group felt it would be advisable to hold public meetings and get the input of all stakeholders before the members felt secure about their recommendations.

(With concerns) There is some concern about the motives of the work group's members. The work group did not take an integrated, holistic look at forest health issues, and changed or ignored some of the items that they were tasked with reviewing. There needs to be additional, independent analysis of the work group's recommendations that can focus on the actual work group itself. All issues that brought forth the 2004 legislation still exists, and the work group needs to address all of the issues. A holistic approach is needed, which must include economic and ecological analysis.

Testimony Against: None.

Persons Testifying: (In support) Senator Morton, prime sponsor; Pat McElroy, Department of Natural Resources; and Karen Ripley, Department of Natural Resources.

(With concerns) Heath Packard, Audubon Society; and Mike Ryhard, Northwest Eco System Alliance.

Persons Signed In To Testify But Not Testifying: None.