

TESTIMONY

Douglas Nelson, State Fire Marshal

House Energy and Natural Resources Committee

March 20th, 2025

Representative Porter, Chairman of the House Energy and Natural Resources Committee, and Committee members,

My involvement in the October fires started on the Monday following the large weekend fires. Our office was requested to investigate two of the fires. As I surveyed the area what I noticed beyond the damage, losses, and charred remains, was that fire departments were still running emergent to contain and control hot spot fires over 48 hours after the fires had started. Many of the same people that started working these fires on Saturday morning, were still working these fires on Monday afternoon. This was not only true in Williams County, but I have spoken with responders from the other fires as well and know that they too were working tirelessly day in and day out to control the fires.

This is evidence of the strength of our communities, volunteers, and all responders that helped to control and recover from these fires. However, this is the second time within three years that our state has run into these types of conditions and experienced whole towns threatened by the speed and intensity of fires. We need to ensure that we are supporting and preparing local front-line firefighters to the fullest through studying fire service responsibilities, coordination and response to emergencies.

As I drove back to Bismarck from Williams County, the question that arose in my mind after noting this is, “am I doing enough?”. Is there more that my office can do to help the State during large scale or state fire emergencies. If the answer is yes, then we should be doing that. In North Dakota, we take pride with being as efficient and effective as we can with what we have. If there is a way that we can further support local jurisdictions and state agency partners, we should have the authority, training and organization to jump in and help.

The State Fire Marshals Office is comprised of 10 dedicated staff to our specialty of fire prevention through fire investigation, plan review, fire inspections, and community risk reduction. Part of our training is to train in firefighter certifications, and most of our staff are current or have been firefighters in their careers. Our office has this training and experience, yet we lack any authority to assist or help during these statewide or large-scale emergencies. Now, I am not stating that our small staff can make a significant impact just by activating us, but what I suggest that we study is how all of our resources at the state

and local level can be involved in an organized framework for response to support one-another. By evaluating what is possible in coordination with the Department of Forestry, North Dakota Firefighters Association, the Department of Emergency Services, the North Dakota National Guard, and other state agency partners, we may be capable of much more together with an organized plan.

We also could benefit from studying how our local jurisdictions are part of our state-wide response. Identifying training levels, mobilization plans, coordination of resources, will help ensure we are prepared for the next long-term or large-scale fire service emergency. This study is needed not only to prepare for sporadic large responses, but to determine and implement a continual situation of preparedness across the state.

Not only wildfires, but large-scale structure fires, floods, tornados, structural collapse, or other emergencies, we can prepare this framework together. It is well known that the volunteer fire service is challenged with recruitment and retention issues. With no quick solution foreseeable to this, identifying how we mobilize and support each other at the local and state level is more important now than ever. We have an opportunity to identify the most efficient and more importantly effective ways for our fire service to prepare itself and to support ourselves within the state for any fire emergency.

I have spoken to many fire chiefs on the heels of this fire. What I have learned is that we don't have the answer right now, but need time and funding to study what is the best operational coordination for our state fire service to work with and support each other. This study will give us the opportunity to get stakeholders to the table, have the discussions, ideas and agreements in place to move forward with a prepared fire service in North Dakota. The State Fire Marshal's Office supports Senate Bill 2340, and we ask for your support to better prepare our fire service.