

MINUTES**HOUSE AND SENATE INTERIM COMMITTEES ON
AGRICULTURE, FORESTRY & ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT**

May 15, 2013

The House and Senate Interim Committees on Agriculture, Forestry & Economic Development met on Tuesday, May 15, 2013, 10:30 a.m., at the Hot Springs Convention Center, 400 Convention Boulevard in Hot Springs, Arkansas.

House committee members present: Representatives Nate Steel, Vice Chair; Bob Ballinger, David Branscum, Charlotte Douglas, Dan Douglas, Homer Lenderman, Stephen Meeks, James Ratliff, Tommy Thompson, Scott Baltz (non-voting) John Vines (non-voting) and Betty Overbey (non-voting).

Senate committee members present: Senators Ronald Caldwell, Jonathan Dismang, and Stephanie Flowers.

Other legislators present: Representatives John Baine, Duncan Baird, John Burris, Ann Clemmer, Harold Copenhaver, Bruce Cozart, Jody Dickinson, Jim Dotson, Charlene Fite, Kim Hammer, Fonda Hawthorne, Monte Hodges, Mike Holcomb, Douglas House, John Hutchison, Fredrick Love, Mark McElroy, Chris Richey, Wes Wagner, and Jeff Wardlaw. Senators Joyce Elliott, and Eddie Joe Williams.

Representative Steel called the meeting to order.

WELCOMING REMARKS

Representative Lenderman welcomed committee members and guests to the meeting.

OVERVIEW OF ARKANSAS FORESTRY COMMISSION

Mr. Joe Fox, Director, Arkansas Forestry Commission (AFC), was recognized and presented a PowerPoint presentation entitled, "Arkansas Forestry Commission 2011-2012 Annual Report." The presentation included the following information:

- drought index— consistently in 700's for approximately 10 weeks (extreme drought); 8 index stations within state
- 4 record fires last summer
- fire plow—basic unit of fire protection
- fire wise program—Arkansas ranked #1 in the nation in recognized communities; teach landowners, communities, and volunteer fire/rural departments how to successfully make defensible areas around their homes and communities.
- rural fire protection program—provides required wildland training courses for volunteer fire departments (VFD) and administers a federal grant program to assist VFDs with the purchase of firefighting equipment.
- AFC has over 2,400 trucks, tank trucks, engine trucks, small brush trucks, etc.
- 1,100 fire departments in Arkansas; of this amount more than 850 are volunteer fire departments
- AFC sent 40 trucks to rural fire departments this year; over \$100 million in vehicle equipment within fire departments across Arkansas

- private forest land management programs; best management practices—AFC provides training and education for landowners, loggers, and foresters
- Arkansas has an 89% compliance record with the logging community
- AFC is a part of the West Gulf Tree Improvement Program
- forestry inventory analysis is ongoing—1/5 of the 6,000 permanent forestry plots are checked within the state
- Arkansas has gained 100,000 acres of forest land in the last 5 years
- five cities received a federal grant to complete an urban tree canopy assessment
- three full-time and 11 part-time law enforcement officers investigate timber theft, arson, equipment vandalism, and dumping in the forests
- recovered \$700,000 in restitution for landowners
- Poisons Springs State Forest received \$500,000 grant for next year

Mr. Fox stated that AFC works with partners as much as possible--more than any other agency within the state. He noted that without these partnerships AFC would not be as successful as it is now. Some goals include:

- protection
- firefighting
- emergency response
- management
- administration

Mr. Fox noted that AFC will also have 50 to 60 objectives and action steps.

In response to a question by Representative Love regarding how to avoid the financial situation that AFC experienced 2 years ago. Mr. Fox replied that AFC's fiscal report compares 2011 and 2012 fiscally, noting that AFC is expecting to have \$3.1 million at the end of this fiscal year. Mr. Fox stated that his goal is to never go into a new year with less than \$2.3 million.

UPDATE ON ACT 833 FUNDING

Mr. Richard Drilling, CGFM, Fiscal Accounting Manager, Office of Administrative Services, Department of Finance and Administration (DFA), stated that Act 833 was created in 1991 by the legislature. He explained that Act 833 is 1/2 of a 1% premium tax on fire insurance policies. Mr. Drilling reported that DFA received approximately \$4 million in Act 833 funding the first year; and approximately \$12 million last year. Since the program's inception, DFA has collected a total of \$161 million that has been made available to fire departments--\$158 million has been dispersed. The program is operating on a calendar year basis, with a certain percentage of the funds allocated to each county. Each county is responsible for distributing the funds to their local fire departments.

According to Mr. Drilling, county mayors and the governor decide upon the needs of each county. He stated that in order for fire departments to receive funds they must meet the minimum certification requirements, noting that 1/3 of the counties have a redistribution clause in their resolutions that allow funds to be redistributed to participating fire departments if a fire department did not apply for funds by the end of the year. The deadline to apply for funding is October 31st. He encouraged legislators to determine whether or not the local fire departments in their districts are applying for the Act 833 funding.

Mr. Kendell Snyder, State Fire Service Coordinator, Arkansas Department of Emergency Management (ADEM), gave a brief overview of the certification requirements. He explained that the certification process consists of training requirements (16 hours of certified training for active firefighters), equipment requirements, and accounting for previous funds. Mr. Drilling concluded by stating that ACT 833 is restricted money and can only be spent for specific items.

Representative Meeks asked whether or not ADEM helps the rural fire departments improve their water insurance service office (ISO) hose ratings. Mr. Snyder replied that ADEM tries to be very involved with this, noting that improving the ISO hose ratings is a goal of many of the fire departments. He reported that retention and recruitment of new firefighters in rural areas is low.

Mr. Fox agreed to provide answers to Representative Lenderman's questions. Committee staff will distribute this information via email to committee members.

With no further business, the committee adjourned at 11:30 a.m.

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