

Written Testimony on Raised Senate Bill No. 102, AN ACT CONCERNING MINOR REVISIONS TO ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION AND AGRICULTURE RELATED STATUTES. Specifically my testimony relates to liability language as it relates to inter Compact exchange of wildland fire resources.

My name is Ralph Scarpino. I reside in Barkhamsted. I retired from the DEEP, Division of Forestry, after 39 years of service in 2013 and held the position of Program Supervisor of Forest Health for 23 years. My primary job was managing the wildland fire program. Last August I was appointed as a Commissioner to the Northeast Forest Fire Protection Compact (NFFPC) by the Governor.

The needed minor revisions to the legislation as outlined in Bill No. 102 are vital to the DEEP in managing wildfire and protecting life and property in CT. Without these changes DEEP will not be able to assist local fire departments as defined by statute in situations when there are multiple fires within the state and local resources are being stretched. Resources will not be available.

Connecticut has been lucky as long term drought has not plagued our region. The 2016 drought coupled with gypsy moth defoliation demonstrated what severe problems can occur (646 fires, 919 acres). These factors which are beyond our control caused a significant upswing in fire starts and acreage burned. Forecasts of weather extremes are expected with global climate change.

Connecticut is almost 60% forested and is in the top 5 states of population density. Practically the whole state is considered within the Wildland Urban Interface (WUI). The WUI is defined as where the forest and people encroach upon each other. These WUI areas are exceptionally vulnerable to wildfire starts and the related structure losses when fires occur. The horrible fires in Tennessee in 2016 demonstrate what can happen when fire weather, topography and dry fuels combine. Tennessee fire conditions are not much different than Connecticut.

When a wildfire is reported the local fire department is the first response. They will call the DEEP if assistance is needed which is often the case when fires get large, are in remote areas, continue past 1 operational period or structures are threatened. DEEP responds with available resources. The next line of defense is the NFFPC. After that requests go nationally. When help is requested from the NFFPC neighboring agencies will send help if available however it should be realized that the Northeastern states often share the same weather patterns and if CT is having fires so are our neighbors. There is a national system of response but may not be timely or exactly what is needed. Specifically:

1. DEEP has suffered from significant reductions in personnel available to respond to wildfires. The trained Parks staff have been reduced from over 300 forty years ago to about 60. The Forestry staff have been reduced from 30 to 14. The Wildland Fire staff has gone from 5 to 2. Staff shortages will require outside help in difficult wildfire situations. It is not a question of if but when. DEEP can't help the way they used to. They will need outside help.
2. Nine of the twelve NFFPC agencies have already adopted these changes.
3. These changes will allow the exchange of resources from Compact to Compact which is often the most efficient and cheaper way to receive the needed personnel and equipment.
4. These revisions are minor, cost nothing and are bring wording up to par with other Emergency Management language.
5. Wildfire potential in the WUI is real and outside assistance will be needed.

6. When the NFFPC was formed in 1949 it was the first wildland fire Compact in the nation. The exchange of resources between Compacts was not an issue as there weren't other Compacts. Today 43 states are in 1 of 8 Compacts. Four of these Compacts have the necessary resource exchange language. The remainder are all working to make these revisions.

I strongly encourage members of the Environment Committee to adopt the language proposed by the DEEP as it relates to revisions to Article IX of Section 23-53. This language is needed to protect Connecticut's resources and citizens.

Thanks you.

Ralph Scarpino

Barkhamsted