

HB70 draft findings/summary

ENVIRONMENTAL QUALITY COUNCIL
J. MOHR – APRIL 20, 2026

Oxford Languages dictionary: “Finding: A conclusion reached as a result of an inquiry, investigation, or trial.

HB70: STUDY OF STATE FIRE SUPPRESSION

House Bill 70 asks the Environmental Quality Council to investigate:

- firefighting operations and management policies in Montana by state and federal agencies
- the efficient use of fire suppression resources
- the impact of operations on private land and use of private resources
- state and federal forest and grazing policies

STUDY PROGRESS

The council has:

- Reviewed past legislative reports and audits on prescribed burning, wildfire air quality, and fire assessments, and the 2009 Fire Suppression Interim Committee report, Price of Flame
- Reviewed a GIS-based data tool of the Modernization and Risk Analysis Committee that maps historical wildfires with information such as ownership, property values, and fire costs.
- Received a 2025 fire season summary and updates on 2026 season
- Received state wildfire policies, including “aggressive and rapid initial attack,” burn permits, and local fire protection.
- Reviewed recent legislation, such as certified prescribed fire manager and electric utility wildfire mitigation plans.
- Reviewed jurisdiction, protection, and cooperative agreements between the state, federal agencies, and local fire departments.
- Convened a 12-person panel discussion of “what has changed since the 2009 report,” which included members of state and local fire agencies, law enforcement, and private wildfire contractors
- Created EQC-member working groups to further study and make recommendations related to wildfire suppression funding, wildland urban interface (WUI), wood products infrastructure and fuels treatment, and contracting of resources
- Heard testimony from federal firefighting officials on announced reorganization plans and the upcoming fire season
- Considered findings and recommendations from all panelists and public commentors

DRAFT FINDINGS

1. Forest and timber conditions continue to deteriorate due to epidemics and other environmental factors. Timber mortality exceeds harvest rate, even as additional mitigation work is needed to improve forest health.
2. The timber industry continues a long-term decline, as the state has lost 36 timber mills in the past 36 years. Five mills remain, including only one that processes ponderosa pine, a prevalent species around many at-risk towns and homes.
3. Aggressive initial attack continues to be identified as the most cost-effect wildfire suppression method.
4. The state wildland firefighting budget has stabilized since 2009, especially after the passage of HB883 (2023). State resource-sharing with local fire units is also positive.
5. Increasing numbers of people inhabit the wildland-urban interface.
6. Beyond immediate damage to the trees, land, and wildlife, wildfires may tax law enforcement and emergency services, destroy transportation and agricultural infrastructure, and create public health issues through poor air quality.
7. Private timber treatment projects may have slowed or halted recent wildfires.
8. Consolidated federal wildland firefighting agencies may improve contracting, administration, decision-making, and response related to wildfires.

HB70 PANEL* FINDINGS (OF JAN. 14)

Deteriorating forest and timber conditions. Pine beetle epidemics have increased tree mortality, resulting in poor forest conditions. Timber mortality exceeds the harvest rate, even as additional mitigation work is necessary for improved forest health.

Timber industry decline. Montana has lost 36 timber mills in 36 years, with 5 remaining. Only one processes ponderosa pine, which stands around many towns and homes and is particularly dry and flammable.

Firefighter response. Aggressive initial attack is identified as the most cost-effective wildfire suppression method.

Funding for wildland firefighting. The state firefighting budget has stabilized since 2009, especially with the passage of HB883. State sharing of firefighting resources with local fire units is also positive.

Contractor issues. Private wildland firefighting contractors continue to be overlooked by the federal procurement process.

Policy stagnation. Multiple stakeholders said the state has not made significant progress in wildfire prevention or forest management since the 2009 legislative report, although increased Good Neighbor Authority agreements and the federal Fix Our Forests Act are expected to have a positive impact.

Societal changes. More people are moving into the wildland urban interface, but are often less self-reliant and may have higher expectations of public services during fire events.

Secondary impacts. Beyond immediate fire damage, wildfires drain law enforcement, destroy roads and agricultural infrastructure, and create public health issues through hazardous air quality.

Private landowner mitigation. Private timber treatment project may have slowed or halted recent major fires.

HB70 PANEL RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Pre-position firefighting resources to enhance the state's aggressive initial attack policy.
2. Create a unified workforce that fights fires during the season and performs recovery or mitigation work in the off-season.
3. Increase the involvement of local governments in incident management teams (IMTs) for large, complex wildfires.
4. Increase timber removal to benefit forests and the timber industry.

* Panelists: Commissioner Jeff Burrows (Ravalli Co.); Rich Cowger, Columbus Rural Fire District chief; Wyatt Frampton, deputy forest administrator (DNRC); Sheriff Steve Holton (Ravalli Co.); Jason Jarrett, mutual aid coordinator (Gallatin Co. Sheriff's Office); Peter Kolb, MSU Extension forestry specialist; Patrick Lonergan, chief of emergency management and fire (Gallatin Co.); Ray Ragsdale, Broadus Volunteer Fire Dept. and Power River Co. fire warden; Julia Altemus, Montana Wood Products Association executive director; Kevin Erickson, Call When Needed Resources LLC; Jason Todhunter, Montana Logging Association regional representative; Meranda Warren, private wildland firefighting contractor

Findings from federal wildfire agencies (March 25, 2026)

State and local officials should expect mostly typical federal response and support, including aggressive initial attack

USFS is studying idea of consolidating with US Wildland Fire Services' (USWFS) agencies

USWFS individual agencies will continue to make own land management decisions

USWFS efficiencies may be gained in contracting, administration, payments

USWFS seeking better data to better measure efforts, such as fire response times and treatment project risk reduction (instead of just acres treated)

Other USWFS consolidation benefits include strengthened decision-making, speed up response, reduce overlap, better recruitment, improved firefighter safety and career paths

*Panelists were Troy Heithecker, regional forester, Rocky Mountain Region (USFS); Aaron Thompson, fire chief, N. Rockies Geographic Area (USWFS); Bradley Shoemaker, fuels and post-fire specialist (USFWS)