

Testimony by Bradley Reed – Fire Warden for Town of St. Johnsbury on Emergency Management and Disaster Response Omnibus Bill

For the record my name is Bradley Reed. I am the appointed fire warden for the town of St. Johnsbury where I also serve as the fire chief. My testimony today is in support of the proposed changes to the current forest fire and fire prevention statute. This modernization effort comes at a critical time as the fire service seems to be responding to an increase in natural disasters, incidents related to weather patterns that appear to reach greater extremes, and the impact these conditions have on the wildland firefighting environment. In St. Johnsbury, we experienced two severe flooding events in 2024 with a 100-year areal flood occurring on July 10 followed 20 days later by what has been referred to as a 1,000-year flash flooding event that cause horrific devastation to our community.

What we realized after those floods is that there was an enormous impact on the wooded areas where streams became raging rivers cutting new paths through the hillsides, causing numerous landslides and changing the landscape forever. What we have yet to visualize are the impacts deep in the woods, which certainly endured similar consequences from the destructive force of these floods. From a wildland firefighting perspective, the result from these events is an increased fuel package. The additional fuel load laying on the forest floor makes it more likely that a fire could grow to a larger size which many Vermont communities are not prepared to handle.

As with any emergency, coordination with partner agencies is important, especially for complicated larger scale incidents. The current language in the statute sets up a situation where the fire warden and the fire chief may be two different people. There may be somewhat parallel authorities for directing fire operations, except that the fire chief has legal authority over the apparatus and personnel while the fire warden would ultimately have legal authority for the forest fire. One proposed change to the statute would identify the fire chief as the fire warden alleviating any confusion or conflict that may arise during a

wildland fire operation. Further, the fire chief/fire warden would have the ability to name deputy fire wardens who could assist with issuing burn permits to spread out any additional workload.

Next, the proposed categorization of open burning and who issues those permits provides greater clarity. For people who are seeking burn permits, this will provide them with understandable clear guidance for what is and what is not allowed. When weather conditions present elevated fire danger, this will give the State a scalable approach to restricting categories which allows the fire wardens to have a more uniform burning ban across the fire danger rating area.

The proposal to repeal the statute on uniform fire prevention tickets is welcome news. We are not law enforcement officers and should not be issuing tickets. While our municipality enjoys the services of a local police department, not all towns have the same resources.

In summary, the proposal outlined in this bill is a step forward toward improving wildland fire safety in Vermont. Ensuring the proper authority having jurisdiction has the legal responsibility and capability to command wildland fires will enable adequate response of resources to incidents of all sizes. It will encourage coordination between multiple agencies for forest fires that exceed the capability of the local community. Clear guidelines for open burning will encourage compliance and it allows flexibility when conditions dictate a prohibition on certain levels of open burning.

Thank you for giving me the opportunity to provide you with these brief comments. I am happy to answer any questions you may have.