

Testimony by Bradley Reed – Fire Warden for Town of St. Johnsbury on H.935

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 subchapter as outlined in H.935. This modernization effort comes at a critical time as natural disasters appear to have become more frequent in our state. Whether flooding, heat, drought, or wildfires, our firefighters and EMT's are on the front line of these events.

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 causing horrific devastation to our community. One may wonder how this is related to wildland fires, so I will connect the dots. Fuel, weather, and topography are the three factors that most significantly impact fire spread and intensity. When a catastrophic flash flooding event impacts an area, it wipes out sections of land taking down trees which lay on the forest floor creating additional dead fuels. Hotter summers and severe droughts like the one we experienced in the Northeast Kingdom last year quickly dry highly combustible material. This creates very dangerous conditions leading to elevated fire danger, and the likelihood fires will burn more intensely, spread more quickly, and consume more acreage.

For several years, we have been concerned about the increased chances of more complex forest fires, and how communities will manage these events. Coordination with partner agencies is vitally important, especially for complicated larger scale incidents such as out of control, large scale wildfires. One proposed change to § 2641 requires the chief of the fire department to be the designated fire warden. This is a positive change from the current practice where anyone can be designated the fire warden regardless of whether or not they have any municipal fire service authority. This will ensure the fire warden will also have the ability to direct the use of

resources at a wildland fire which is something that may not be true now. Further, it allows the fire warden to name deputy fire wardens who could assist with issuing permits and spread out any additional workload.

Next, the proposed change to § 2645 creates categories of permitted fires clarifying what is expected for people who are seeking burn permits. This process will provide them with understandable clear guidance for what is and what is not allowed. When weather conditions present elevated fire danger, the State will be able to use a scalable approach by restricting categories based on current and predicted fire weather conditions. This will allow fire wardens to have more uniform local burn bans 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 proposals before you are a step forward and will improve wildland fire safety in Vermont. Ensuring the fire chief is the fire warden means the incident commander will have the legal authority and responsibility to command wildland fires. This will and enable an adequate response of resources to incidents of all sizes. The proposed changes will encourage coordination between multiple agencies during forest fires when they exceed the capacity of the local community. Clear guidelines for open burning will encourage compliance and allow flexibility when conditions require 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.