

Oral Testimony Proponent of HB 2140

Introduction:

Rodney Redinger, Fire Training Specialist, Kansas Forest Service (2003-Present)

- 18 years of fighting Wildland fires across the country
 - 5 years Pike interagency Hotshot (1998-2002)
 - Crewboss Mid Plains Handcrew (2003-2007)
 - Division Supervisor ICT3 (2007-2015)
 - OSC2 Rocky Mountain Area Type 2 team (2016-current)
- Incident Commander of Anderson Creek
Barber County

The Oklahoma/Kansas line is not only a state boundary, but also a Geographic Area Coordination Center (GACC) line, and a FEMA regional boundary. For the Anderson Creek fire the absence of a Compact meant that coordination of resources from outside the state of Kansas was challenging, and nearly impossible. This, on the front end, translated to mean that the Barber County, Kansas Forest Service and Kansas Department of Emergency resources were operating inefficiently due to redundant command layers and varying jurisdictional boundaries.

The absence of a Compact also meant that out-state resources, should they have been requested, would have been required to go through the U.S. Forest Service's Pueblo Dispatch Center, a division of the Rocky Mountain Area Coordination Center then to the Southern Area Coordination Center then to the unit in order to get resources to cross the state line.

If Kansas had been a Compact state the Kansas Forest Service would have called Oklahoma Forest Service to request resources. An example is the use of aerial firefighting resources in the initial phases of the fire when we were close to evacuating the towns of Sun City and Medicine Lodge. At that time I was on the phone with the Incident Commander from Oklahoma and they offered the aircraft for free, however due to the lack of a Compact we were not able to use them since they would have been crossing the state line.

Another example is the Type 2 IMT from Texas that was called to manage the Oklahoma side of the fire through a Compact request. Had Kansas had the Compact they could have assisted the Kansas Forest Service and the Kansas IMT with management of the whole fire instead of having to stop at the state line.

Since most of Kansas' counties had mobilized resources to simultaneously assist several on-going fires, (principally Anderson Creek and Burmac Road in RN and HV counties), the state's local resources were extremely stretched. Having the Compact would have allowed the Kansas Forest Service to call other Compact states to request resources to either backfill the local fire departments or to assist with the Anderson Creek fire. This would have allowed extremely tired resources to return home.

Speaking from the view point of an Incident commander on the largest wildfire in our state's history, it was challenging to 1). Stay abreast of what resources we needed to order and have in place, and 2). understand the limits on requesting support due to inefficiencies within the state's emergency management system, including both time and money. This, among other things, prevented on site firefighters to get adequate rest. Historically this is when firefighters make mistakes and/or are exposed to unnecessary risk leading to injuries and/or fatalities.

We were fortunate to not have any significant injuries associated with the Anderson Creek fire. However as an incident commander, part of my job is to reduce safety risks where we can and allowing for rest is one of the ways we can reduce risks. In that regard, the Compact would have allowed the state to mobilize resources necessary to safely and efficiently suppress the fire without exposing fire fighters to undue health and safety risk.

In conclusion, passing house bill 2140 will provide Kansas' Fire Services a means to more effectively address future wildfires. Should the time come again, when we have either exhausted or will soon exhaust the state's firefighting resources, partner fire-fighting assistance will be readily available. Additionally, the Compact will pave the way for addressing border fires that may cross the state line by backstopping counties who have exhausted their mutual aid agreements. In principle, the Compact will allow partners to freely cross the state line without fear of operating outside their existing agreements.