

69TH LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY

House Bill 1112 - "Relating to membership of the NDPERS Public Safety Defined Benefit Retirement Plan."

House Government and Veterans Affairs Committee

January 9, 2025

Testimony Submitted by:

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Purpose:

Members of the House Government and Veterans Affairs Committee, my purpose of submitting testimony is to provide a request to include state firefighters in 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. The current language does not provide for state firefighters, including (NDFS) North Dakota Forest Service firefighters, to participate in the NDPERS Public Safety Defined Benefit Retirement Plan. This legislation seeks to remove barriers to participation.

Background:

As a rural fire department, we have worked alongside the NDFS firefighters' multiple times, we see firsthand when they travel to locations for suppression efforts, they have to take into account that they will be fighting fires with the bare essentials for equipment during extreme wildfire conditions and staying in very primitive accommodations. They are usually a long way from their home station and do not have access to a lot of the equipment and ppe that most even the smallest of departments have access to. The health risks alone should be a primary reason to offer this program to include participation of state firefighters including NDFS firefighters. Wildland fire smoke is a mixture of gases and particles such as carbon monoxide (CO) and respirable particulate matter (PM) that may cause short- and long-term health effects. Wildland firefighters can be exposed to smoke at wildfires and "prescribed" fires (planned and intentionally ignited low-intensity fires). The contents of and exposure to wildfire smoke can vary greatly throughout the day depending on the vegetation type, fire behavior, and meteorological conditions. Research has shown that wildland firefighters have been exposed to gases and particles such as CO and PM above the occupational exposure limits during both wildland and prescribed fires. While burning vegetation is the primary exposure of concern for wildland and prescribed fires, when fires burn in the wildland urban interface (WUI, where wildland vegetation and urban areas meet) the smoke may contain compounds that are more like what structural firefighters encounter.

Wildland firefighters will often suppress these fires and may be exposed to some of the hazardous compounds of WUI smoke such as volatile organic compounds (VOCs), flame retardants, and polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons (PAHs). However, wildland firefighters do not have the benefit of wearing some of the personal protective equipment (PPE) typically used in a structural response (e.g., self-contained breathing apparatus [SCBA], turnout gear) that could provide protection from these compounds. Additionally, wildland firefighters may be exposed to smoke at firefighting base camps (incident command posts) where they eat and rest while off-duty. These health concerns are just the tip of the iceberg. There are several other health risks they face which are hard to quantify like mental health and other bodily injuries.

The firefighters working for the NDFS have provided our department and surrounding agencies with training that has been paramount to our communities in preservation of life and property. They were in Kindred assisting us with a 300-acre fire when a lot of local agencies were battling fires in their own districts and together, we saved a generational farm with minimal defensible space. I can personally speak to the talent and perseverance endured by each and everyone of them and hope that you will take into consideration the time and effort put in by each and every state employed firefighter and be inclusive to allow participation into the NDPERS Public Safety Defined Benefit Retirement Plan so we can continue to grow as an organization and help provide help in times of need. I would like to thank you all for your time in allowing me to testify to this important measure.