

House Government and Veterans Affairs Committee

January 9, 2025

Testimony on House Bill 1112

Submitted by: Robert Knuth, Training Director, North Dakota Firefighter's Association

Chairman Schauer and Members of the House Government and Veterans Affairs Committee:

I appreciate the opportunity to submit testimony in support of the proposed legislation to include state firefighters under subsection 8 of section 54-52-01, section 54-52-06.4, subsection 3 of section 54-52-17, and subsection 4 of section 54-52-17 of the North Dakota Century Code. This legislation is critical as it removes barriers preventing state firefighters, including those with the North Dakota Forest Service (NDFS), from participating in the NDPERS Public Safety Defined Benefit Retirement Plan.

Currently, state firefighters are excluded from this plan, creating inequity in recognizing their vital contributions to public safety. This legislation seeks to correct that oversight and ensure that state-employed firefighters receive the same retirement benefits as other public safety professionals.

The NDFS wildland firefighters are not only front-line responders but also serve as instructors and subject matter experts for the North Dakota Firefighter's Association (NDFA). Their expertise is critical in training rural firefighters, developing certification programs, and preparing local departments to handle the increasing challenges of wildland fires. Their technical knowledge and real-world experience are essential to fulfilling NDFA's mission of equipping North Dakota's fire service for emergencies.

As the Assistant Chief of the Minot Rural Fire Department, I've witnessed the invaluable support provided by NDFS firefighters. In 2008, during a wildland fire sparked by power lines in East Side Estates, extreme drought conditions caused the fire to spread rapidly. Despite mutual aid from over six departments, our resources were overwhelmed. A secondary fire, ignited by a train in Trestle Valley, compounded the crisis. At this critical juncture, we called on the NDFS for assistance. Their response, including equipment and manpower, was pivotal in managing these fires when local capabilities were exceeded.

The October 2024 wildfires underscored the importance of preparedness across the state. Once again, NDFS firefighters demonstrated their readiness and ability to deploy where needed, supporting overburdened local departments.

The North Dakota Firefighter's Association fully supports this legislation. Allowing state-employed firefighters, including those with NDFS, to join the NDPERS Public Safety Defined Benefit Retirement Plan is a step toward recognizing their indispensable role in protecting lives and property across North Dakota.

Thank you for considering this important issue, and I urge the committee to advance this legislation.

Sincerely,



Robert Knuth

Training Director, North Dakota Firefighters Association; and
Assistant Chief, Minot Rural Fire Department