

TESTIMONY

Karolin Jappe, McKenzie County
Emergency Management
Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee

January 31, 2025

Honorable Senator Patten, Chairman of the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee, and Committee members

As the Emergency Manager of McKenzie County I want you to know that I am here in support of SB 2340. In McKenzie County we have 11 volunteer fire departments that protect our County. Two of those fire departments are Montana departments who have always showed up in time of need. We also have a department from Williams County that protects a corner of our County. I share this with you as when we have a strong fire going out of control we have all 11 departments showing up.

This past October was a true test of all our capabilities. These departments as well as other county fire departments that I've not mentioned, worked tirelessly sometimes going from one fire to another. Splitting our resources to try and get ahead of the fires was a challenge to say the least. The winds were unlike any I've seen and I could tell our firefighters were tired, but I knew they were not about to stop.

On Saturday, October 6th after another couple of fires had just started, one of my fire chiefs asked me to call out the National Guard. It was getting more that we could handle. I had sent out 4 emergency alerts in twelve hours, two of them were to evacuate people from their homes in two different areas in McKenzie County. I could continue, but what I would really like to do is say that we need to rethink the way these large fires are being fought and to find a win win solution. It something that doesn't happen every day or every year, but when it does, what we really need is to get a more coordinated and prepared response to large-scale fires. The strain on resources, particularly with so many departments stretched thin, speaks to the importance of having a plan in place for such high-intensity situations.

Having a plan that anticipates the scale of these events, and a system in place that allows for quick mobilization of the right resources, could make a world of difference in maintaining safety and ensuring that firefighters aren't put in positions where they're overwhelmed. It's vital that the state and local leaders are thinking ahead to address these types of challenges before they become full-blown emergencies. I ask for your support of this bill not only for our firefighters, but for the citizens we all serve.