

February 25, 2026

Good morning, Mr. Chair.

My name is Aaron Collette, and I serve as Fire Chief for the Williston Fire Department. I have thirty-seven years of service in the Vermont fire service and also serve as the Rescue Team Manager for Vermont Urban Search and Rescue Task Force One.

I appreciate the opportunity to speak with you today regarding the proposal to merge Town Forest Fire Warden responsibilities into the role of the local fire chief. I am fully in support of this proposal.

The role of a fire chief today is far more complex than simply dispatching crews to extinguish fires. Our responsibility is to anticipate risk, prepare our personnel, and manage a wide range of emergencies that are limited only by the circumstances of the 9-1-1 caller. My job—and the job of our firefighters—is to ensure that our team is prepared to respond at any hour, on any day, to any type of emergency.

Wildland and vegetation fires are among those emergencies. These incidents range from small outside fires caused by improper disposal of smoking materials to large woodland fires capable of consuming acres of remote forest.

In Williston, our minimum staffing is five firefighters per shift, providing coverage 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. In 2025, we responded to 2,681 emergency calls. Of those, 1,802 were emergency medical calls requiring our ambulance crew. When the ambulance is committed to a call, our available staffing is reduced to three firefighters. There are very few fireground tasks that can be performed safely and effectively with only three personnel. A wildland fire is certainly not one of them.

To mitigate wildland fire risk in Williston, we operate an online burn permit system. Residents wishing to burn brush must first review and acknowledge our rules, including what materials may be burned and under what conditions. For example, wind speeds must be less than four miles per hour, a pressurized water source must be available, the fire must be attended at all times, and it must be extinguished by dusk. Applicants submit a digital photo of the materials they intend to burn, and our officers can approve or deny permits remotely from the station.

The system provides a real-time display of active permits on a large monitor in the on-duty officer's workspace, including both a list and a map. If we receive a report of "smoke in the area" or a "large column of smoke," we can immediately reference that display to determine whether a permitted burn is underway nearby.

During fire season, we receive a daily Vermont Fire Danger Forecast from our partners at the Department of Forests, Parks, and Recreation. Fire danger levels range from Low to Extreme. When the forecast is High or greater, we suspend burn permits for the day. This is a deliberate

risk-management decision. We recognize our staffing limitations and understand that we may not have the capacity to manage a complex wildfire without outside assistance.

On October 4, 2025, when we received a 9-1-1 call from air traffic control at Burlington International Airport reporting a fire atop Brownell Mountain, I immediately requested assistance from the state's Wildland Fire Control resources. I did so before arriving on scene because I understood our staffing levels, the potential fire behavior, and the critical infrastructure located on that mountain. That early recognition and coordinated response allowed us to successfully control the unpermitted fire.

Staffing availability also influences our burn permit decisions. During the summer of 2025, nearly an entire shift of firefighters was out sick due to a virus. With limited personnel available and no operational depth to manage a complex wildland fire, we temporarily suspended burn permits until our staffing stabilized. That decision was based on operational reality and risk management.

These examples illustrate why the local fire chief should serve as the Town Forest Fire Warden. The fire chief has the requisite knowledge of fire behavior, fuel conditions, staffing levels, and operational capability. A warden who is not integrated into the fire department may lack awareness of real-time staffing or the department's response capacity. It is both logical and prudent that the individual responsible for mitigating fire emergencies also has the authority to manage the risk factors that can prevent those emergencies from occurring.

For these reasons, I strongly support the proposed change requiring the local fire chief to serve as the Town Forest Fire Warden.

I would also like to briefly address the proposed Technical Rescue Microgrant Program.

While I support the concept of the microgrant program, I have concerns regarding the composition of its working group. A Special Operations Working Group already exists under the Vermont Homeland Security Grant Program. I have served on that group for more than a decade. There is an opportunity for the Program Manager of Vermont Urban Search and Rescue Task Force One to serve as chair of this effort. However, I do not support the inclusion of Senate and House Government Operations Committee members on the board.

Decisions about specialized rescue equipment and resource deployment should be guided by those who manage and deploy these resources during large-scale disasters. My concern is that, without coordination, we risk creating siloed capabilities and duplicating equipment in neighboring communities.

We experienced this after September 11, 2001, when homeland security funding flowed into communities with limited statewide coordination. Neighboring departments purchased identical specialized equipment. In the end, we accumulated an overabundance of certain tools

yet made limited progress in strengthening our true operational capacity to manage complex technical rescue incidents.

Another significant concern is long-term sustainability. Specialized equipment requires ongoing maintenance, repair, and eventual replacement. In prior grant cycles, we observed agencies receive highly specialized equipment only to find, five years later, that they lacked the funding or capital replacement plans to maintain or upgrade it.

I support the microgrant program. I simply urge that it be developed in consultation with experienced fire service and special operations leaders to ensure we are building coordinated, sustainable operational capacity across the state—not simply stockpiling equipment.

Thank you for your time, your consideration, and your continued commitment to the safety of Vermonters.

Respectfully submitted,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "A. J. Collette". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial "A" and "C".

Aaron J. Collette

Chief of Department, Williston Fire Department

Rescue Team Manager, Vermont Urban Search and Rescue Task Force One