



Legislative Fiscal Bureau

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Joint Committee on Finance

Paper #577

Forest Fire Emergency Response (DNR -- Forestry and Parks)

Bill Agency

[LFB 2007-09 Budget Summary: Page 417, #2]

CURRENT LAW

The Department of Natural Resources has broad authority in the prevention, detection, and suppression of forest fires. DNR utilizes funding from the forestry account of the conservation fund to establish and maintain lookout towers, ranger stations, and fire suppression and communications equipment and for fire law education and enforcement activities. The Department's forest fire control program takes primary responsibility for forest fires on public and private lands in most northern and many southern counties. The program also provides cooperative services to towns in those southern counties where wooded lands are more scattered.

GOVERNOR

Provide \$736,200 in 2007-08 and \$982,300 in 2008-09 (including \$246,100 in one-time funding) from the forestry account of the conservation fund for efforts relating to the detection and suppression of wildfires.

DISCUSSION POINTS

1. The large forest fire in Adams County in the spring of 2005 demonstrated some shortcomings in equipment staffing within the Division of Forestry. The basic firefighting unit used by the Division of Forestry is a John Deere tractor plow which is transported to the fire by a Type 4 engine (a fire truck) with water-carrying and pumping capability. This unit is staffed by one permanent firefighter, who drives the engine to the fire, and unloads and operates the tractor plow.

When fire dangers become severe, an attempt is made to hire a second person (an LTE) who is qualified to operate the engine. This person is then able to drive the engine to other fire-fighting units to provide water and structural protection. In the past, the backup positions have been filled by emergency fire wardens, students, volunteer fire department members, or other local community members. However, the emergency fire wardens have begun to retire, and DNR forestry officials indicate that there is difficulty finding persons with an interest in providing this sort of weather dependent, inconsistent service. Local fire departments offer one avenue of reliable candidates, but often these candidates are needed within their local departments, especially in cases of high levels of fire danger in the area. As a result, the Division of Forestry has had a difficult time identifying and training personnel to staff these units on an as-needed basis. Although the Forestry Division has 84 Type 4 engines in service, the Department indicates they had only resources to hire 18 LTE's qualified to drive these engines on an as-needed basis in 2006 (\$45,600 for salary and fringe benefits). The Department argues that allocating additional resources toward recruiting qualified candidates, and providing appropriate training and equipment as well as a more consistent work schedule, would aid in recruitment and retention of emergency fire season staff.

2. Additionally, heavy dozers are used to plow fire break lines so that the engines can navigate the line and assure that the fire does not cross the line. Often, these dozers are privately owned with the Department contracting for their use. Forestry officials indicate that the personnel using these dozers lack sufficient safety equipment (fire resistant Nomex clothing, fire rated hard hat, gloves, goggles, fire shelter, and a portable radio). Further, emergency firefighters hired for the spring fire season (who are not qualified to run heavy equipment) who do hand work with light tools such as shovels, also lack the appropriate personal protective equipment or radio. A hand crew typically consists of approximately 10 people. Annually, the Forestry Division has approximately 50 crews (500 people) distributed across the state, available to respond to a fire emergency.

3. The bill would provide for the following assistance during the spring fire season.

	<u>2007-08</u>	<u>2008-09</u>
LTE Firefighters	\$355,900	\$355,900
Daily Expenses	10,800	10,800
Training	54,500	54,500
Personal Protection Equipment	<u>0</u>	<u>246,100</u>
	\$421,200	\$667,300

The bill would provide \$355,900 annually to support 54 LTE emergency firefighters for 10 weeks in the spring. The forestry division has 54 ranger stations with at least one heavy firefighting unit (Type 4 engine, tractor plow, and trailers). These LTEs would work full-time for a 10-week period during the spring fire season (end of March to end of May) and support the permanent firefighters, providing an additional person qualified to operate the Type 4 fire engine per ranger station. However, the recommended amount could be reduced by the \$45,600 DNR is currently allocating for this purpose.

4. Of the total, \$10,800 would support daily expenses (\$4 a day for meal

reimbursement) for the 54 LTE firefighters. Funding of \$54,500 annually would be provided for training for the LTE emergency firefighters in fire suppression and engine operation, and \$246,100 in one-time funding in 2008-09 would be provided for personal protection equipment (Nomex clothing, fire rated hard hat, gloves, and goggles), fire shelters for 230 firefighters, and radios. The 2005-07 budget provided funding of \$384,000 in 2005-06 for the purchase of 1,500 standard fire shelters. However, the Forestry Division purchased 1,250 fire shelters (780 standard shelters and 470 large shelters) for a total cost of \$377,700. Fire shelters are light weight, reflective bags, similar to a sleeping bag, which each fire fighter carries. The shelter is deployed if the wildfire overruns the fire fighter. The additional 230 shelters would supplement those provided through the 2005-07 budget and replace shelters damaged during a fire event. The Division would also purchase an adequate supply of personal protective equipment and radios for 16 dozer operators. The Department argues that a more consistent work schedule, appropriate training and available personal protective equipment would provide the necessary incentives to recruit and hire qualified candidates to fill these positions. The anticipated candidate pool would primarily consist of self-employed or semi-retired individuals.

5. Further, the bill would provide \$300,000 annually on an ongoing basis for master lease payments supporting the purchase of base station radio tower repeaters. A repeater consists of a radio receiver, an amplifier, a transmitter, an isolator (a one-way device which reduces interference from nearby transmitters), and two antennas. When strategically located on top of a tower or high building, a repeater can greatly enhance the performance of a wireless radio network by allowing communications over distances much greater than would be possible without it. The base stations are part of the Department's public safety communications network and are used primarily for forest fire detection and control. The 2005-07 biennial budget authorized \$155,900 in 2005-06 and \$337,900 in 2006-07 for the first two years of an expected four-year master lease. Funding was provided on a one-time basis. The Department estimates that the master lease will cost approximately \$1.3 million over five years. It may be argued that, as funding for the first two years of the master lease payments was provided on a one-time basis in the 2005-07 budget, funding for the next two years of the master lease could again be provided on a one-time basis. Under this alternative, costs of approximately \$206,200 in 2009-10 to complete the master lease would need to either come from agency base resources or through a 2009-11 biennial budget request.

6. Additionally, the bill would provide \$15,000 annually for the periodic inspection and repair of 93 fire towers located throughout the intensive fire protection areas of the state. Department personnel provide wildfire surveillance from these towers. The fire towers were built between 1945 and 1956 and are located in the following 31 counties: Adams, Ashland, Barron, Bayfield, Burnett, Chippewa, Clark, Douglas, Eau Claire, Florence, Forest, Iron, Jackson, Juneau, Langlade, Lincoln, Marathon, Marinette, Menominee, Monroe, Oconto, Oneida, Polk, Price, Rusk, Sawyer, Shawano, Taylor, Vilas, Washburn, and Wood.

7. If no additional funding is provided, the Department indicates that it would continue to attempt to recruit a limited number of emergency LTE firefighters on an as needed basis using available resources.

ALTERNATIVES TO BILL

1. Adopt the Governor's recommendation to provide \$421,200 in 2007-08 and \$667,300 in 2008-09 from the forestry account of the conservation fund for emergency LTE firefighters, support, training, and equipment for assistance during the spring fire season. Further provide \$300,000 annually, on an ongoing basis, for master lease payments supporting the purchase of base station radio tower repeaters. In addition, provide \$15,000 annually for the periodic inspection and repair of 93 fire towers throughout the state.

ALT 1	Change to Bill Funding	Change to Base Funding
SEG	\$0	\$1,718,500

2. Adopt the Governor's recommendation with the following modifications.

a. Designate \$300,000 in each year for master lease payments for radio tower repeaters be on a one-time basis.

b. Reduce the amount provided by \$45,600 annually to reflect resources currently allocated for emergency firefighters backup.

ALT 2b	Change to Bill Funding	Change to Base Funding
SEG	-\$91,200	\$1,627,300

3. Delete provision.

ALT 3	Change to Bill Funding	Change to Base Funding
SEG	-\$1,718,500	\$0

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