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SAN DIEGO COUNTY WILDFIRES

Congress OKs fire aid, but will focus fizzle?

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With images of last month's infernos in Southern California still fresh in their minds, members of Congress have passed a \$500 million aid package to help pay for firefighting nationwide.

The measure was approved Thursday night and now awaits President Bush's signature.

It includes up to \$90 million to help reduce the risk of catastrophic wildfires by clearing overgrown brush and dead and dying trees on federal, state and certain private properties in Southern California.

But if the past is any indication of the future, only a small fraction of the vegetation will be cleared before funding fizzles.

Congress typically spends emergency money for fire-risk reduction after a high-profile inferno. The issue fades from view, however, as lawmakers soon turn to other priorities such as paying for the Iraq war or helping a hurricane-stricken community.

This was the case after the Cedar and Paradise blazes of 2003 in San Diego County.

Congress directed about \$40 million to a coalition of state and local agencies so they could clear vegetation mainly on state and private property in the county. The money helped pay for work on only about 15 percent of the land deemed to have dangerous levels of vegetation.

Even with the aid package passed Thursday, the coalition probably will continue to struggle for more federal dollars. Congress had not approved a major injection of funds for vegetation control in nearly four years.

"If you don't have a crisis in front of you every day, the attention and the urgency doesn't get maintained and other priorities come forward," said Jay Jensen, executive director of the Council of Western State Foresters, which represents top forestry officials.

"This situation is not going to get fixed if we continue addressing it reactively," he said.

Tom Schott, an official with the Natural Resources Conservation Service in Riverside County, said dead and drying trees should be treated like "any other issue that is with us year in and year out." His agency is the arm of the U.S. Department of Agriculture that funded much of the vegetation clearing in San Diego County after the 2003 blazes.

"The scale of the problem is huge," Schott said. "We just need to have a regular, pronounced program that we can count on that is well-funded and well-staffed."

Congress is the primary source of funding for vegetation control, including the thinning done on state land

and private parcels in San Diego County's backcountry. It uses emergency grants and ongoing programs to pay for such efforts.

The money is usually managed by federal agencies such as the U.S. Forest Service and the conservation service, which pass on grants to state and local governments in fire-prone areas.

Generally, the disbursements have been getting smaller.

Since 2004, a critical Forest Service program for helping states prevent fires in zones where homes and wildlands meet has declined nearly 30 percent nationwide. In the Pacific Southwest region, which mainly concerns California, the fund is down by 82 percent.

"There is no question that hazardous fuels reduction has been underfunded," said Sen. Dianne Feinstein, D-Calif.

Feinstein, a member of the Senate Appropriations Committee, had proposed \$1 billion for wildfire programs in Southern California and nationwide. The amount was ratcheted down to \$500 million.

Although federal funding for vegetation control on state and private lands has declined, Congress has been spending more to fight wildfires once they start. Federal budgets for fire suppression have jumped dramatically in the past decade – from \$284 million in 1997 to \$1.8 billion this year.

That increase reflects the growing intensity of wildfires in the United States, especially across the West.

It also underscores the need to protect a steadily rising number of houses built in rural areas and other places with a severe risk of wildfires. California fire officials said that in San Diego County, about 75,000 homes in the urban-wildland zone face extreme fire dangers.

One result of such development is that even people who don't live in the backcountry must pay, through taxes, to defend the homes of those who do. Nevertheless, many local fire officials said it's smart to lessen the risks – and financial costs – to everyone by investing more money in vegetation control programs because they reduce the chance of catastrophic blazes.

The current trend of providing major post-fire funding is "absolutely self-defeating," said Kirk Rowdabaugh, the chief forester for Arizona and president of the National Association of State Foresters.

"We can't control the weather and we can't control the topography, but we can control the fuels," he added. "That is really where the long-term battle on fire suppression is going to be won and lost."

The U.S. Forest Service pays for fire-prevention work on state and private lands through its State Fire Assistance Fund. Partly in response to the Cedar and Paradise blazes, the agency increased the fund's budget to \$111 million in 2004.

But that budget has since fallen. It was about \$81 million for the recently ended 2007 fiscal year, and President Bush has proposed about \$68 million for this year.

State forestry officials nationwide predict that the 2009 pot will shrink even further as firefighting costs escalate.

Likewise, officials for the USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service said they're short on cash for reducing fire risks.

Congress gave the service about \$32 million in emergency money for San Diego County after the 2003 wildfires. The money helped pay for brush and tree thinning, mainly on private and state properties.

Crews removed brush and nearly 500,000 trees before funds dried up this year, amounting to about 15 percent of the land that a coalition of fire agencies said needed attention.

The participating agencies focused first on the most high-risk areas, such as where vegetation had grown close to homes and roads. Palomar Mountain was a top priority because it was – and still is – loaded with drought-stressed trees.

The mountain is also home to a popular state park. The Poomacha inferno scorched about two-thirds of the park last month, but several fire officials said the landscape, park buildings and private camps fared far better than they would have before the coalition's vegetation work.

In one critical spot, crews were able to set a backfire because the coalition had recently cleared vegetation from there. This controlled burn helped stop the Poomacha blaze from destroying several communication towers, said Gary Reece, a fire management specialist for the park.

Earlier brush and tree removal “greatly reduced the intensity of the fire,” Reece said. “Now we need the funding to do (more of) it.”

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