



Bosworth bemoans lack of firefighting funds

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By **SHERRY DEVLIN** of the *Missoulian*

Forest Service chief visits Ninemile fire camp

NINEMILE - Forest Service Chief Dale Bosworth called on Congress on Saturday to help his agency find a saner way to finance wildland firefighting.

"This is a crazy way of doing business," Bosworth said during an early morning visit to the sprawling Ninemile fire camp, where more than 1,500 civilian and military firefighters are mustering to fight the Fish Creek Complex of fires.

Congress gave the Forest Service about \$360 million to fight fire during fiscal year 2003; to date, the agency has spent more than \$600 million nationwide. By season's end, firefighting costs could reach \$900 million.

The result: "We are taking dollars from other programs to fund the firefighting effort," Bosworth said. "And that's not a good way to operate."

On Friday, the Lolo National Forest returned \$1.3 million of its fiscal year 2003 budget; national forests throughout the Northern Region surrendered \$15 million to the national firefighting effort. They'll be asked to give more in the weeks to come.

Every national forest in the country is turning back money, including those where fires are not burning.

That's why Bosworth and his staff are working with the federal Office of Management and Budget to find a long-term solution to the fire-funding fiasco.

"What ends up happening is, we use the 10-year average for fire suppression and ask for that amount," the chief said. "And we usually get what we ask for. But on years like this, we end up spending way more than the 10-year average."

As of Saturday, there have been 3,278 wildfires so far this year in the northern Rocky Mountains, with 665,811 acres burned and well over \$200 million spent on their suppression. And the fire season could continue into October.

Not so many years ago, Congress routinely reimbursed the Forest Service for all firefighting cost overruns. Last year, lawmakers refused at first, then reimbursed some of the money lost to fire suppression. This year, the U.S. Senate refused a request for emergency fire funds shortly before adjourning for its summer recess.

Another request is expected after the Labor Day holiday.

But Bosworth said he's also looking for a long-term solution: maybe the creation of an emergency firefighting fund. Or maybe a line of credit the agency could draw upon during fire season.

"We need help from Congress," he said.

The agency is doing everything possible to control wildland firefighting costs, Bosworth added. "But when you have drought and a lot of fuel in the forest and conditions come together to create ignitions and you have all these homes in the wildland-urban interface, you are going to have costs."

"Every fire with large costs has homes - people - in close proximity," said Brad Powell, the regional forester responsible for national forests in Montana and northern Idaho. "That's what leads to the higher costs."

The only way to significantly reduce firefighting costs, Bosworth said, "will be to get our forests back into a more

natural condition. Then we can get fire back into the forest in a controlled way."

For nearly a century, the Forest Service chased nearly every fire in the forest, virtually eliminating fire from tens of millions of acres.

Dry lower-elevation forests that once burned every eight to 20 years have missed several fire cycles, Bosworth said. Now the woods are dense with small-diameter trees - thickets that burn hotter than they would have historically and resist most attempts at control.

And that's where Bosworth said he needs help from environmental groups: to find the common ground needed to win approval for more - many more - forest-thinning projects. So far, the Forest Service has been unable to convert most environmental groups to the forest-thinning campaign, what President Bush calls his Healthy Forests Initiative.

Time and again, forest health projects have been stopped by lawsuits or administrative appeals.

"We are not thinning these forests as quickly as we need to," the chief said Saturday. "We have got to bring people together and start trying to find common ground and real solutions."

Environmentalists, though, including two groups that kicked off a "Healthy Forests Reality Tour" in Missoula on Friday, believe the Forest Service and Bush administration are using fear tactics to win support for old-fashioned, large-scale timber sales.

Members of the National Forest Protection Alliance and the Native Forest Network said they support tree-thinning projects around homes in the wildland-urban interface, but do not support backcountry fuels reduction.

And Jake Kreilick, who leads the national forest group, said he'll challenge the Forest Service at every turn until the agency puts the emphasis on the wildland-urban interface. He'll also oppose all attempts to salvage timber burned by wildfires this season, he said.

But Bosworth urged environmentalists to "come to the table and into the woods." When any group insists on one and only one approach, everything falls apart, he said. "It doesn't help the public. It doesn't help the forests. It doesn't help the future."

Reporter Sherry Devlin can be reached at 523-5268 or at sdevlin@missoulian.com

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