

OPED: We can combat wildfires better, but it takes new ideas in Helena to get the job done

By Llew Jones, Montana State Representative, R-Conrad

Living in Montana we know wildfires come with the territory of living in our beautiful state. But what we don't address with enough frequency is that there are modern-day solutions to decreasing the negative impacts of wildfires, not only here but throughout the country.

According to the National Interagency Fire Center, there were a total of 1,372 fires in Montana that burned over 409,000 acres of land in 2021. Taxpayers spent \$70 million of their hard-earned money fighting fires, combined with an estimated \$140 million from the Federal Government. The cost of fighting fires is only one aspect of the damage wildfires cause to our state. Extensive property damage and loss of business revenue happen statewide every time there is a fire. Not only has the physical damage become an increasingly worrisome problem, but our lungs burn and our eyes water every time a wildfire spreads. It is time Montana got more aggressive in reducing wildfires by investing in new technology and techniques.

The best long-term solution for combating wildfires is to convert excess timber fuel load to useful lumber. On that front, the Republican legislature is working with the Gianforte administration to bring back the logging industry devastated by extreme environmentalist lawsuits. But this action will take time.

My fire bill, HB 883, proposes we invest \$186 million to reduce wildfires over the next biennium. Over the years, I have worked with those in the firefighting space and business community to discuss how we address this serious problem facing our state. Together, we made sure this bill was not just about waiting to pay for fighting large out of control wildfires. Instead, this bill targets the root causes of extended wildfires: Unhealthy forests with excessive fuel load and slow initial firefighting response.

HB 883 tasks the DNRC with investing up to \$30 million in preventing fires by converting excess fuel load to useful products in high-risk areas. While this is a great first step, this is still not enough. HB 883 also tasks the DNRC with establishing rapid suppression activities, a concept that includes an aggressive Montana Rapid Initial Attack - Aerial Response task force. The feds' "let it burn" approach can be practiced elsewhere. We must establish a state-centered large aerial fire attack task force now.

The Federal Government used to maintain 50 large air tankers for use by states.

The federal fleet is now 18. Let that sink in.

These 18 planes cover so much territory that they often do not arrive on a wildfire for several days; we all know wildfire response time is critical. In 2020, George Mason University completed a fire response time study on the effectiveness of large aerial

tankers and quick responses using data from over 5,000 wildfires. The findings clearly determined that getting large aerial resources on a wildfire early correlated to shorter fires. When large aerial assets get on a fire in less than an hour, the fire will likely be out in less than three hours. If a large air tanker can get on a fire within 12 hours, the fire duration is just over one and a half days. If it takes three days for large air tankers to arrive, the fire burn duration is extended up to 47 days. The destruction caused by long wait times for some communities is unrepairable.

Knowing time and speed are imperative, HB 883 supports a rapid initial attack model. Montana would lease and keep at least two large rapid initial attack planes strategically staged. As soon as smoke is spotted, an aircraft would be dispatched within 30 minutes to pummel fire quickly and assess the situation. If Montana can get this rapid initial attack model well-tuned, most fires will last less than two days. If Montana has a wet summer, we will lease these aircraft out to surrounding states on a daily basis to defray costs. When on duty to tackle a federal fire in Montana, the Federal Government will reimburse Montana.

Thank you for allowing me to be your legislator. HB 883 invests in the Big Sky Country by having more days where blue skies stretch as far as the eye can see. Let's encourage the legislature to pass this smart bill into law for the betterment of all of Montana.