



## Rational Steps #1: Reducing Catastrophic Wildfires

*Welcome to the initial installment of my policy series, where we will identify and explore important issues facing our state and recommend workable policy solutions. It is my goal that this series be informative, educational, and an example of how to constructively take rational steps toward a better Washington for all.*

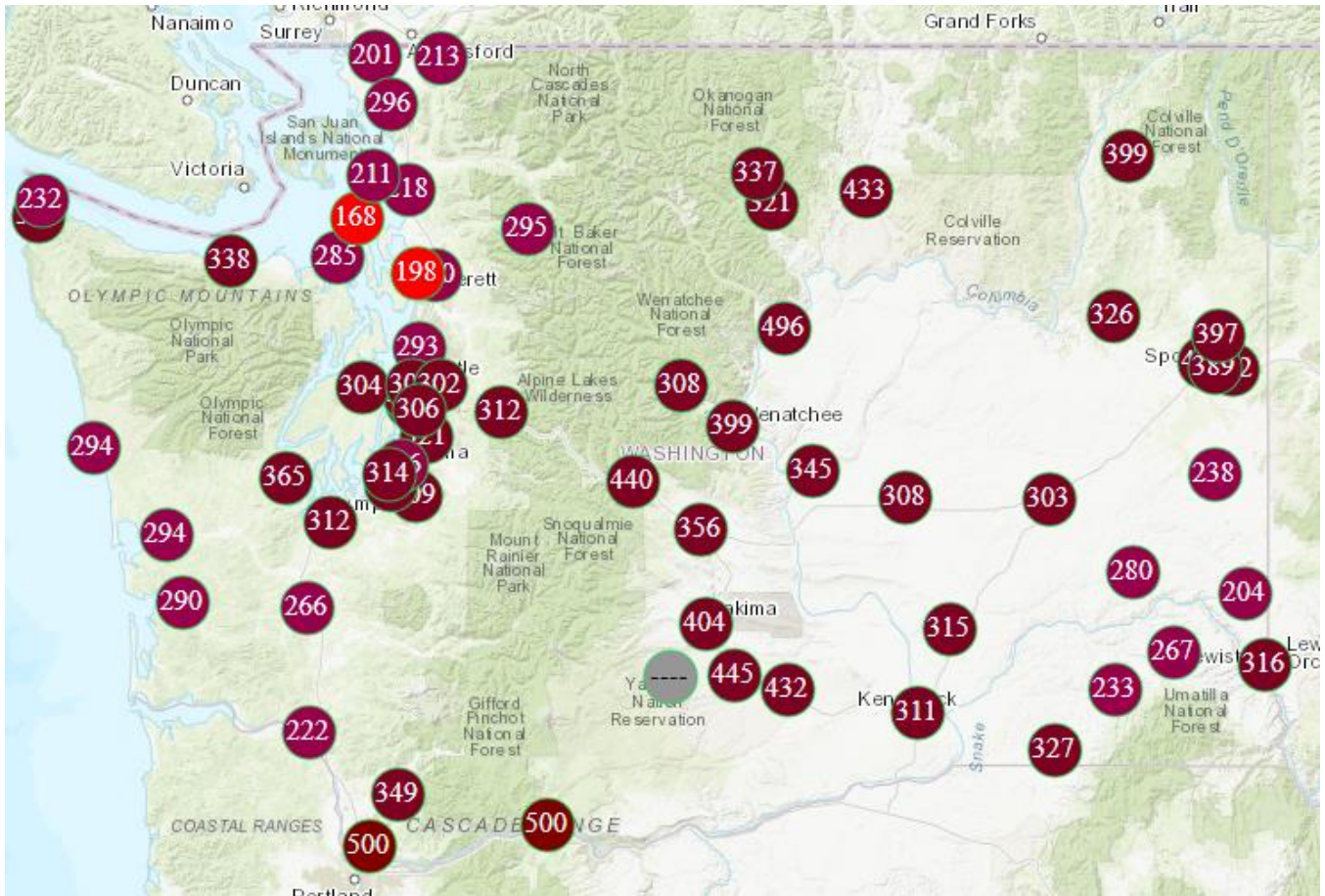
To begin, this series is going to highlight some of the more significant policies put forth in the operating budget ([SB 5451](#)) our caucus proposed earlier this month.<sup>1</sup> While we do not expect the budget itself to become law, there are several ideas that merit strong consideration, as they would benefit Washingtonians' lives now and well into the future.

First up: Funding a plan to improve forest health and reduce catastrophic wildfires.

- **Issue:** Wildfires have greatly increased in frequency, size, and cost in recent years.
- **Rational Step Toward a Better Washington:** Fund the Department of Natural Resources' Forest Health Plan, which proposes treating 1.25 million acres in coming years. This will pay dividends for the environment, taxpayers, and Washingtonians' health for decades to come.

### A. A Hazard to Our Health

The image below shows air quality recordings from September 2020.<sup>2</sup> Nearly every area in the state experienced a "hazardous air quality" level, the highest category for air pollution. And for most of the state, this extreme hazardous air quality level persisted for days.



## B. Wildfire Damages & Costs Have Been Growing

While the image above recalls the dangerous air quality Washington experienced last fall, the reality is that the frequency, size, and damage of wildfires have been a growing concern for several years.

As a proxy for this growing damage, let's look at the cost to the state budget for wildfire suppression:

\* From 2000-10, the state averaged \$28 million a year fighting fires. The state never once spent \$50 million in a year.<sup>3</sup>

\* In the past six years, the state has spent over \$555 million fighting fires.<sup>4</sup> That's almost \$100 million a year, or ***four times the annual cost from the prior decade.***

## C. The Blueprint for Action: DNR's 2018 Forest Health Plan

In 2017 the Legislature, via SB 5546, prime sponsored by Sen. Brad Hawkins (R-East Wenatchee), called upon the Department of Natural Resources to create a plan to solve the state's forest health issues.<sup>5</sup> Decades of neglect and mismanagement – including policy choices – had greatly contributed to the increased size and scope of wildfires.

In 2018, DNR issued the [required plan](#), proposing to treat 1.25 million acres over the next 20 years to reduce fuel loads and improve the resilience of our state's forests.<sup>6</sup> The plan was estimated to cost \$500 million.<sup>7</sup>

#### **D. Legislative Inaction To Date**

Despite the Forest Health Plan's issuance in 2018, the Legislature has been slow to make progress on the issue. Debate has focused on how to fund the plan (bonds? Tax on homeowner insurance policies?), rather than the costs of not taking action.<sup>8</sup>

In the present biennium, the state is spending a scant \$16 million on forest health – all from the capital budget.<sup>9</sup>

#### **E. Rational Step Toward a Better Washington: Fund the Plan!**

Simply put, we must do better. Every year we wait to fund the Forest Health Plan, the cost of inaction (in hazardous air quality, increased fire suppression costs, environmental damage, and homes destroyed) rises.

In the Senate Republican Caucus Operating Budget proposal (SB 5451), we made this a top priority and took an important, yet simple step: We fund the plan. We put the required resources into DNR to fully treat the 1.25 million acres over the next 16 years, putting \$62.5 million in this biennium and carrying that amount forward into future biennia, so that \$500 million is put into the plan over 16 years.<sup>10</sup>

#### **Conclusion**

The Legislature owes it to both present and future Washingtonians to reduce catastrophic wildfires by funding DNR's Forest Health Plan – **this session**. This is a rational step that will benefit taxpayers, the environment, and people's health for decades to come.

#### *Footnotes*

1. SB 5451, <https://app.leg.wa.gov/billsummary?BillNumber=5451&Year=2021&Initiative=false>
2. <https://wasmoke.blogspot.com/2020/09/smoky-siege-look-back-at-smoke-storm-of.html>
3. W&M staff analysis, DNR Fire Suppression Costs (2/20/21 email)
4. *Id.*
5. <https://app.leg.wa.gov/billsummary?BillNumber=5546&Initiative=false&Year=2017>
6. <https://www.dnr.wa.gov/foresthealthplan>
7. W&M staff analysis
8. SB 5996 (2019), *Tax on Homeowner Insurance Policies* - <https://app.leg.wa.gov/billsummary?BillNumber=5996&Year=2019&Initiative=false>
9. SB 6195 (2020), *\$500 M Forest Health Bond Issuance* - <https://app.leg.wa.gov/billsummary?BillNumber=6195&Year=2019&Initiative=False>
10. <http://leap.leg.wa.gov/leap/budget/lbns/2019LBN.pdf>, p. C-8 & C-19
10. [http://leap.leg.wa.gov/leap/Budget/Detail/2021/soSB5451AgencyDetail\\_BudgetSummary0211.pdf](http://leap.leg.wa.gov/leap/Budget/Detail/2021/soSB5451AgencyDetail_BudgetSummary0211.pdf), p. 172