

## **AUDIT PROPOSAL**

### **Kansas Wildfire Management: Evaluating the Adequacy of Kansas' Wildfire Suppression System**

#### **SOURCE**

This audit proposal was jointly requested by Representative John Carmichael, Representative Kyle Hoffman, Representative Melissa Rooker, Representative Steven Becker, Representative Ken Rahjes, Representative Troy Waymaster, Representative Boyd Orr, and Senator Tom Hawk.

#### **BACKGROUND**

During 2016 and 2017, Kansas experienced record-breaking wildfires that burned hundreds of thousands of acres and placed significant demands on the state's fire departments. The Kansas Department of Agriculture estimates that the 2017 Starbuck Wildfire that took place in Clark, Comanche, and Mead counties caused a combined agricultural loss of between \$44 to \$52 million. That estimate includes \$36 million for fence replacement, up to \$8 million in lost livestock, and up to \$15 million for the economic impact of the lost livestock. In addition, numerous homes and farm buildings of untold value were lost in this fire and the Highland fire in Reno county.

Numerous state and local entities are involved in wildfire suppression efforts, including the Office of the State Fire Marshal, the Kansas Department of Health and Environment (KDHE), the Kansas Department of Transportation (KDOT), the Kansas Forest Service at Kansas State University, and several other state and local governments. The specific roles of each of these agencies is defined in an emergency response plan developed by the Adjutant General's Division of Emergency Management (or in the case of the Kansas Forest Service, by state law).

The Kansas Forest Service—an agency that provides a variety of forestry and wildfire management services—is reported by the Wichita Eagle to have one of the smallest state forestry service budgets in the nation. Of the Kansas Forest Service fiscal year 2016 budget of \$3.0 million (14% of which is state funded), officials told us that about one-third was dedicated to wildfire prevention and suppression efforts (all of which was federally funded). That funding allows the service to maintain three un-staffed fire engines, four employees dedicated to fire prevention and suppression, and two mechanics that help prepare excess military equipment for use by the state's volunteer fire departments. By contrast, Oklahoma Forestry Services has a budget of about \$15 million in 2016, giving it the capacity to employ 80 firefighters and operate 47 fire engines, 47 bulldozers, airplanes, helicopters, and management and logistical teams. The Kansas Forest Service also relies on local fire departments, the Kansas National Guard, other states, and the federal government to provide resources necessary to fight wildfires.

On May 1, 2017, Governor Brownback signed House Bill 2140, which allows Kansas to enter into the Great Plains Interstate Fire Compact. The compact is an agreement between Colorado, North Dakota, South Dakota, New Mexico, Nebraska, and Wyoming to share firefighting resources during emergencies.

By joining the compact, Kansas would be able to share firefighting resources directly with 36 other states rather than requesting such resources through the federal government, which generally takes longer and is potentially more expensive.

#### **AUDIT OBJECTIVES AND TENTATIVE METHODOLOGY**

*The audit objectives listed below represent the questions that we would answer through our audit work. The proposed steps for each objective are intended to convey the type of work we would do, but are subject to change as we learn more about the audit issues and are able to refine our methodology.*

**Objective 1: Is Kansas' wildfire suppression system adequately designed and resourced to effectively suppress wildfires?** Our tentative methodology would include the following:

- Review state law and regulations and interview officials within the Adjutant General's Department, the Kansas Forest Service, and others to identify which entities are participants in Kansas' wildfire prevention and suppression efforts statewide and what responsibilities they each hold in that system.
- Review professional literature and interview officials with relevant forestry organizations such as the U.S. Forest Service, the National Association of State Foresters, the National Wildfire Coordinating Group, and the Kansas' State Fire Fighters Association to identify best practices related to wildfire suppression and prevention.
- Interview officials from a small sample of other midwestern states to identify the resources they have available to suppress or prevent wildfires in terms of funding, staffing, and machinery and equipment.
- Work with officials from the Adjutant General's Department, the Kansas Forest Service, and other entities involved in wildfire prevention and suppression efforts to determine how their practices and resources compare to those recommended by best practice and those in other midwestern states.
- Work with officials from the Kansas Forest Service and other entities involved in wildfire prevention efforts to collect their opinion on the feasibility of implementing any best practices we identified.
- Work with officials from the Kansas Forest Service and other relevant agencies to collect their estimates of how much the 2016 and 2017 wildfires cost the state and taxpayers in terms of the cost to suppress the fires and the damage those fires caused.

#### **ESTIMATED RESOURCES**

We estimate this audit would require a team of **three (3) auditors** for a total of **four (4) months** (from the time the audit starts to our best estimate of when it would be ready for the committee).