

INTERIM JOINT COMMITTEE ON TOURISM, SMALL BUSINESS, AND INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY

Minutes of the 2nd Meeting of the 2025 Interim

July 31, 2025

Call to Order and Roll Call

The second meeting of the Interim Joint Committee on Tourism, Small Business, and Information Technology was held on July 31, 2025, at 1:00 PM in Room 149 of the Capitol Annex. Representative Kim King, Chair, called the meeting to order, and the secretary called the roll.

Present were:

Members: Representative Kim King, Co-Chair; Senator Phillip Wheeler, Co-Chair; Representative Deanna Gordon, Co-Chair; Senators Shelley Funke Frommeyer, Jason Howell, Scott Madon, Matt Nunn, Reginald L. Thomas, Mike Wilson, and David Yates; and Representatives Shane Baker, Ryan Dotson, Daniel Fister, Chris Fugate, Daniel Grossberg, Vanessa Grossl, John Hodgson, Nima Kulkarni, Matthew Lehman, Chris Lewis, Mary Lou Marzian, Shawn McPherson, Adam Moore, Michael Sarge Pollock, Timmy Truett, Bill Wesley, Mitch Whitaker, Richard White, and Susan Witten.

Guests: Brandon Howard, Director, Division of Forestry, Energy and Environment Cabinet; Dawn Baase, Environmental Scientist Consultant, Department of Natural Resources, Energy and Environment Cabinet; Rich Storm, Commissioner, Department of Fish and Wildlife Resources; Ben Robinson, Director of Wildlife, Department of Fish and Wildlife Resources; and Jenny Gilbert, Legislative Liaison, Department of Fish and Wildlife Resources.

LRC Staff: Janine Coy, Christian Deeter, Austin Johnson, and Sasche Allen.

Approval of June Minutes

A motion to approve the minutes from the June 18, 2025, meeting was made by Co-Chair Wheeler, seconded by Representative Baker, and approved by voice vote.

Kentucky Prescribed Burn Process & How Prescribed Burning Benefits the State

Brandon Howard, Director, Division of Forestry, Energy and Environment Cabinet, discussed prescribed fire as a strategic land management tool used to protect, conserve, and enhance Kentucky's forest resources. Prescribed fire, unlike wildfires, is intentionally planned and executed by trained personnel under controlled conditions to achieve ecological, forestry, and safety objectives. The presentation outlined the multiple benefits of prescribed

burning, including reducing hazardous fuel loads to lower wildfire intensity, promoting oak regeneration vital to Kentucky's \$9 billion bourbon industry, and protecting the state's \$19 billion forest economy. Mr. Howard shared wildfire statistics and explained the legal framework under KRS Chapter 149, including exemptions for certified burn bosses and guidelines for safely conducting burns during hazard seasons. He concluded with an overview of Kentucky's burn process.

Lighting the Way - The Future of Prescribed Fire in Kentucky

Rich Storm, Commissioner, Department of Fish and Wildlife Resources; Ben Robinson, Director of Wildlife, Department of Fish and Wildlife Resources; and Jenny Gilbert, Legislative Liaison, Department of Fish and Wildlife Resources, detailed the structured process behind implementing prescribed burns, including planning, weather monitoring, safety protocols, interagency coordination, and trained personnel execution. Presenters emphasized prescribed burns are carefully controlled, science-based tools used to manage vegetation, restore native ecosystems, and reduce fuel loads that contribute to dangerous wildfires.

Speakers highlighted the wide-ranging benefits of prescribed burning for the Commonwealth. These include enhancing wildlife habitats, improving forest health, supporting biodiversity, and contributing to cleaner air and water. Prescribed fire also plays a vital role in maintaining open lands used for hunting, recreation, and tourism. The speakers discussed the importance of continued public education, streamlined regulatory processes, and legislative support to expand the safe and strategic use of fire as a conservation and economic development tool.

Joint Question and Answer Discussion

Addressing Representative Grossberg, Mr. Howard said prescribed fire consumes the fuel on the forest floor with a goal of preventing the fire from becoming intense enough to damage large trees, which are mostly resistant to prescribed fire. Mr. Robinson confirmed wildfire is a greater risk to wildlife in comparison to prescribed fire which burns at a low intensity in specific ignition patterns. Addressing a follow up question about the regeneration of oak trees, Mr. Howard stated lush trees across the state are likely the result of a fire regime that existed many years ago that created an ideal environment for growth.

Responding to Co-Chair Wheeler, Mr. Howard discussed the importance of the type of fuel in the prescribed burn process. Mr. Storm emphasized the significance of burn bosses being properly insured in the event of a burn becoming unstable and said insurance for burn contractors should be statutorily mandated.

Answering Senator Madon, Mr. Storm stated the Commonwealth's quail population has decreased over the years due to a loss of habitat and hybrid vigor. Mr. Robinson remarked

restocking of quail has been proven to be less successful compared to turkey, deer, or elk due to environmental changes.

Replying to Representative Moore, Mr. Robinson discussed the training program for burn bosses that is overseen by experienced fire professionals.

Addressing Representative Baker, Mr. Robinson said members should encourage constituents to view the Kentucky Prescribed Fire Council (the Council) webpage for more information on training opportunities. The Council is volunteer led and does not presently have a dedicated funding source.

In response to Chair King, Mr. Robinson confirmed the Council has trained 510 individuals to date but is limited by its workforce capacity and lack of funding. The Council conducts one annual meeting with trainings performed in various counties throughout the year.

Answering Senator Yates, Mr. Robinson clarified details regarding liability insurance for burn contractors which does not include incidents of negligence.

Replying to Representative Pollock, Mr. Robinson stated the time of year that a prescribed burn is dependent on the objective of the burn, but the ideal timeframe is January to April.

Addressing Representative Marzian, Mr. Robinson estimated the Council would benefit from \$500,000 to \$1 million in initial revenue funding.

Responding to Representative Fister, Mr. Robinson said the department is open to discussing funding and statutory supports with members. Mr. Storm also discussed the public health benefit of prescribed burns as it relates to ticks.

Answering Senator Wilson, Mr. Robinson reiterated the benefits of prescribed burns for the state's quail population. Mr. Storm detailed the history of the Commonwealth's trees and habitat formation.

Replying to Chair King, Mr. Robinson stated the Commonwealth burns 12,000 to 15,000 acres annually, while some southern states burn up to one million acres annually. It is primarily the responsibility of the burn boss to notify the appropriate dispatch of a scheduled burn. There are 187 burn bosses throughout the Commonwealth with slightly more located centrally. Additionally, any federal funding mentioned was in reference to funds made available to land owners through farm bill or environmental quality incentive programs.

Addressing Co-Chair Wheeler, Mr. Robinson verified that volunteer firefighters assist with

prescribed burn trainings and agreed any available federal funding for trainings would be beneficial to the Council.

Adjournment

There being no further business before the committee, the meeting adjourned at 2:08 PM.