



City of Vergennes Fire Department

50 Green Street, Vergennes, Vermont, 05491

Testimony on H.935 David DiBiase, Chief, City of Vergennes Fire Department Vice President, Vermont State Fire Fighters Association 4/14/2026

Thank you for allowing me a few minutes today. My name is David DiBiase, Chief of the City of Vergennes Fire Department and Vice President of the Vermont State Fire Fighters Association, representing the volunteer fire service in Vermont. I have been in the fire service for 24 years.

I am here to testify on H.935. Although there are many important elements of this bill that concern public safety, my testimony today will focus on the proposed changes to the Fire Warden program and wildfire response in general.

Although Vergennes is a city and not typically thought of as an area prone to wildland fires, we also protect the towns of Panton, Waltham, and approximately 50% of the town of Ferrisburgh areas that do present ample opportunity for wildland fire. Wildland fires are not new to Vermont, but their increasing frequency has many fire chiefs concerned for the safety of those we are tasked to protect. The fire service has become remarkably dynamic in terms of the range of services the public expects us to provide. This is not the fire service of yesteryear people call, and they expect us to show up, even when an issue does not fall firmly within our traditional scope.

H.935 presents an opportunity for the fire service to get things right. It would align departmental responsibilities for protection with the authority over controlled burning authority that currently rests solely with a Fire Warden. Although this system has been in place for many years, it is time to align risk with responsibility by giving fire chiefs the authority to make tactical decisions consistent with their staffing, capabilities, training, and equipment.

Importantly, this reform is not just about response it is about Community Risk Reduction. The fire service increasingly relies on a data-driven, proactive approach to identifying and prioritizing local risks before emergencies occur. This framework, built around Education, Engineering, Enforcement, Economic incentives, and Emergency response, recognizes that the best outcome is one where the incident is prevented or mitigated before it becomes a crisis. Burn permits are not simply administrative paperwork, they are a risk reduction tool. When a fire chief has visibility into and authority over the permitting process, it creates an opportunity to apply all five of those elements locally: educating residents about conditions, enforcing standards appropriate to the environment, and ensuring emergency resources are staged and ready when the risk is elevated. The current Fire Warden system bypasses the

fire chief entirely, removing the one person most accountable for community safety from the risk reduction equation.

The current system provides very little input for the Fire Chief or Fire Department in the permitting process. In many cases, fire wardens have no current affiliation with local fire departments. In some cases, they are former members who left their department under poor circumstances and yet they retain control over decisions that create risk for the department that will ultimately have to manage the consequences.

On March 30th of this year, we were dispatched to our Ferrisburgh response zone for an out-of-control wildland fire approximately one acre in size. By the conclusion of that event, 110 personnel, numerous UTVs, fire trucks, and other equipment had been deployed and the fire had grown to 110 acres, making it the largest wildfire in Vermont in ten years. This fire did not occur in what we would consider a high-risk area; it burned through swamp, farmland, and forest. Responders spent six hours on scene working to stop further spread and prevent loss of structures.

The individual responsible did not have a burn permit, but he had been in contact with the fire warden shortly before and during the time the fire ignited. That information was not shared with us until after the incident. This is precisely the gap that Community Risk Reduction is designed to close. Even early conversations with residents if communicated to the fire department would allow us to take proactive measures: adjusting staffing, pre-positioning equipment, or advising against burning given current conditions. Instead, we were left to manage the consequences of a decision made without us.

H.935 offers Vermont the chance to move the fire service from a purely reactive posture to a proactive one. Giving fire chiefs authority over the burn permit process is not about turf it is about ensuring that the people most responsible for community safety have the tools, information, and authority to reduce risk before it becomes tragedy.

Respectfully,

David DiBiase

City of Vergennes Fire Chief

Vice-President Vermont State Firefighters Association