

FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FROM THE HJ 23 SUBCOMMITTEE

STATE ADMINISTRATION AND VETERANS' AFFAIRS INTERIM COMMITTEE
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BACKGROUND

During the September 2023 State Administration and Veterans' Affairs (SAVA) Interim Committee meeting, members voted to allocate 0.25 FTE to member topics in the committee workplan. At the November 2023 meeting, committee members voted to take up the HJ 23 study of disaster and emergency service recovery response in Montana. The HJ 23 study was introduced during the 2023 Legislative Session and died in standing committee on the last day.

During the January 2024 SAVA meeting, a subcommittee was formed to complete the study with the understanding that the subcommittee would provide updates to the full committee during each meeting and that any legislation would be reviewed and approved by the full committee. Senator McKamey, Senator Mandeville, Representative Dooling, Representative Fitzgerald, and Representative Kortum were appointed to the subcommittee and Representative Fitzgerald was selected as the Chair.

FINDINGS & RECOMMENDATIONS

The subcommittee met four times - March 6th, April 30th, May 16th, and June 25th. The meetings included robust public comment, a presentation from Montana Disaster Emergency Services and a panel discussion with county and conservation district officials about their work, recent incidents, and areas where the legislature could provide additional support. The incidents discussed were primarily floods and fires, and it quickly became clear to committee members that recovery, or long-term efforts, were where they needed to focus their attention.

FINDINGS

Based on the speakers' comments, public comment, and hearing from individual constituents, committee members identified the following gaps and needs in the recovery processes in Montana:

- There are gaps in recovery training, expertise, and personnel at both the state and local levels that need to be addressed.
- There are communication gaps between the entities involved, including local, state, non-profit, private, and federal players.
- There are issues with permitting processes associated with recovery, including the timeliness of permit review, the applicability of various permits to specific emergencies, and needing to get permits at the beginning and end of the recovery process (for things like debris removal, etc.).

RECOMMENDATIONS

The subcommittee members make the following recommendations:

- Introduce legislation to revise the timelines in the emergency procedures provision found at MCA 75-7-113(4) and (5).
 - PD 19 was reviewed and adopted at the July 31, 2024, SAVA meeting as a committee bill. Senator Mandeville will carry the bill.
- Introduce legislation to create regional coordinator positions and provide additional funding for state and local recovery efforts (including FTE).
 - The subcommittee decided at the June 25th meeting to request additional information on this topic from DES and to discuss the idea with the full SAVA committee before requesting a provisional bill draft.
 - The full SAVA committee decided at the July 31st meeting to leave the addition of FTE to the HB 2 budgeting process.

In addition, subcommittee members encourage state and local entities to:

- Increase their focus on preparation efforts for disasters and emergencies and use this time to build stronger working relationships.
- Build upon existing interlocal agreements and mutual aid agreements and develop more of these agreements throughout the state.
- Make use of the new [joint application form for stream permitting](#).