

GENERAL ASSEMBLY OF NORTH CAROLINA
SESSION 2025

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HOUSE BILL 355
Committee Substitute Favorable 3/26/25

Short Title: OSFM to Study Future of Rural Firefighting.

(Public)

Sponsors:

Referred to:

March 12, 2025

A BILL TO BE ENTITLED
AN ACT TO DIRECT THE OFFICE OF THE STATE FIRE MARSHAL TO STUDY THE
FUTURE OF FIREFIGHTING IN RURAL AREAS OF THE STATE.

The General Assembly of North Carolina enacts:

SECTION 1.(a) Study. – The Office of the State Fire Marshal shall conduct a comprehensive review of firefighting in rural areas of the State. The purpose of the study is to examine current trends, problems, and opportunities confronting rural fire departments and suggest funding and other legislative actions needed to keep those fire departments fiscally sound and mission effective.

SECTION 1.(b) Scope. – The study conducted by the Office of the State Fire Marshal under this section shall examine and evaluate, at a minimum, the following:

- (1) Volunteer firefighter recruitment and retention. Identify programs, actions, or incentives that could increase recruitment and retention, including (i) financial incentives or benefits; or (ii) modern, comprehensive training programs to ensure volunteers are properly certified and equipped to perform their duties.
- (2) Funding and resource allocation, including (i) an analysis of the current distribution of funding and how it could be improved to ensure that rural fire departments have the resources they need to continue to meet their mission, (ii) opportunities for federal and State grants specifically for rural firefighting needs, and (iii) strategies for purchasing and maintaining costly equipment such as fire trucks, hoses, and protective gear.
- (3) Interagency cooperation and mutual aid agreements, including how such agreements can be strengthened, how to improve collaboration among rural departments and between rural and urban departments to allow for more effective response during large-scale emergencies, and best practices for sharing resources and training among fire departments, law enforcement, and emergency medical services in rural areas.
- (4) The physical, mental, and emotional toll that rural firefighting takes on firefighters, including identification of programs to help maintain firefighter health and well-being.
- (5) Public education and outreach, including (i) fire safety programs to ensure that residents in rural North Carolina are educated about fire safety, such as creating defensible space around their properties and understanding how to evacuate in case of fire, and (ii) programs to engage and encourage youth involvement in firefighting, building interest in the profession among young people.



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- 1 (6) Long-term sustainability and community engagement, including reducing the
2 environmental impact of fire response activities and encouraging
3 community-driven approaches to firefighting, such as neighborhood fire
4 prevention efforts or local fire departments hosting regular community
5 engagement events.

6 **SECTION 1.(c)** Stakeholder Engagement. – The Office of the State Fire Marshal
7 shall engage stakeholders, including fire chiefs and firefighters from rural departments,
8 representatives of statewide organizations for firefighters and fire departments, and rural
9 community leaders. The Office of the State Fire Marshal shall conduct at least three public
10 hearings, one in each geographic region of the State (Western, Central, and Eastern North
11 Carolina), to gather public input and recommendations. The Office of the State Fire Marshal shall
12 open a public comment period of at least 90 days during which individuals, fire departments, and
13 organizations may submit feedback.

14 **SECTION 1.(d)** Report and Legislative Recommendations. – The Office of the State
15 Fire Marshal shall submit a report on the results of the study authorized by this section, including
16 any recommended legislation, to the General Assembly by March 1, 2027.

17 **SECTION 2.** Effective Date. – This act is effective when it becomes law.