



Baucus proposes ways to meet rising firefighting costs

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By *JOHN CRAMER of the Missoulian*

U.S. Sen. Max Baucus, D-Mont., on Monday outlined two potential strategies for paying the growing costs of wildfires.

Forest and grassland fires cost more than \$100 million to fight in Montana last year.

Firefighters extinguished 97 percent of those wildfires within 24 hours of their initial attack, but still more than 800,000 acres burned across the state, making it the second worst fire season in the past decade.

Speaking at the U.S. Forest Service's Aerial Fire Depot in Missoula, Baucus said either of his proposals would provide badly needed funding to combat wildfires, especially in Western forests that are being developed into homesites.

“We have to be ready” for the 2008 fire season, the state's senior senator said. “No one can predict what kind of fire season we'll have, but odds are we are staring down the barrel of another bad fire year.”

Baucus met for an hour with federal, state, tribal and local officials and firefighters and toured the smokejumpers' base just west of Missoula International Airport.

He has introduced the Stable Fire Funding Act, which would establish a trust fund with \$600 million in seed money for the Forest Service and \$200 million in seed money for the Bureau of Land Management.

The funds, which would generate interest, would be used to cover 80 percent of firefighting costs that exceed the agencies' appropriated budgets every year, he said.

Baucus' other strategy would be funded by a provision he included in the Climate Security Act, which is aimed at curbing greenhouse gases and combating climate change. The bill was passed by a Senate committee in December.

The provision would provide up to \$1.1 billion annually to combat catastrophic wildfires, or the yearly cost to the federal government of the largest 1 percent of wildfires. Those severe fires account for 85 percent of wildfire suppression costs.

Currently, the Forest Service and BLM borrow emergency fire suppression funds from their own budgets, which reduces funding for thinning the hazardous fuels that feed the fires.

As of late October, the Forest Service and BLM had spent \$1.7 billion on fire suppression in 2007, a figure that doesn't include the total cost of the California wildfires.

Nationwide, nearly 50 percent of the Forest Service's annual budget goes toward wildfire suppression,

fuels reduction, training and other preparedness.

“We are now caught in a cycle of robbing Peter to pay Paul,” Baucus said. “When these agencies have to raid other accounts to pay for firefighting, important maintenance and fuels reduction work falls by the wayside.”

During his talk with fire officials, Baucus remarked about how changing weather and ground conditions have combined to worsen fire conditions in Montana in recent years.

Many of the state's forests are crowded with fuels, which have been turned into tinder by warm, dry weather.

Fire officials said a shortage of money and firefighters, as well as environmental regulations and lawsuits, have allowed hazardous quantities of fuel to build up in the forests.

State forester Bob Harrington said fire officials are trying to reach agreements with environmental groups about where fuel reduction can take place without litigation.

About 160,000 acres in Montana underwent thinning or prescribed burns last year, a small percentage of the total needed to prevent severe fires and to slow the progress once they start, fire officials said.

Fire agencies in Montana have adopted a wildfire strategy that uses a geographic information system to help prioritize areas where fuel reduction is needed.

The strategy also helps to determine where lightning fires should be allowed to burn and where firefighters should strike against fires with a high chance of being contained or that threaten people, structures and watersheds.

Tom Tidwell, the Forest Service's Northern Region forester, said the growing number of houses being built on the urban-wildland fringe is driving up the cost of wildfires.

Many homeowners don't create a defensible space by thinning trees and removing combustible fuels, which increases the risk to firefighters and fire suppression costs, he said.

“It's a problem that's getting worse throughout the West,” he said.

Fire officials said possible solutions to the “wildland-urban interface” problem include tighter requirements by home insurers and stiffer zoning that precludes new houses in high-risk forest fire areas - just as they are restricted in floodplains.

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