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News Update

Budget cuts fuel Arizona fire threats

By Mark Flatten, Tribune

Poorly thought-out budget priorities will leave Arizona communities vulnerable to catastrophic wildfires unless Congress restores money to thin overgrown woods outside of federal forest boundaries, state and federal officials say.

At issue is a plan by the Bush administration to slash about \$30 million from U.S. Forest Service programs that channel federal dollars to states and local communities to thin overgrown land near national forests. If those cuts go through, high-priority projects to protect Arizona communities would have to be delayed or scrapped, state forester Kirk Rowdabaugh said.

With forested land in the state already dangerously overgrown, any delay in thinning heightens the risk of another devastating blaze like the Rodeo-Chediski fire that ravaged Eastern Arizona in 2002, Rowdabaugh said.

"The need is immediate," Rowdabaugh said. "We can't do enough fast enough to avoid the danger of a Rodeo-Chediski. The threat is real. The need to move as quickly as we can is real."

Ballooning federal deficits and political pressure to control runaway spending have led to tight budget proposals for federal agencies that are not directly involved in defense or homeland security.

The president's proposed budget would cut U.S. Forest Service funding about 5.8 percent, to about \$4.07 billion, in the 2006 fiscal year which begins in October.

To help meet that target, the proposed budget for the Forest Service would cut about \$30 million from the State and Private Forestry program run by the Forest Service.

Money in that program goes largely to states and local communities to pay for fuel treatments on private or public land adjacent to national forests. Federal grants are matched with state or local funds to pay for forest thinning needed to protect communities from runaway wildfires.

There is a move in Congress to restore the funding to current-year levels, which allocate about \$101.8 million for the program.

Rep. Jeff Flake, R-Ariz., said he agrees with the president's efforts to trim overall agency spending. But the budget plan has its priorities wrong, said Flake, a member of the House Resources Committee's subcommittee on forests and forest health.

While proposing cuts in the program that pays for thinning projects around communities, the proposed budget allocates tens of millions of dollars to acquire





more federal land, or to buy "conservation easements" that prevent development on private land near national forests.

"What they tend to do is spend far too much in federal land acquisition and far too little in putting money aside to fight fires or prevent fires," Flake said of the spending priorities Bush has proposed.

Flake is backing recommendations by the forest health subcommittee that would restore funding to community forestry grants, while eliminating \$80 million the president has requested to buy conservation easements.

Hank Kashdan, budget director for the Forest Service, said complaints that the president's budget shortchanges forest thinning are not valid. While the plan does reduce the grants to local communities, it increases spending on hazardous fuels reductions within the forests by \$19 million, Kashdan said.

There also are other grants available through other agencies, such as the Federal Emergency Management Agency, to help protect communities outside the forest boundaries, he said.

Rowdabaugh said it is too early to know how much the state stands to lose if Bush's budget request passes. Arizona competes with other western states for the grant money, and at this point there is no way to know what the final appropriation for the grant program will be, he said.

This fiscal year, 14 fuel treatment projects are being funded using about \$2.5 million in federal grants, Rowdabaugh said.

They include thinning projects in the Tonto, Prescott, Apache-Sitgreaves and Coconino national forests.

New grant requests will be prepared and ranked based on their urgency next fiscal year, he said.

The fire danger in the state remains high, particularly in the deserts where rains have produced thick vegetation that will dry out this summer, Rowdabaugh said. While rains were heavier than normal this year, long-term projections indicate a return to prolonged drought, he said.

The projects that will be funded through the federal grants will provide some immediate protection when they are done, but are geared toward reducing the danger to forested communities over the long term, he said.

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