



2021 Issue Paper: Forests

LWVWA Supporting Positions

The [LWVWA Program in Action 2019-2021](#) has the following positions related to forests:

- Healthy forests are essential to habitat for a diversity of plant and animal life, to the hydrologic cycle, and to carbon storage to mitigate global warming. (FO-1)
- Coordinated action by all levels of government to control, limit, and reduce air pollution. (AQ-1)

Background on Forests

The Washington State Department of Natural Resources (DNR) is responsible for the state's 6 million acres of public lands, which includes 3 million acres of the state's forests. The DNR organizes the firefighting force that covers the state's public and private lands and coordinates with the Army National Guard, the Washington State Department of Corrections, and U.S. Forest Service firefighters.

Climate change resulting in higher temperatures, draught, less summer precipitation, and stronger winds, especially on the eastside, is contributing to the increased incidence and size of wildfires, which further release carbon into the atmosphere. Our forests also play a role in sequestration of carbon and retention of water, delaying fast runoff of water into streams.

Following the alarming state wildfire seasons in 2015 and 2018, the legislature increased funding for wildfire preparation, providing the DNR with more firefighters, equipment, and coordinated training. They also funded fire-prevention measures, including removing forest waste, thinning dense forests, and implementing prescribed burns. In the 2019 and 2000 legislative sessions, the agency's bill requesting a dedicated account for wildfire expenses funded by homeowner's insurance fees did not pass. The DNR has released both a *Plan for Climate Resilience* and a *20-year Forest Health Strategic Plan* for Central and Eastern Washington. The expense to the general fund for wildfires has been averaging about \$150,000 per annum. Notably, 96% of the fires were caused by humans and 4% by lightning.

The summer/fall (mainly September) of 2020 was the worst part of the year for wildfires and pervasive smoke in the state's history. Over 700,000 acres burned, 181 homes were lost and one person died. Despite the increased firefighters and firefighting equipment, the needs of this year's wildfires overwhelmed all available people power and equipment. Also, additional smoke from record wildfires in Oregon and California blanketed Puget Sound and the entire state, worsening air quality, health problems, and visibility, and grounding firefighting aircraft. The worst wildfires were the Evans Canyon fire northwest of Naches, the Cold Springs Canyon fire in the Okanogan, and the Cold Creek wildfire near White Pass, all on the state's eastside.

The town of Malden, 30 miles south of Spokane, was 80% destroyed. Wildfires also affected the west side in Bonney Lake and Sumner, with mass evacuations and road closures. This year fires were not only in forests but on grasslands, impacting the cattle industry.

This fall, eastside legislators are calling for the legislature to address wildfires. Most probably the DNR's bill requesting a dedicated account to fund wildfires will be reintroduced with a new funding source. Other bills may also be introduced regarding the importance of forests for carbon sequestration and retaining water to slow the release into rivers. We strongly support establishing a dedicated fund for wildfires, which will only increase in severity.

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