

By Bethany Knipp

Nebraska News Service

A bill that would help protect Greater Nebraska against forest fires advanced through the Unicameral Monday.

LB634, the Wildfire Control Act of 2013, made it through the first round of consideration on a vote of 36-0 with eight senators not voting.

Under the bill, the Nebraska Forest Service would contract to place two single-engine air tankers near Chadron and Valentine to be ready to combat wildfires.

Sen. Al Davis of Hyannis introduced the measure and said the planes, along with other provisions of the bill, would cost \$1.7 million.

He said the cost of preventing or reducing fires was less than the cost of doing nothing.

"This program should have been placed a long time ago," Davis said. "We are moving into what appears to be a hotter and drier period in history. Fires are going to be stronger, harder, more severe and it's time the state started taking some responsibility and be proactive rather than reactive."

According to a written statement from Major Gen. Judd Lyons and Al Berndt of the Nebraska Emergency Management Agency, 1,570 wildfires burned more than 500,000 acres of land in 2012. In 2011, fires burned fewer than 37,000 acres, according to NEMA's annual report.

Lyons and Berndt said the majority of the fires were caused by lightning strikes and fueled by dry trees and crops, known as dry fuel, that resulted from last summer's drought and high temperatures.

But senators thoroughly discussed another contributor to the wildfires: red cedars.

The tree that is technically a fire intolerant weed, makes fires more rampant. The trees have to be trimmed because their seedlings spread rapidly, increasing the potential for wildfires.

Davis said \$600,000 in state money for the Fuel Reduction Program, alongside federal money and Natural Resources District funds, would be spent to try to eradicate the red cedar problem.

Sen. Kate Sullivan of Cedar Rapids said she didn't want to get to the point where landowners would wait for grant money to take care of their cedars.

"It is a problem that to a certain extent should never have happened if the landowner was doing his or her due diligence and taking care of those cedar trees before they got to be a problem," Sullivan said.

"Over time I've seen hills just blackened because the landowner just doesn't take care of those cedar trees and then they get to be too big and you can't do it with anything other than burning or mechanical eradication," Sullivan said.

Davis said, "Most people are working pretty hard at the red cedar problem."

"They were planted as wind break for many, many years and never had a problem but we have a new and sort of a more vigorous plant that's out there taking over the acreage," he said.

Two committee amendments to LB634, introduced by Sen. Tom Carlson of Holdrege, were adopted with no votes against them.

The amendments added an emergency clause and eliminated the requirement for a Nebraska incident management team to assess fires because it exists in current statutes.

Carlson addressed concerns about spending and said the loss to individuals and the state was too great not to pass the bill.

"That's why I say this is a savings bill, not a spending bill," he said.

