

**TESTIMONY OF  
TOM CLAEYS  
STATE FORESTER  
NORTH DAKOTA FOREST SERVICE  
BEFORE THE 68<sup>th</sup> LEGISLATIVE SESSION  
SENATE APPROPRIATIONS COMMITTEE  
JANUARY 27, 2023  
IN SUPPORT OF SENATE BILL 2016**

Chairman Sorvaag and members of the Senate Appropriations Education and Environment Committee Division, my name is Tom Claeys and I am the State Forester with the North Dakota Forest Service. Today I am pleased to provide testimony in support of the 24/7 state watch center concept which is part of the Adjutant Generals request in Senate Bill 2016. A 24/7 center that modernizes our approach to information sharing and wildfire coordination will benefit countless citizens across the state.

The North Dakota Forest Service stands to benefit from a 24/7 state emergency watch center for in two ways. First, the proposed watch center will improve situational awareness and wildfire data in the state by centralizing all-hazards intelligence and wildland fire data into one location. This centralization will increase the data points that can be analyzed and included throughout the wildland fire season, which will lead to better decision making and resource allocation. This is becoming even more important as wildland fire-fighters become more difficult to hire in this competitive job market. We must use the resources we have wisely. The improved technology will also proactively monitor weather conditions, soil moistures, computer automated dispatch (CAD) data, Red Flag warnings and burn restrictions in local political subdivisions. An emerging capability that could be implemented with a resource dedicated to monitoring is the automated use of satellites to identify remote fires even before a human can find them. These technologies all exist today, but as a state we are not taking a whole of government approach to information sharing and analysis.

The second benefit of the watch center is improved coordination of resources at the local and state level. We need to look no further than the historic Medora (744 Fire) fire in 2021 to find an example of a large state response to a wildfire. While the Medora fire response was a success, there was still room for improvement. For example, the use of Unmanned Aerial Systems (UAS) for situational awareness can be a force multiplier, but it must be coordinated with the local incident commander to ensure it doesn't impact operations. Similarly, the use of National Guard helicopters was essential to the success, but would have benefitted with improved coordination. In the next big incident, the use of a military UAS could provide the needed imagery to turn the tide in the fire fight, but we need someone to coordinate the sharing of video feeds to and from the scene. These are all opportunities we have in front of us.

Mr. Chairman, this concludes my testimony. The North Dakota Forest Service is a strong advocate of establishing a 24/7 watch center to centralize public safety information and to be at the ready to proactively coordinate state responses to fires. It would enhance our ability to get the right information to the right people at the right time, and in turn ensure the appropriate response occurs in time to maximize resources while minimizing costs. It will increase the safety of our citizens and their property and reduce costs in the long run. Thank you for the opportunity to provide support for Senate Bill 2016.