



Chairman Patten, Members of the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee, for the record my name is Greg Kessel, State Senator from District 39. I appear before you today in support of SB 2340.

The devastating October wildfires highlighted critical shortcomings in our state's emergency response capabilities. While our brave firefighters, assisted by civilians and industry, valiantly battled the flames, the loss of life, homes, livelihoods, and critical infrastructure underscored the urgent need for significant improvement.

The October fires were not an isolated incident. Our state faces recurrent challenges from wildfires due to our dry climate, strong winds, and increasingly frequent extreme weather events. The 2021 Medora fire and the 2017 fire season serve as stark reminders of this recurring threat.

The recent wildfires exposed critical deficiencies in our current system:

- \* **Inadequate Coordination:** Challenges arose with communication, organization, and coordination between local, state, and federal agencies.
- \* **Resource Limitations:** Replenishment of depleted firefighting resources proved challenging, hindering effective response efforts.
- \* **Over-reliance on Federal Assistance:** Differing command structures, firefighting strategies, and equipment, along with unforeseen costs imposed by federal agencies, created significant obstacles.

This presents an opportunity to proactively enhance our state's emergency response capabilities. We must:

- \* **Strengthen Local Response:** Empower and support our frontline responders through improved training, funding, and mobilization capabilities.
- \* **Leverage State Resources:** Utilize the expertise and resources of the National Guard, State Fire Marshal's Office, Department of Forestry, Department of Emergency Services, and other relevant agencies.
- \* **Foster Public-Private Partnerships:** Collaborate with private industry to identify and leverage their resources and expertise.
- \* **Improve Coordination and Communication:** Establish clear lines of communication and a robust command structure to ensure efficient and effective response across all levels of government.

SB 2340 provides the necessary framework for conducting a comprehensive study to address these critical issues. This study will:

- \* **Assess current capabilities and identify gaps.**
- \* **Explore innovative solutions for resource mobilization, training, and coordination.**
- \* **Develop a roadmap for enhancing the state's fire service preparedness and response capabilities.**

Investing in this study is not about solving past problems, but about proactively preparing for future emergencies. By strengthening our fire service, we can better protect our communities, our economy, and the lives of our citizens. Therefore, Chairman Patten, Members of the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee, I urge your support for SB 2340 and would be open to any questions.