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Appeal made for Fire Safety Council

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Nevada residents appealed to the state Legislature on Monday for \$2.5 million to fund the state Fire Safe Council, which seeks to reduce the risk of wildfires.



SB497 would give the council, loosely formed in 1999 and made a private nonprofit organization in 2002, \$2 million for projects to reduce the wildfire threat and a little more than \$500,000 for administrative and operating costs over the coming two budget years.

“Nevada is consistently among the top five states in the number of acres burned each year,” Sen. John Lee, D-North Las Vegas, told the Senate Finance Committee. “We will see the results (of the bill) in healthy forests.”

Elwood Miller, executive director of the council, said there are 26 local chapters across the state working to reduce the risk of wildfires — both those created by lightning as well as blazes caused by people.

Until now, the council has relied on federal grants. But its leaders were told last fall that funding may be reduced or eliminated in the future. The council has received about \$400,000 in matching contributions and donations from Nevadans.

“So we are here to ask for your assistance in keeping this vital program alive,” Miller said, adding, “Based on our experience, we think that \$1 million (a year) for project work is what our staff can handle.”

Ed Smith, chairman of the council’s board of directors, said that while preventing and recovering from wildfires is primarily the responsibility of homeowners affected by them, Nevadans need outside help and training to tackle out-of-control blazes.

“This is the best example of federal, state, local and private cooperation I’m aware of in our state,” he said.

Smith told lawmakers that the Fire Safe Council also is affiliated with the part of the Tahoe basin that’s in California, prompting Senate Majority Leader Bill Raggio, R-Reno, to ask why Nevada’s western neighbor isn’t contributing any money.

Raggio requested a copy of the council’s revenue and expenditures before the

committee, which he chairs, takes action on the request. But he said those who testified had made “a very compelling case.”

Among those who spoke in favor of the measure was Charlene Meenan, a Glenbrook resident who said that the council has helped her community set up an evacuation program, which was important when an arsonist set multiple fires.

“We knew what to do and we knew that we had a safe zone around our community,” she said of a fire perimeter around the area. “We are finding that citizens that are members of the chapters are more alert. ... (We) can’t do without the Fire Safe Council.”

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