A candid look at where DEB came from, where things stand and the current challenges and opportunities.

Like many organizations, DEB is committed to regularly evaluating its rate of success, efficacy in its mission and identifying areas for improvement. The following report steps back and looks at our strengths, challenges, opportunities and risks facing emergency preparedness on Decatur Island.

Our mission is a safer, more educated and better prepared Decatur Island.

Strengths

DEB was created after the July 3, 2018 yard debris fire in Davis Bay that put five members of the DNR helitack crew and multiple neighbors in real danger on one of the most fire-prone days of the year.

The brigade formed with the leadership and support of DNW, which had already maintained a fire plan and equipment cache for years. At the time, DNW's insurance was nearly cancelled after a member falsely reported to their insurer that DNW was operating as a firefighting organization. DEB was created in part to provide the proper structure and oversight for equipment and training so the island could continue preparing responsibly.

Since then:
• Roughly 140 neighbors have participated in basic wildland training
• Volunteers have recently responded to real incidents where early action mattered, including the 2024 St. Patrick's Day grass fire, a golf cart battery fire, and another human-caused wildfire last year that had real potential to spread.

DEB exists because neighbors stepped up and chose preparation over complacency.

Challenges

Decatur's demographics create a real constraint. We are a small island with many part-time residents. Most people come here to decompress, maintain their property and enjoy island life and that leaves limited bandwidth for regular volunteer commitments. A small number of volunteers therefore carry a bulk of the work.

Two things matter going forward:
• Celebrating and supporting the volunteers who step up
• Being realistic about the load such a small group can carry

Clear communication and correcting misinformation are also essential.

Opportunities

There are practical ways to improve preparedness. The I am Responding (IaR) system already used by DEB could expand into a broader platform for coordinating on-island medical resources when emergencies occur. Integration with DICERA and the existing VHF emergency radio system is an additional opportunity.

At the county level, 128 outer islands have no fire district and very little coordinated planning. That is a policy gap San Juan County leadership will eventually have to address, including whether 911 dispatch should remain with the Sheriff or move to a structure that guarantees equal service across all islands, similar to other rural regions.

Another opportunity is helping our neighbors understand the insurance changes affecting rural and wildfire-exposed areas. These pressures are regional and national — not unique to Decatur Island — and many people are navigating these issues for the first time.

DEB should continue to work with San Juan County leadership and regional fire professionals to explore longer term solutions, such as a regional fire authority or an outer island fire district that includes multiple major outer islands. A response structure built at that scale could provide shared resources, professional oversight, and stronger operational resilience while still relying on local volunteer brigades as the operational backbone. This is the model many rural coastal communities use, regional coordination built on demonstrated volunteer capacity, not theoretical governance structures created in the absence of people willing to train and respond.

Expanding and bolstering existing channels of communication, extending outreach to other outer islands facing similar challenges and sharing more advanced education within our community are the cornerstones of DEB's efforts.

Continuing strong partnerships with county leadership is critical to our path forward.

Risks

A recurring claim has been that DEB leadership opposes forming a Fire District. That is incorrect. From the beginning, DEB has supported regional district solutions and has worked with surrounding fire chiefs to inform training and planning. Across rural Washington, volunteer brigades are usually the foundation from which viable fire departments and districts grow.

But a District is not a Fire Department. Across Washington State, rural fire protection systems rely heavily on volunteer capacity. Fire districts provide governance, taxing authority, and equipment, but the day-to-day operational capability still depends on trained responders who live locally and are willing to respond when emergencies occur.

A fire district does not create responders. It depends on them.

A district without an active volunteer base is not a solution. It is a structure without the people required to make it work. The long-term sustainability of emergency preparedness on Decatur ultimately depends on maintaining and expanding the pool of trained volunteers.

Governance structures do not create emergency response capability. People do.

We encourage everyone to review the **2012 San Juan County Community Wildfire Prevention Plan (CWPP)** and the **recently adopted 2025 update**:

2012 CWPP
http://www.sanjuandem.net/About/PDFs/2012%20SJC%20CWPP.pdf
2025 CWPP Update
https://www.sanjuanislandscd.org/_files/ugd/411f23_8e9a54668a1046dbb2c64d6e2d03b01c.pdf

Both documents clearly outline the long standing challenges faced by the outer islands, where emergency response depends almost entirely on volunteer capacity.

For example, **Stuart Island's fire district ultimately shut down due to lack of financial and volunteer resources**. It has only recently been reestablished through a brigade structure modeled in part on the success of the Decatur Emergency Brigade and integrated with San Juan Island Fire District 3. The CWPP also notes the continued difficulty even on **Shaw Island**, a ferry served island, in maintaining sufficient participation to support a traditional fire district.

Over the past two years, **DEB volunteers contributed hundreds of hours to the CWPP update process**. A central goal was to ensure that the County fully understands the realities facing the outer islands — communities that are not among the main population centers but still depend on reliable emergency response.

On small islands like ours, **volunteers and trust are our only real assets.**
Without them, no model works. With them, communities can build resilient solutions that serve everyone.

Anyone who wishes to help strengthen that foundation is always welcome to participate.

Possible Next Steps

• Continue to support and expand volunteer training opportunities
• Improve island-wide communication about risk and preparedness

- Coordinate with San Juan County on outer-island planning
- Explore long-term regional solutions