

Voluntary Actions Can Help Control Fire Suppression Costs

by Glenn Marx, Executive Director of the Montana Association of Land Trusts

Wildfire is a natural part of Montana's landscape, but there's a growing concern about the risks and costs of wildfires in Montana's wildland-urban interface. Expanded growth and increased development in the forest fringe means additional burdens to firefighters, as their budgets and personnel are stretched dangerously thin.

The Montana Association of Land Trusts, a group of a dozen nonprofits whose focus is private land conservation, has developed a voluntary, incentive-based proposal that was approved by the Montana Fire Suppression Committee and seeks to reduce the risks and costs associated with fighting wildland fires in populated areas.

This proposal, which combines land conservation and fire mitigation, is believed to be the first of its type in the nation and has been encompassed in Senate Bill 129, introduced by Senator Dave Lewis, a member of the Fire Suppression Committee.

The proposal focuses on the forest fringe area where more and more homes are being built, and where firefighters report it is increasingly more dangerous and more expensive to protect those homes.

How expensive? A recent report released for the Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation by Headwaters Economics of Bozeman stated that the cost of wildland fire home protection in Montana during 2006 and 2007 was over \$90 million. The report also stated that as few as 150 extra homes in the forest fringe threatened by fire can result in a \$13 million increase in suppression costs.

Indeed, state agencies, county commissioners, county planning departments, local and regional fire crews and others repeatedly testified at hearings that a major fire cost issue facing the state of Montana is expansion of residential development in the wildland-urban interface.

The Fire Suppression Committee issued a dramatic warning about the future of wildland fire in Montana unless things change. The committee's final report warned that, "*With limited resources and fuel and climatic conditions, it is likely that communities will burn, firefighters will be seriously injured or killed, and hundreds of members of the public will be seriously injured or killed.*"

That's a pretty serious prediction. And it is going to take some pretty serious actions to address the problem of wildfire in the wildland-urban interface.

The Voluntary Private Land Wildfire Mitigation Act is one such serious proposed action.

Land trusts believe within the context of fire suppression, land trusts are an existing ally and conservation easements are an existing asset. Land trusts work with willing landowners on voluntary conservation agreements called conservation easements. These agreements help protect natural resources by limiting future development.

The proposal would serve as a cost effective, practical and valuable approach to reduce firefighting costs while also protecting private property rights.

Here is how the proposal works.

First, the bill only applies to lands located within the wildland-urban interface, and creates new requirements for wildfire mitigation conservation easements. The proposal restricts any new development to one acre or less in a location agreed to – based on fire mitigation and conservation priorities – by the land trust and Montana's state firefighting agency, the Department of Natural Resources and Conservation. The proposal also requires the landowner to implement sound forest management practices and create a wildfire risk reduction plan with DNRC. The landowner must also adopt best management practices for residential defensible space and must also use firewise materials for any new or replacement structures.

The purpose of the proposal is to foster forest stewardship to reduce the threat of catastrophic fire while at the same time offering an incentive to the landowner to limit development and take steps to reduce risks and costs for firefighters.

The incentive here is that landowners who comply with all these requirements would be eligible for a Montana state income tax credit of up to \$100,000. The income tax credit would only be awarded after DNRC certified the landowner has complied with the provisions of the statute.

The marriage of land conservation and fire mitigation embodied in SB 129 is a good-faith effort by land trusts to address a serious, expanding and expensive problem. If implemented, it would increase fire mitigation and assist firefighters in an area where mitigation and assistance is essential.

(Glenn Marx is the executive director of the Montana Association of Land Trusts, a group of twelve nonprofit organizations whose focus is private land conservation.)