

Testimony in favor of LD 305 An Act To Include Forest Rangers and Forest Fire Prevention Specialists in the Bureau of Forestry's Forest Protection Unit in the Laws Concerning Cancer Suffered by Firefighters

Respectfully submitted by: William Barnum, Woodland ME

Senator Rafferty, Representative Sylvester, and members of the Labor and Housing Committee; my name is Will Barnum and I have served as a Forest Ranger with the Maine Forest Service since 2005. Though I am not here today representing my Department, I do wish to share some numbers and experiences that I have acquired during my last decade and a half of public service.

I speak to you today to request that employees of the Maine Forest Service Forest Protection Division be added to the Presumptive Cancer Law T39-A §328.B Cancer suffered by a firefighter. Forest Rangers are a unique category of public servant. We are a law enforcement agency tasked with enforcing natural resource laws as they relate to forests and forest practices within the State of Maine. But preemptive to our responsibilities as law enforcement, we are wildland firefighters, and wildland fire managers.

Last year rangers responded to 2274 Wildfire Law Enforcement Situations and inspected 2984 open burning permits, resulting in 829 actionable offenses. Of those 829 violations, 289 were classified as prohibited materials fires under Title 12 §9324. Prohibited materials fires, for those that may not be aware, are any out of doors fires where waste that is not wood waste is being burned. As a ranger I have seen just about everything imaginable burned in prohibited materials fires up to and including, kitchen sinks. Clothing, pressure treated wood, household trash, tires, vehicle parts, industrial wastes, roofing materials, electrical wiring, furniture, just to name a few items are common occurrences found in the smoldering piles of prohibited materials fires.

In addition to Wildfire Law Enforcement Cases, Rangers also responded to 1154 wildfires across the state last year. Of those 228 involved equipment, vehicles, or structures. It is not uncommon for rangers to assist with structure fires or even be the responsible authority on scene for structures and vehicle fires, particularly in the unorganized territories of Maine.

I personally can not speak to the long-term health effects of exposure to the smoke and fumes from these types of fires, but I know others today will. I can, however, share my own experiences of exposure. I have responded to many prohibited materials fires where the smoke

and fumes were noxious enough to make me sick to my stomach and on a few occasions made me feel ill for hours and even days after the response. As rangers, we do our best to stay upwind of the fires and avoid breathing in the airborne pollutants as much as possible, but inevitably, during the course of suppression, evidence collection, and investigation fumes are inhaled, and particulate matter is ingested.

I have focused today primarily on the obvious hazards of chemicals associated with prohibited materials, vehicle, and structure fires. But even the 926 wildfires in 2020 that were not related to vehicles, equipment, or structures still exposed rangers to smoke for long durations with little opportunity for respite. Frequently these fires end up burning into what we call the wildland urban interface, the areas where the forest meets the homes. This area is ripe with unexpected items that ought not be burned. There is a lot of waste dumped in the fields and woods surrounding homes and when a wildfire comes those items become fuel and release toxins just as a prohibited materials fire would.

I think it is also worth noting the number of wood burning fires that rangers respond to, and recognize that while the concentrations of chemicals and known carcinogens are probably less than those of what has already been discussed. Rangers are still breathing smoke for extended periods during those situations as well. Most everyone has had a campfire, or bonfire; but at certain times of the year, rangers are on site for multiple fires per day. During peak fire season they may be fighting fires for days and weeks at a time. This long-term exposure is far beyond what most people experience and undoubtedly has some health impacts. I ask you to consider those impacts and the others I have mentioned and strongly urge your support of adding employees of the Maine Forest Service Forest Protection Division to the Presumptive Cancer Law T39-A §328. B. Thank you for your time and consideration and I would be happy to answer any questions you may have.