

# DNR presses for fire funding

## Commissioner stops in Ellensburg to make case

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Dec 18, 2015



Commissioner of Public Lands Peter Goldmark stopped in Ellensburg on Thursday to make the case for funding for next year's fire season. (Brian Myrick / Daily Record)

During the 2015 fire season, wildfire burned over 1 million acres in Washington, and destroyed 499 structures including 307 primary homes, 21 commercial structures and 171 outbuildings.

There were 1,541 fires reported, and the total cost of firefighting in the state was estimated at about \$320 million, according to the state Department of Natural Resources.

Strengthening Washington's wildfire fighting force is a priority in 2016, said Commissioner of Public Lands Peter Goldmark on Thursday.

Goldmark stopped in Ellensburg Thursday to discuss the 2016 budget request he'll be taking to the state Legislature in January.

Goldmark is making an urgent funding request to the Legislature for \$24 million for preventative measures and training for next year's wildfire season.

"A little investment up front can save a lot of money on the back end," he said.

## **Volunteers**

Last summer the state opened fire areas in Omak and Colville to volunteers in a first-ever effort. The state processed thousands of people for the program, including a number of volunteers who were trained and experienced.

Goldmark said it's his goal to enhance the number of volunteers before fire season next year.

"We'll train them ahead of the season so they can be integrated into the command structure that already exists," he said. "You can't have people float in and out."

The state funding request includes nearly \$7 million for joint training resources that would train DNR, fire district volunteers, tribes, the Washington National Guard and private contractors. Training them together will allow them to more effectively fight fire together.

Another \$6.1 million in the request would provide local fire district assistance grants. Goldmark said the grants would target the most fire-prone areas, and provide local fire districts with equipment, safety, tools and training.

"I want in-state on-call resources so we can put the fires out when they're small," Goldmark said. "I don't want to have to reach out to Canada. I don't want to have to reach out to Oregon. I don't want to have to reach out to California or Alaska, or for that matter New Zealand or Australia, as we did this past season."

## **Other funding**

Goldmark said past fire budgets have not taken care of current and future needs.

"We have to make those additional investments to protect people, property and the state treasury all at the same time," he said.

His funding package also includes about \$3.2 million for coordinated command, \$1.2 million for fire communications efforts including well-maintained radios, \$443,000 for aerial attack like helicopters and airplanes and around \$6.3 million for wildfire prevention and fuels reduction.

While the \$6.3 million won't be enough to completely tackle forest overgrowth, it will be a start, Goldmark said.

"We know that doing thinning and fuel reduction in forests can help make fires more suppressible and controllable," he said. "We need to increase the amount of Firewise done across the landscape."

The Firewise program works with landowners to protect property.

## **Predicting fires**

Predicting where fires will happen is a huge challenge. About two-thirds are human caused, Goldmark said.

Of the 1,541 wildland fires reported in 2015, 1,084 were caused by humans, according to DNR statistics.

Another 457 were caused by lightning.

The way to do it is to spread resources out all over the state to combat the large number of erratic origin and timing of the fires.

Resources can be concentrated for something that's predictable like a lightning storm.

Goldmark said this summer's drought, 100-plus degree temperatures and high winds didn't help.

“All of those components together make the challenge of keeping a fire small really important because once they get out of control, once they get to any size, they explode,” he said. “We saw that at Sleepy Hollow. We saw that at Chelan.”

### **Fire liaison**

In November Goldmark appointed Kittitas County Commissioner Gary Berndt to the newly created position of Wildland Fire Liaison.

“I’m very appreciative of Gary taking this position because it’s a huge challenge,” Goldmark said. “He’s going to chair the Wildland Fire Advisory Committee.”

The committee is going to be assembled from many jurisdictions. There will be a tribal, an eastern county, a western county, the U.S. Forest Service, a grazing representative and others.

“Having them connected to render advice pre-fire in terms of what the appropriate level of communication is and how we can enhance the cooperation and communication between all the entities represented around the table,” Goldmark said about the committee’s goal.

The committee has not yet met, but likely will meet several times before the 2016 wildfire season.