

Summary of work on HB70 (state fire suppression)

ENVIRONMENTAL QUALITY COUNCIL
JAN. 6, 2026

WHAT IS HB70?

House Bill 70 ([Study of state fire suppression](#)) requires the [Environmental Quality Council](#) to investigate:

- firefighting operations and management policies in Montana by the state and federal governments
- the efficient use of fire suppression resources
- the impact of operations on private land and use of private resources
- state and federal forest and grazing policies

WHAT'S IN THE EQC WORK PLAN FOR HB70?

- Review of relevant laws, policies, legal decisions, budget related to wildland firefighting
- Panel discussion(s) with relevant public officials (local, state, federal, tribal), landowners, contractors/industry
- Summary of other states' policies
- 1-2 add'l HB70-specific council meetings
- Creation, meeting of subcommittees
- Solicitation and consideration of public comments/input
- Analysis of relevant laws, actions, policies, data, legal decisions, budgets, other states policies
- Deliverables: report, legislation

WHAT HAS BEEN DONE?

<i>July 29, 2025 agenda items</i>	<i>Summary</i>
Introduction to topic	Review of 2009 Fire Suppression Interim Committee (Price of Flame); 11 of 38 proposed bills passed 2009 session
Legislative audit	Legislative Audit Division found the DNRC Fire Assessment Program could modernize to reflect current conditions, promote cost-reduction and improve fee administration.
Federal fire agencies	DNRC discussed presidential order , proposed closure of the Region 1 office in Missoula, and consolidation of Department of Interior firefighting (National Park Service, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Bureau of Indian Affairs, Bureau of Land Management) into a new U.S. Wildland Fire Service.
Wildfire data tool	Legislative Fiscal Division GIS-based data tool that maps historic fires with additional layers, such as land ownership, property values, fire perimeters.
Fire season update	DNRC reported roughly the same number of wildfires, but consuming less acres. Fire costs higher than recent years; Windy Rock fire near Drummond most costly.

Oct. 23, 2025 agenda items *Summary*Background on state wildfire policy

EQC staff highlighted relevant land and policies, including:
Key statutes:

- Protection of forest resources (sets state fire policy for “aggressive and rapid initial attack,” burn permits)
- Local gov’t fire protection (includes volunteers, fire districts)
- Liability for forest or range fires (legal standard for civil action)

Recent legislative studies (Price of Flame (2009); prescribed burning (2018); wildfire air quality (2022))

Recent legislation (HB84: Certified prescribed fire manager; HB490 PSC-approved “wildfire mitigation plan” for electric utilities)

Who pays for protection depends on jurisdiction, protection, cooperation agreements; DNRC and 5 federal agencies sign on to Master Cooperative Agreement; DNRC and 400 local FDs have county-level fire agreements

Wildfires data tool

LFD developing “consumer version” of tool in coming months

2025 wildfire season update

Final of costs of 2025 wildfire season between \$60-\$80 million (DNRC)

WHAT’S ON THE JAN. 14 AGENDA?

Council staff invited panelists based on the legislation, work plan, and input from the bill sponsor. Panelists were asked to be familiar with the 2009 Fire Suppression Interim Committee, specifically the observations, prediction, conclusions, and recommendations on pages 6-13. The panelists were asked to present their view on what has or has not changed since the 2009 study. In general, the 2009 study:

- Observed
 - escalating wildland firefighting costs
 - increased development in the wildland-urban interface
 - complex local/state/federal dynamics
 - longer and hotter fire seasons
 - unpredictable fire costs
- Predicted
 - an increase in suppression costs
 - unsustainable financial obligations for taxpayers
- Concluded
 - the current approach to wildland firefighting was unsustainable;
 - landowners in the WUI must assume increased responsibility for mitigation
 - prevention, fuels reduction, and community preparedness are cheaper than fire suppression
 - landowner responsibility is incentivized over regulations to manage risk in fire-prone areas
- Recommended
 - a more predictable state funding mechanism
 - consideration of wildfire risk in land use planning
 - cost-sharing with landowners in high-risk areas for suppression and mitigation projects
 - strengthened coordination between firefighting agencies
 - more public education about defensible space, building materials, and personal responsibility

WHAT COMES NEXT?

The council and its work plan will direct the next step of the HB70 study, which may include follow-up on panel discussion, creation of subcommittees, other states’ wildfire policies, further legal or budget analysis.