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Pro Senate Bill 5996 | Proactive plan needed to reduce wildfires, support firefighters



By Hillary Franz Guest column Apr 25, 2019

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Are big wildfire seasons and the acrid smoke that chokes communities across Washington the new normal?

It's a question I heard last summer, when smoke blanketed our communities, Washington's air quality was the worst in the world and our firefighters responded to a record high 1,850 wildfires — 40 percent of which were west of the Cascades.

The question has already been raised this year, as we experienced 54 unseasonal wildfires in March.

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In Washington, some 2.2 million homes are exposed to

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wildfire risk. Never before have we faced a wildfire crisis of this magnitude.

If we don't change course, smoke and flames will continue to jeopardize our rural and urban communities. Severe wildfires seasons will be the new normal.

The good news is, it doesn't have to be this way. Not if we take action.

That's why I strongly support Senate Bill 5996, which is being considered by the state Legislature. This innovative approach creates the Wildfire Prevention and Suppression Account, which will dedicate \$62.5 million a year to tackle our wildfire crisis.

Those dollars will fund immediate wildfire suppression needs, allowing the Department of Natural Resources (DNR), our state's wildfire fighting agency, to build a 21st century wildfire fighting force.

That means new helicopters, more firefighters and improved training to ensure our wildland firefighters have the tools they need to respond quickly and effectively during challenging fire seasons. This investment will, quite literally, save lives and protect communities.

The account will also fund DNR's 20-Year Forest Health Strategic Plan, which will restore the health of 1.25 million acres of diseased and dying forests across Central and Eastern Washington.

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Officers helped Boodry Street residents evacuate floodwaters

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Unhealthy forests lose their natural wildfire resistance and make easy kindling for wildfires. They are also more vulnerable to disease and insect infestation, which weakens them further. The result is a tinderbox, just waiting for a spark to ignite huge wildfires that spread rapidly.

Fortunately, we have the blueprint to restore these forests to health and reduce wildfires. By "treating" unhealthy forests — i.e., removing dead and dying trees and underbrush — we allow strong, healthy trees to thrive. Healthy forests are less likely to catch fire and less susceptible to wildfire.

Forest health work also offers benefits beyond reducing wildfire. Forests clean our air and water, they pull carbon pollution out of our atmosphere, support local economies, and provide vital salmon habitat, the primary food source for our struggling orca whales.

We will pay for these critical investments through a small increase in the tax on premiums for property and casualty insurance — from 2 percent to 2.52 percent. The 0.52 percent increase would be less than \$2 per month for the average household.

This funding source has a clear nexus to the harm wildfires cause. When wildfires hit, people lose their homes and vehicles — necessities for living their lives — and there is a big impact on our communities and economies when smoke forces us indoors or neighborhoods are evacuated.

Asking families for more is not a request we make lightly. But we are already paying, and paying more than we need to.

Wildfire suppression costs in Washington averaged \$153 million per year over the past five years. And suppression costs are only a portion of the total cost of wildfires once lost business, infrastructure, disaster recovery, and health impacts are considered. When wildfires become catastrophic, our city and county firefighters are also called into duty — stressing budgets and safe staffing levels.



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By making strategic investments upfront, we will end up saving money. That's because the money we spend to make forests healthier and more fire-resistant is far less than the cost of fighting megafires that feed on unhealthy forestland.

Senate Bill 5996 sends a clear message that it's time to rethink how we address the wildfire crisis and that it's time for a forward-thinking, proactive strategy to reduce and head-off devastating fires.

Wildfire is not an "us" or "them" issue; it's not an eastside or westside issue; it's a Washington state issue that will take all of us working together to solve.

Commissioner of Public Lands Hilary Franz leads the Department of Natural Resources, Washington state's wildfire fighting force.



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