



UTILITY WILDLAND FIRE PREVENTION ADVISORY COMMITTEE

Biannual Report – July 1, 2022

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Background

In 2019, the Washington State Legislature (legislature) created the Utility Wildland Fire Prevention Task Force (task force) with the passage of Substitute Senate Bill 5305 (Chapter 77, Laws of 2019) to advise the Department of Natural Resources (department) on issues related to preventing wildland fires caused by utilities such as model agreements, protocols, thresholds, and identifying third parties that can assistance when needed. The task force met quarterly from July 2019 through December 2020 and DNR submitted a [final report](#) to the legislature from results and recommendations.

In 2021, the legislature established a permanent Utility Wildland Fire Prevention Advisory Committee (advisory committee) in Engrossed Senate Bill 5158 (Chapter 183, Laws of 2021). The bill was codified in RCW [76.04.780](#) and became effective July 25, 2021. It implemented several of the task force recommendations and directed the Commissioner Public Lands (Commissioner) to convene the committee by August 1, 2021.

In permanently establishing the advisory committee, the legislature created a forum for electric utilities, the department, forestland owners, historically marginalized communities, and fire suppression organizations to meet, identify, and develop solutions for utility wildland fire prevention and risk mitigation. The advisory committee addresses matters related to utility transmission and distribution networks, identification of best management practices, electric utility infrastructure protection, and wildland fire suppression and response.

The Commissioner (or designee) chairs the committee and appoints members that include:

- One person representing each investor-owned utility;
- Two persons representing municipal utilities;
- Two persons representing public utility districts;
- Two persons representing rural electric cooperatives;
- One person representing small forestland owners;
- One person representing industrial forestland owners;
- Other persons with expertise in wildland fire risk reduction and prevention;
- Two persons representing historically marginalized or under represented communities;

and,

- No more than two additional members designated by the Commissioner

The legislature intended that the advisory committee specifically address issues related to the ongoing implementation of the relevant recommendations of the electric utility wildland fire prevention task force established in 2019. This included:

1. Finalizing a model agreement for managing danger trees and other vegetation adjacent to utility rights-of-way on state uplands managed by the department;
2. Implementing recommendations of the task force related to communications and information exchanges between the department and utilities;
3. Implementing recommendations of the task force related to protocols and thresholds when implementing provisions of RCW 276.04.015; and
4. Implementing recommendations of the task force related to creating rosters of certified wildland fire investigator firms or persons and qualified utility operations personnel who may be called upon as appropriate;
5. Establishing joint public communications protocols among members of the advisory committee, and other entities, to inform residents of the state of potential critical fire weather events and the potential for power outages or disruptions;
6. Providing comment to the wildland fire advisory committee established in RCW 76.04.179 through an annual presentation addressing policies and priorities of the utility wildland fire prevention advisory committee; and
7. Addressing other related issues deemed necessary by the commissioner.

The legislature also established reporting requirements for the department to submit a biennial report to the legislature beginning July 1, 2022 that:

1. Describes the prior biennium's proceedings of the advisory committee, and;
2. Identifies recommended legislation from the advisory committee, if any, necessary to prevent wildfires related to electric utilities.

Proceedings of the Advisory Committee

There are no proceedings to report. Despite efforts to recruit representatives from the identified entities to join the committee, the department was unable to fill several positions. Over several months in the fall of 2021, the department reached out to several organizations that represent small forest landowners and historically marginalized or under-represented communities. Many cited the stress of the pandemic, committee participation burnout and non-compensated travel as reasons for declining to participate on the committee. As a result, the advisory committee was unable to convene in the 2022 fiscal year. The department continues to actively recruit for membership.

Recommendations

The advisory committee was unable to meet in fiscal year 2022, and as a result the advisory committee makes no recommendations for legislation. If the advisory committee develops recommendations the department will include those in the next legislative report due July 1, 2024.

