

SENATE BILL REPORT

SB 6195

As of February 7, 2020

Title: An act relating to funding forest health activities for the protection of people, homes, and the environment through issuance of state bonds.

Brief Description: Funding forest health activities for the protection of people, homes, and the environment through issuance of state bonds.

Sponsors: Senators Braun, Becker, Short, Wagoner, Warnick and Sheldon.

Brief History:

Committee Activity: Ways & Means: 2/06/20.

Brief Summary of Bill

- Establishes a priority for using bonding authority to fund forest health activities as part of the 20-year forest health plan developed by the Department of Natural Resources.
- Authorizes the State Finance Committee to issue bonds.
- Anticipates that approximately \$500 million in state bonds will be needed for eight consecutive biennia to achieve this goal.

SENATE COMMITTEE ON WAYS & MEANS

Staff: Jed Herman (786-7346)

Background: Department of Natural Resources' Fire and Forest Health Authority. The Department of Natural Resources (DNR) has direct charge of and supervision over all matters pertaining to the forest fire service of the state, specifically including the work of suppressing forest fires. In 2007, the Legislature designated DNR as the state lead in developing a comprehensive forest health program and created a tiered advisory and regulatory system to address forest health issues.

Fire and Forest Health in Washington. A 2014 report from DNR identified approximately 2.7 million acres of eastern Washington forestland in need of forest health treatment or

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disturbance, such as thinning or prescribed fire. Washington has experienced record-setting fire seasons in recent years.

Forest Health Assessment and Treatment Framework. Legislation in 2017 directed DNR to develop a forest health assessment and treatment framework designed to address the forest health issues facing the state. A specific goal of the framework is to assess and treat 1 million acres by 2033. For each biennium, the framework must include:

- a plan to identify and assess 200,000 acres of fire-prone lands and communities in need of treatment, such as through prescribed fire or mechanical treatment—the scope of the assessment includes state-protected lands as well as other lands that pose a high risk to lands protected by DNR;
- the prioritization of areas assessed in the previous biennium and treatment of as many of those acres as possible with the available funding; and
- a biennial progress review and reporting process that includes providing funding requests, planned treatments, and reporting completed treatments and barriers to framework implementation, to the Legislature and Office of Financial Management.

DNR completed the plan in December 2018.

Summary of Bill: The State Finance Committee is authorized to issue \$500 million in bonds to implement the 20-year forest health plan developed by DNR.

Forest health projects are funded over eight biennia beginning with the 2021-2023 biennium. The bonds are issued within the existing debt limit. Each budget cycle capital budget writers would approve projects based on biennial requests from the DNR as part of the 20-year forest health plan.

Proceeds from the bonds must be deposited in the newly created Washington Forest Health Bond Account.

Appropriation: None.

Fiscal Note: Available.

Creates Committee/Commission/Task Force that includes Legislative members: No.

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

Staff Summary of Public Testimony: PRO: I sponsored this bill because I believe we need to get serious about how we protect our forests and homeowners from the potential of wildfires, and funding the forest health program will go a long ways toward doing that. Our state forest lands are an important capital asset, we believe it is appropriate to use bonds to protect this asset. We support the premise of the bill, but are neutral on the funding mechanism. We have a wildfire crisis, and we have a forest health crisis. \$1 spent on forest health saves \$1.45 on fire suppression. There is no disagreement on the need, the public supports doing something. We have tried lots of different funding ideas, let's get moving on this one. This is an innovative approach, and we agree to this funding strategy. We support this bill. We need to get a hold of the forest fire issues of the state.

Persons Testifying: PRO: Senator John Braun, Prime Sponsor; Mark Doumit, Washington Forest Protection Association; Matthew Comisky, American Forest Resource Council; Jean Leonard, Washington Insurers; NAMIC; Kenton Brine, NW Insurance Council; Mo McBroom, The Nature Conservancy.

Persons Signed In To Testify But Not Testifying: No one.