

editorial**Fighting fire with funding**

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The restoration of \$2 million in U.S. Forest Service funding for Colorado fire management projects this year is welcome and potentially lifesaving news.

Until Colorado's congressional delegation intervened, the money was set to be diverted to other forestry programs as a midyear effort to balance the books at the service, which manages federal forests, recreation and wilderness areas.

The restored Colorado money is intended to thin forest land of easily ignitable tinder that can turn a manageable fire into an inferno. That the administration even considered diverting the money to pay for other expenses points out a systemic problem with the agency's budgeting that ought to be addressed.

The driving force behind the problem is the increasing cost of fighting wildfires and the failure of Congress to adequately budget for firefighting.

It's not a problem that's going away. The price of fighting wildfires has spiraled as the country faces the effects of drought, climate change and residential development in forested areas. In recent years, the service has spent more than \$1 billion annually to fight fires.

Yet, the agency's overall budget has remained flat. Jay Jensen, executive director of the Council of Western State Foresters, notes, "Basically, everything else gets squeezed."

Since 1998, the agency's fire-suppression costs have routinely outstripped the money appropriated to pay them.

Typically, Congress will pass supplemental measures that only partially cover costs incurred. To make ends meet, the agency siphons money from other projects. Ironically, the projects that get raided frequently are mitigation initiatives intended to lessen the severity of fires or prevent them to begin with - things such as forest thinning and equipment purchases, according to a 2004 Government Accountability Office report.

The GAO suggested Congress consider alternative funding strategies, including the creation of an agency-wide or government-wide recurring emergency reserve account that that could be tapped to pay firefighting costs.

While Colorado's congressional delegation deserves a pat on the back for its success in persuading Forest Service chief Gail Kimbell to restore the Colorado money, it's clear

that a structural change in the budget is necessary. As fires raged through California, Florida and Georgia last week, it could hardly be more apparent.

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