

RCW 76.04.521 Forest sector workforce development. (1) The legislature finds that satisfying the goals identified in RCW 76.04.505 to increase the pace and scale of forest health treatments and improve wildfire prevention and response requires increasing the workforce that is needed to perform this critical work. This need creates an opportunity to develop employment and career pathways across the state, including in rural communities throughout Washington. Investments to support and further develop the forest sector workforce are recommended in both the department's 2019 "plan for climate resilience" and the department of commerce's 2020 report "Washington's green economy."

(2) The department and the department of commerce shall jointly develop and implement, as appropriate and in consultation with centers of excellence, higher education, secondary education, and workforce development centers, initiatives to develop a forest health workforce necessary to implement the goals of this section. Initiatives may include, but are not limited to:

(a) Creating a new or making an existing grant program available to nonprofits, labor organizations, state agencies, community and technical colleges, institutions of higher education, private sector employers, skills [skill] centers, or other training and education institutions that have qualifications and experience in the development of training programs, such as secondary and postsecondary courses, relevant to the workforce needs of the forest sector. Grants must be awarded on a competitive basis with priority funding for programs that meet urgent forest health and wildfire suppression skills gaps and demonstrate a lack of available workforce in underserved communities. Grants awarded may be used for activities such as internships, Washington state registered apprenticeship programs, recognized preapprenticeships, career launch, and other relevant career connect Washington activities, and postsecondary bridge programs for forest sector or skill relevant trades that provide:

(i) On the job training;
(ii) Hard and soft skills development;
(iii) Test preparation for trade apprenticeship;
(iv) Advanced training in the forest sector relating to jobs such as: Hand crews; wildland firefighters; fire safety; equipment operators; timber operators; mill workers; mill or forestry technicians; mechanics; loggers; timber fallers; commercial truck drivers; foresters; ecologists; biologists; or other workforce needs in support of forest restoration and wildfire response;

(b) Developing education programs for elementary, secondary, and higher education students that: (i) Inform people about the role of forestry, fire, vegetation management, and ecological restoration; (ii) increase the awareness of opportunities for careers in the forest sector and exposure of students to those careers through various work-based learning opportunities inside and outside the classroom; (iii) connect students in pathways to careers in the forest sector; and (iv) incorporate opportunities for secondary students to earn industry recognized credentials and dual credit in career and technical education courses;

(c) Developing regional education, industry, and workforce development collaborations, including recruiting and building industry awareness and coordinating candidate development particularly in areas that are traditionally underrepresented in natural resource industries and specifically in forestry;

(d) Building additional statewide response. The department shall develop a recruiting and outreach program across the state to encourage people to volunteer with their local fire departments. The department shall expand existing training programs to meet increased interest and need in wildfire response and forest health work; and

(e) Developing a program to train local building and construction trade members and contractors to be deployed during periods requiring surge capacity for wildland fire suppression including:

(i) As wildland firefighters who meet the requirements of being utilized by the department; and

(ii) As heavy equipment operators who meet the requirements to be utilized by the department as required by RCW 76.04.181.

(3) The commissioner and the director of the department of commerce must direct their staff to develop a plan for tracking, maintaining, and publicly reporting on the following:

(a) A working definition of the forest sector workforce, including the job skills, certifications, and experience required;

(b) Recommendations for the training, recruitment, and retention of the current and anticipated forest sector workforce necessary to implement the goals of chapter 298, Laws of 2021;

(c) The identification of gaps and barriers to a full forest sector workforce pool, including:

(i) Estimates of forest sector workforce jobs created and retained as well as any reductions in the forest sector workforce;

(ii) An estimate of the number of needed private contractors to implement the goals of chapter 298, Laws of 2021, an inventory of local and regional private contractors trained to carry out wildfire response and forest health work, and a list of local private contractors utilized annually for wildfire response and forest health work; and

(iii) An inventory of existing training facilities and programs that support ongoing and anticipated forest sector, or related sectors, as identified in subsection (2)(a)(iv) of this section;

(d) Recommendations for addressing identified barriers or other needs to otherwise continue the development of a forest workforce necessary to implement the goals of chapter 298, Laws of 2021.

(4) The department and the department of corrections shall jointly develop opportunities to expand existing programs to provide the additional wildfire, forest health, and silvicultural capacity necessary to implement the goals of chapter 298, Laws of 2021, including a postrelease program that helps formerly incarcerated individuals who served on state fire response crews obtain employment in wildfire suppression and forest management.

(5) The department shall utilize existing programs such as the Washington conservation corps, Washington veterans corps, Washington service corps, customized and on-the-job training, or similar programs to expand opportunities and promote family wage careers in the forest sector workforce.

(6) To the maximum extent possible, workforce development programs and policies should prioritize historically marginalized, underrepresented, rural, and low-income communities.

(7) The department and the department of commerce, working with the forest health advisory committee, must assist forestland owners and forest products companies grow existing and develop new market opportunities for the utilization of material produced as a result of forest health treatments funded through the wildfire response, forest restoration, and community resilience account to improve the economic

benefit of the treatments while increasing the speed, efficiency, and impact of forest restoration on the landscape. [2021 c 298 s 5.]

Short title—2021 c 298: See note following RCW 76.04.505.