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## Senators Question Wildfire Prevention Program

*By Kim Last*

(AXcess News) Washington – Additional money is needed to treat land in the West that is vulnerable to catastrophic wildfires, members of the Senate subcommittee on public lands and forests concluded Wednesday.

This comes despite the Healthy Forest Restoration Act, signed into law in December 2003, which helps remove timber, wood pulp and other flammable materials from lands susceptible to fires. It also pays for forest projects to prevent wildfires that could damage residential areas.

Out of 1.6 million acres treated across the country this year, slightly more than 44,000 acres were in Colorado.

Dale Bosworth, chief of the U.S. Forest Service, attributed the small acreage to the high cost of land treatment. He pointed out that acreage in the Southeast U.S. costs less to treat than land in the West.

Sen. Ken Salazar, D-Colo., said that there were at least 240,000 acres of hazardous lands that needed to be handled by the forest service. He called the low number of treated acres a "lack of responsibility" by the government.

"This is similar to Katrina," Salazar said. "It's the Katrina of the west. You can see it coming up from the coast, yet the government didn't do enough. Now we're paying billions and billions, and that can happen again."



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As of Wednesday, the Interagency Fire Center in Boise, Idaho, reported more than 63,000 fires so far this year that burned more than 4 million acres. That's above the 10-year seasonal average of 47,000 fires and 2.5 million acres.

The center reported 399 new fires in 14 states in the week ending Wednesday, none of them in Colorado. But the state has had more than 900 fires this year, burning nearly 78,000 acres.

"We are not providing the funding to get these treatments done," Salazar said. "Only 25 percent has been done and 75 percent is missing. That gap concerns me."

Bosworth said that his administration has been working closely with the Bureau of Land Management to treat federal lands that are in danger of wildfires.

"This process includes a lot of working together," Bosworth said.

When Salazar mentioned the possibility giving the project more money, Bosworth admitted that it could help.

"If we had additional funding, we could treat additional acres," Bosworth said.

Other members of the subcommittee were angered by the low figures for treated lands in the West.

Sen. Dianne Feinstein, D-Calif., asked the committee to propose legislation to bring money west.

"Treatment does work. We know it works," Feinstein said. "But, how do we treat more lands?"

For now, Jay Jensen, executive director of the Council of Western State Foresters based in Lakewood, Colo., testified that he encourages communities to develop local plans to combat wildfires.

"For now, a community-based solution is the best way to combat these fires," he said. "Then, you can start looking at federal funds."

Source: *Scripps Howard Foundation*

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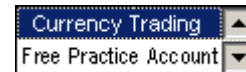
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