



PO BOX 201706
Helena, MT 59620-1706
(406) 444-3064
FAX (406) 444-3036

Fire Suppression Interim Committee

60th Montana Legislature

SENATE MEMBERS

JOHN COBB
KEN HANSEN
RICK LAIBLE
DAVE LEWIS
GERALD PEASE
CAROL WILLIAMS

HOUSE MEMBERS

STEVE BOLSTAD
JIM KEANE
KRAYTON KERNS
RICK RIPLEY
CHAS VINCENT
BILL WILSON

COMMITTEE STAFF

LEANNE HEISEL, Lead Staff
TODD EVERTS, Staff Attorney
DAWN FIELD, Secretary
BARBARA SMITH, Fiscal Analyst

MINUTES

Seeley Lake Chamber of Commerce
June 19, 2008
8:30 a.m. to 1:00 p.m.

2920 Highway 83 North
Seeley Lake, Montana

Please note: These are summary minutes. Testimony and discussion are paraphrased and condensed. **Exhibits for this meeting are available upon request. Legislative Council policy requires a charge of 15 cents a page for copies of the document.**

Please note: These minutes provide abbreviated information about committee discussion, public testimony, action taken, and other activities. The minutes are accompanied by an audio recording. For each action listed, the minutes indicate the approximate amount of time in hours, minutes, and seconds that has elapsed since the start of the meeting. This time may be used to locate the activity on the audio recording.

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To view the minutes, locate the meeting date and click on minutes. To hear the audio recording, click on the Real Player icon. Note: You must have Real Player to listen to the audio recording.

COMMITTEE MEMBERS PRESENT

SEN. JOHN COBB
SEN. RICK LAIBLE
SEN. DAVE LEWIS
SEN. GERALD PEASE
SEN. CAROL WILLIAMS
REP. STEVE BOLSTAD
REP. JIM KEANE
REP. KRAYTON KERNS
REP. RICK RIPLEY
REP. CHAS VINCENT
REP. BILL WILSON

COMMITTEE MEMBERS ABSENT

SEN. KEN HANSEN

STAFF PRESENT

LEANNE HEISEL, Lead Staff
BARBARA SMITH, Fiscal Analyst
Cj JOHNSON, Secretary

AGENDA/VISITOR'S LIST

Agenda, Attachment #1
Visitors' list, Attachment #2.

COMMITTEE ACTION

Panel Discussion:

- **Rhonda Fitzgerald, MT Tourism Advisory Council**
- **Loren Rose, Pyramid Lumber**
- **Tom Ray, General Manager, Plum Creek Northwest Region**
- **Tim Love, District Ranger, Seeley Lake Ranger District, USFS**

CALL TO ORDER AND ROLL CALL

- 00:12:42 SEN. CAROL WILLIAMS opened the Committee meeting at 8:30 a.m. The secretary noted the roll. Attachment #3. SEN. HANSEN is absent.
- 00:13:55 SEN. WILLIAMS welcomed everyone to the meeting at the Seeley Lake Chamber of Commerce.
- 00:15:01 SEN. WILLIAMS introduced Bud Moore and provided background information about him. She said that Mr. Moore is retired from the Forest Service with distinction. She informed the committee members and the public that Mr. Moore was a contemporary with Norman Maclean, who wrote the book "A River Runs Through It". She stated that Mr. Moore was the first unofficial person to review Mr. Maclean's book.
- **Private forest management principles**
- 00:16:27 **Bud Moore, Seeley-Swan**, said he is retired from the Forestry. He talked about the Seeley-Swan having a lot of fire problems and how they are trying to return the fires and the forest back to the ecosystem. He said that fires are like wind and rain, they are here with all of us, and it is inevitable. He said we have to learn to work with it, and yet have respect for the power of things that destroy a lot of human habitation and the forest.
- Mr. Moore talked about growing up in the Bitterroot. When he was eight years old lightning struck a tree across the fence from his home which started a big fire. This was his first initial attack and he said that is when he became addicted to fighting fires. Mr. Moore also talked about when he was older and fighting fires and how they used mules to pack equipment into the back country to fight fires.
- 00:21:21 Mr. Moore presented information and graphs he had drawn on a chart that depicted the key milestones that have taken place since fires have become adversaries. **EXHIBIT 1** He talked about some of the big changes that have

taken place over time. He said the Forest Service needs help, such as a new model to fight fires. He used his chart to explain the principles of land management.

MILESTONES IN FIRE POLICY

Mr. Moore talked about:

- The Peshtigo fires in northern Minnesota and Wisconsin. These were logging fires that grew and formed one large fire from a cold front that was pushing through the area. This fire of October 8, 1871 in Peshtigo, Wisconsin didn't get much notice because it was the same night as the great fire in Chicago. Approximately 3,000 people perished in the Peshtigo fire compared to 300 in the Chicago fire.
- The fires of 1910. This fire burned a lot of Montana, Idaho, and other parts of the west. Mr. Moore said this fire was much like the Peshtigo fire, but in a different manner. He said that fires are part of the ecosystem. He showed the area on his chart where the fires of 1910 burned. See exhibit 1. He said this fire burned 3 million acres in 3 days through northern Idaho and the Bitterroots in western Montana.
- The fires in the 1930s. The fires of 1934 was located in the Lochsa-Selway and Clearwater country. It was at this time that the National Forest Service divided the Selway forest into three sections; Mr. Moore named four sections of the National Forest; the Clearwater, the Nez Perez, the Lolo, and the Selway (the Lolo later became the Bitterroot). A fire policy was developed that was called the 10:00 a.m. policy. Mr. Moore said this policy lasted for 40 years. He explained it was a military style policy, because someone was accountable no matter what, very stringent and strict.

Mr. Moore talked about how he and Bruce Kilgore started the support system on the management of land. He said when they tried to get this started they found that the National Forest Service had no management plans for the land. He said there was no timber plans, no wildlife plans, no burn plans, etc. Mr. Moore and Mr. Kilgore made land management plans. He said they weren't the best in the world, but they were adequate. He discussed:

- Fire control to fire management.
- Investment in wildlands, commercial land, such as Plum Creek land, and resettlement of the west.
- Migration routes for wild game.
- Habitat for grizzly bears and other endangered species.

00:38:07

Mr. Moore talked about Seeley-Swan being too small to fight the big fires that have taken place. He discussed the communities getting together to talk about conservation ownership. He said that Missoula County has been coming alive in their assistance to achieve conservation issues.

Questions from Committee Members:

- 00:40:15 SEN. LEWIS asked Mr. Moore about zoning, and if the state should be passing laws that a person cannot build a house in a forested area, and wanted Mr. Moore's thoughts from a state's perspective and what type of leadership should we be offering on how to deal with this conflict when people want to live in the woods, and how landowners need to realize the value of their land when the enemy (fire) is us. Mr. Moore responded that we have good leadership, and the local people of the Seeley-Swan area understand this, but everyone needs to be involved in the fire program. He said the problem is that the government has moved away from the people. The professionals have taken over the firefighting, and people have dropped out of the fire program except those that are in the profession. He stressed that the professionals such as Bob Harrington, who does allow the firefighters to go for the flames. He said that local people need to be grabbed up first to fight the fires especially on an initial attack, because that is the most important time. He said the time to fight fires is at night. He is hearing from ranchers, fire fighters and others that the state forestry attacks fires pretty aggressively, but the Forest Service isn't, he said it's like they are in it for money. He stated that everyone is disconnected. He talked about the people that come from all over to fight fires when we should use our local people first. Mr. Moore said the outsiders do not go for the flame, only the fires. He said there needs to be more involvement at the local level. The Seeley-Swan needs four fire crews which would consist of 25 people on each crew. Mr. Moore talked about a young man that had told him he has worked for the Forest Service for three years and said there was no action on the fires anymore. The young man said he is going to work for the state fire crews, because that is where the action is.
- 00:47:24 REP. KEANE asked Mr. Moore about a shift in changes regarding the use of equipment, for example; instead of letting the fires burn down the underbrush, to use the equipment and cut it down before it grows. Mr. Moore responded that the bottom-line then it becomes "when is it a natural forest?"
- 00:50:13 SEN. LAIBLE asked about the Lochsa fires of 1934, when the Chief of the Forest Service put the 10 a.m. policy in place, and he wanted to know what the policy did. SEN. LAIBLE also questioned that it looks like we keep creating more policies and wanted to know if that is the reason that the Forest Service is paralyzed. Mr. Moore responded by stating that a friend told him they need to dump all the policy stuff and give the firefighters a regular use book and let them fight fires from there. He explained the 10 a.m. fire policy that started way back in the 1930s until the mid-1950s when fire was considered to be detrimental to the health of the ecosystems. During the 1930s, the National Park Service and the U.S. Forest Service adopted identical fire policies. According to these policies any wildland fires would be extinguished by 10 a.m. the following day. This is commonly referred to as the 10 a.m. rule. During the 1930s though some researchers began to suggest that fire was a natural component of ecosystems. Finally, in the 1960s and 1970s, fire policy began to shift from suppressing all fires to allowing some fires to burn and even to igniting prescribed fires. Mr. Moore talked about mapping out the Wildland Urban Interface (WUI), and said we have the models, but we have geared away from them.

Panel:

- Tourism Industry

00:57:57

Rhonda Fitzgerald, Ecosystem Management Research Institute, Advisory Council, Whitefish, distributed a handout that gives background information on recent wildland fire policy and legislation promoting collaboration among agencies and communities for wildfire management and encourage preparedness through Community Wildfire Protection Plans (CWPP's). **Exhibit 2**

Ms. Fitzgerald talked about the Research Institute and how they are involved with damage control in the area of economic impact on the tourism industry in Montana. She explained tourism and the role it plays on the economy of Montana, and that the tourists do cancel their plans to Montana when there are fires. She said that Seeley Lake really saw the effect of that. It isn't the actual fire that destroys the economy, but the deception of what the media states that scares people off. She said when the Bitterroot burned, Glacier Park lost a lot of tourists. When Glacier burned she put together a package to create a message on what was actually happening on the ground so people could readjust their plans.

Ms. Fitzgerald talked about an on-line website to keep tourists updated when there are fires or a catastrophe here in Montana. She said that the media loves sensation and the people eat it up. She said that the legislature needs to change the 20-day disaster proclamation, because every time a disaster happens the media picks it up and the tourists stay away.

Questions from Committee Members:

01:04:23

SEN. COBB asked if a declaration can be proven that the media keeps tourists away when there are fires. Ms. Fitzgerald said there is an 800 call number that keeps track of tourists cancelling their reservations and the reasons why they cancelled. He asked Ms. Fitzgerald to get the data on the number of people that cancel reservations when there is a declaration. She replied that she would.

Panel:

01:06:49

Loren Rose, Controller at Pyramid Mountain Lumber Mill (Mill), said he has been at the Mill for 23 years, and raised his family here in the Seeley-Swan. He said SEN. WILLIAMS asked him to talk about what do fires mean to the Mill. He talked about last year's fire and how it affected him. When he showed up at the office about 8 p.m. on a Saturday night the county sheriff said his area is being evacuated and told him that they could not be there. He said it is alarming when the sheriff controls the public road, but they were able to go through the logger roadway so he could clean out their offices and everything they needed to make sure they had everything protected and secured for them to be able to continue to operate. He said that normally a fire means good news for the mill, because a fire means there is timber available for the short-term. He said that the state has done a great job on timber sales. The wood that he sold last December had held all its quality even though it was burned. He talked about another timber sale

that will take place next week. He said they have visited that site and the white woods are starting to check and blue, but he felt it won't affect the wood too much. He commented that his good friends from the Forest Service are in attendance, and told them not to take anything personal. He said fires are a good thing for his company, because the fire sales produce good lumber. He had several samples of boards, which he explained. The first board he showed had a knot in it, and said if this board had been cut timely it would have been worth \$1.73 on today's prices, but because it wasn't cut timely there is a little bit of blue stain that means it has been in a fire. He said according to Western Wood Products this board is a #3 grade, so the board is worth only 93 cents wholesale. He said when fires happen and there isn't a timely response the white wood loses its value. He showed another board that he called the forest service board, which is a #4 board and it has grub holes in it. He said the bugs have been in it long enough to make holes. He said this board hasn't even maintained its #3 characteristics, so it is now a #4, worth only 67 cents instead of 93 cents. While fires usually mean there is a product available for the sawmills it is very important that the availability comes quickly. He said by far the state does a great job, but the federal government by no fault of the individuals, do not do a good job. Fire sales mean that the tree harvest has to be done quickly after fires.

Mr. Rose talked about Colorado having legislation in place to get some help to the Forest Service through the Colorado State Department of Forestry. He said there has been some talk in Montana on how can we help the Forest Service here get out and do a more timely salvage of timber when it is available. But the bad side of a fire is they do kill a lot of trees that will never see a sawmill. The state cannot sell anything that burns, and neither can the Forest Service. Plum Creek lost a lot of ground last year, and even if they (Plum Creek) managed that land there isn't a lot of merchantable timber because there is a lot of regenerate burns that might have been growing for another 20 to 30 years, and now it is set back 20 to 30 years. He said when we have those large fire seasons like we had last year on state timbered lands, whether they are on agency or private lands they lose a lot of volume that would normally come in throughout the years. So effectively when losing a lot of the timber base as these catastrophic fire years come they get more and more severe as time goes on. He said the mills in this state are at a disadvantage, because the timber base is eroding very quickly when you have the size of fires that we had last year. He said that now compounding that problem is the fuel infestation which comes behind the fires when the trees are weakened. The surviving trees are hit by the bugs that come, and this is a bigger issue than fire, because those dead trees are going to burn at some point by providing fuels. So the good news is in the short-term years, surviving mills can operate long-term, but it takes a lot of the timber base away.

Mr. Rose said that people who work in the woods make a lot more money during the fire season than they do during the logging season. He said a lot of them live for the fire season. When the smoke starts the loggers take off with their equipment and they get the certification they need even though they may never