

Lincoln (AP) – A bill designed to help fight wildfires in rural Nebraska advanced mid-May to a final legislative vote after lawmakers agreed to reduce the number of firefighting planes.

The new legislation (LB634) would reduce the number of single-engine aerial tanker planes stationed in Nebraska from two to one.

It also would increase the number of bases that are equipped to service the firefighting plane. The state would have to contract to construct at least two single-engine air tanker bases, and develop at least one mobile base.

Lawmakers approved several changes to the measure before giving it second-round approval. A final vote is required before it heads to Gov. Dave Heineman. The bill's sponsor, Sen. Al Davis of Hyannis, said the changes stemmed from a compromise with Lt. Gov. Lavon Heidemann and the Nebraska Emergency Management Agency.

"Rapid response is absolutely necessary to prevent wildfires from growing into the 40,000- or 60,000- or even 80,000-acre fires that Nebraska experienced last year," Davis said.

Nebraska experienced 1,570 wildfires last year that burned a total of 786 square miles — an expanse nearly seven times the size of Omaha, according to the Nebraska Emergency Management Agency.

According to state emergency officials, 98 percent of the wildfires were caused by lightning strikes, and the combined cost of ground-level firefighting, aerial suppression and mutual aid from other states cost Nebraska about \$12 million.

Davis said last year's firefighting effort was delayed several times because of a lack of available planes from out of state, equipment failures with National Guard helicopters, and state emergency officials who were slow to request planes.

The bill would also require the Nebraska Forest Service to thin forests, and develop markets for the wood shavings. Davis said the shavings could be used for pets, landscaping mulch, fence posts and fuel for heating and cooling.

The state would contract for access to the plane for three or four months during the summer fire season.

The bill's total cost was cut to about \$2.4 million over the next two-year budget period, from the original \$3.45 million.

Nebraska State Forester Scott Josiah told a legislative committee in February that the size, frequency and overall number of fires have increased dramatically since 1989.

Josiah said last year's fire burned one-third of the trees in the Pine Ridge Ranger District in northwest Nebraska.

Only 80,000 to 100,000 acres were left untouched, he said.