

On fire lines, cost a concern

As of Monday, BLM had already spent \$105M of its \$249M firefighting budget - and it's still early

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The Salt Lake Tribune
Salt Lake Tribune

Article Last Updated: 07/15/2007 01:37:49 AM MDT

His first day leading the attack on the Milford Flat fire, Rowdy Muir declared his crews would stop it - the largest wildfire in Utah's modern history - with half the money he'd been promised to do the job.

Spending less to do more might sound like an audacious claim, since costs seem to be flaring up as fast as new wildfires and the acreage they leave in ashes.

But the incident commander's pledge is a sign that wildfire managers no longer look only at the fire lines, but the bottom line as well.

For decades, wildfire costs were addressed with a blank check. Congress, state forest agencies and local fire departments would spend first and pay later, usually the next budget year.

"In the last few years, we have become more cost conscious," said Randy Eardley, a spokesman for the BLM and the Interagency Fire Center in Boise.

At the Milford Flat fire, as with all wildfires these days, auditors are on the scene with spreadsheets and calculators. Even the tube of lip balm or sunscreen a medic hands out gets logged and tallied for the final bill.

The air tankers dousing homes with fire retardant, the food service contractors for the 500 firefighters, the satellite mapping experts, the portable toilet providers - expenses add up fast.

Eardley said his agency has tried to trim costs without compromising firefighters' ability to get the job done. For instance, the BLM saved by paring its contracts to provide SEATs - single-engine air tankers that drop fire retardant - from 25 to 17.

Necessity has driven the cost-cutting. In the past six years, the federal government - through the U.S. Forest Service and Interior Department agencies, the Bureau of Land Management, the National Park Service, the Fish and Wildlife Service and the Bureau of Indian Affairs - has spent at least \$1 billion annually. And two of those years the bill topped \$2 billion.

As of Monday, the BLM had spent more than \$105 million of its \$249 million firefighting budget, and it's still early in what is expected to be a long, grueling season for wildland fires, given the drier-than-kiln-dried forests and grasslands in an unusually hot, dry summer.

The federal costs don't count spending in the states, which have their own systems for covering wildland fire costs on state, local and private lands.

In Utah, where 26 counties pay into a kind of state-matched insurance pool, the budget for the 2007 fiscal year was roughly \$16.6 million, not including the annual "deductible" counties must pay. And, at least for the Milford Flat and Neola North fires, the Federal Emergency Management Agency has pledged to pick up as much as 75 percent of certain state costs.

Citing escalating costs, Wasatch and Weber counties have opted out of the firefighting fund, believing they could absorb firefighting costs on their own as Salt Lake County does, state fire officials said. Summit County was poised to pull out as well until a spring fire prompted officials to stick with the fund.

Like the Forest Service and the Interior Department, others are looking for ways to improve the financial front of firefighting.

The Council of Western State Foresters, a kind of professional organization representing fire managers in 23

states and territories, contends more reform is essential, said executive director Jay Jensen. He points out that the drought, the effect of climate change and the increasing numbers of homes built near wildlands all portend that firefighting costs will continue to grow.

Meanwhile, the firefighting agencies face budget caps, which means that money that might otherwise be spent on helping cabin owners build a protective buffer zone against fire may be spent instead on fighting fires.

In the Forest Service budget, for instance, wildland fire suppression used to consume 13 percent of the Forest Service's budget. This year, it's 45 percent - millions of dollars less for fire education and prevention programs, as well as such basic functions as recreation and law enforcement.

And, if costs exceed the department budgets and a \$1 billion rainy-day fund, Congress has established for firefighting costs, nonfire programs will have to be cut even more so the Forest Service and the Interior Department stay within their budgets.

Based on one study, fighting the fire is only a small fraction of the overall cost, Jensen said.

"If the fire season turns out to be what people are expecting," said Jensen, "then we will run out" of money.

A study of one 2003 California fire showed that cost of putting out the fire was just 5 percent of the true economic cost the fire had wreaked on homeowners, businesses and government. The study found that the true cost was nearly \$1.3 billion, not the \$61 million spent on putting out the flames.

Reformers should set aside at least some of the money now spent on fires toward preventing them and helping landowners do the same, Jensen said.

"Congress has done a great job in providing that Band-Aid - and we thank them for that," said Jensen. "But, as we're looking at the future, more long-term investments are needed."

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By the numbers

* **\$3.2 MILLION:** The cost of the Milford Flat fire by Saturday

* **\$16.6 MILLION:** The state's 2007 budget for firefighting

* **ABOUT \$105 MILLION:** How much of the U.S. Bureau of Land Management's \$249 million firefighting budget already has been spent

* **THROUGH OCTOBER:** How long is left in the 2007 fire season

Source: State and federal fire agencies

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