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# Forester: Fire faces stiff competition

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*By PERRY BACKUS of the Missoulian*

It's not just the unexpected windstorm or unusually steep terrain or even the woods choked with way too much fuel that challenges the men and women manning the fire lines each summer.

Bob Harrington, Montana's state forester, said future firefighters' main challenge may be competing against other national priorities on a global scale.

In his keynote speech Tuesday morning to the Interior West Fire Council, Harrington said this country's challenge in fighting terrorism, addressing climate change and struggling to stay abreast with a shifting global economy could push wildfire lower on the national list of priorities.

In turn, that could have an impact on how much money the country is willing to spend on forest restoration projects and fighting wildfires, which would create a whole set of new challenges for firefighters.

“Our challenge is trying to understand where wildfire fits in,” Harrington said to 50 firefighters gathered at the Hilton Garden Inn. “In our world, wildfire is an important issue. We believe that political leaders should be paying attention.”

This summer - when more than 1 million acres burned in Montana - firefighters in the state often struggled to find the kind of equipment and personnel needed to battle wildfire, Harrington said.

The reason was simple enough. There just weren't enough people and equipment to go around.

This summer, a record 9.4 million acres burned in the United States. Before the year was over, the U.S. Forest Service spent more than $1 billion fighting fire - more than it had ever spent before in a single season.

Montana spent $60 million this summer, which is the second only to 2003.

To make matters even more difficult for Montana firefighters, Harrington said 10 of the 11 geographic areas in the country had at least one big fire burning at the same time.

“That had a tremendous impact on the availability of resources,” he said.

In 2000 and 2003 - two other large fire seasons for the state - there wasn't much competition for firefighting resources, Harrington said.

“The rest of the country was pretty much down by then during those years,” he said. “This year, we weren't the only game in town. The Great Basin and Northwest were actually lit up worse than we were.”

This year, help for the state came from the north as firefighters and equipment from Saskatchewan and Alberta came across the border to lend a hand.

“I don't know what we would have done without the crews and miscellaneous assets we received from Canada this summer,” he said.

Tight on resources, the state was forced to focus much of its efforts on fires threatening homes and other private lands.

That reality helped set up a late-season firestorm across the midsection of Montana.

When many thought the season was nearing an end, firefighters focused resources on a dangerous blaze burning in the Emerald Hills near Billings that threatened about 350 homes, Harrington said.

“We didn't have enough resources to address the Derby (Mountain) fire,” he said. “Mother Nature faked with a left and got us with a right hook.”

With an unexpected change in the wind, the Derby Mountain fire scorched nearly 100,000 acres in a day. By the time it was done, about 25 homes were destroyed.

“I'm quite sure we'll live with the political fallout for a long time,” Harrington said.

From the ashes, long-term beneficial relationships sometimes blossom.

Harrington recalled a trip to the Missouri Breaks area following a large fire in 2003 where he and the governor were met by a very frustrated populace.

This year, the situation was considerably different after the community came together to acquire equipment and train. When the same management team arrived to help fight the fire this summer, they found people willing to work together.

Fighting wildfire isn't just about putting out flames, Harrington said. It's also important to develop relationships with local people.

Those kinds of relationships will continue to be important as firefighters continue to have to deal with an increasing number of houses in the wildland-urban interface.

“We're seeing more development in the wildland-urban interface,” Harrington said. “That will continue to increase. The estimate I've seen says in the next two decades, 200,000 more people will migrate into Montana. Most of those are probably going to live in the western and southwestern parts of the state.

“You add 20 percent to the state's population within the next two decades and many of those are going to choose to live in a fire-prone environment,” he said. “It's going to have huge implications.”

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