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Western governors ask for more fire money

Congress to talk agency budgets this week

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Land managers don't always agree on what's causing an unprecedented string of catastrophic wildfires across the West.

No one, however, disputes its costing more money to put them out, often at the expense of campers, hikers and other public land users.

Forestry experts, Western states and policy groups all say the federal agencies need more money for fire suppression, as agencies are increasingly dip into other programs - such as campground maintenance - to pay for fire suppression.

The Western Governors Association, a nonprofit coalition of governors from 19 Western states including Idaho, sent a letter to congressional leaders last week proposing they create a "suppression funding fix" by creating a separate budget for fighting large fires.

Committees in both houses of Congress will meet this week to discuss funding the agencies, namely the U.S. Forest Service, and are likely to discuss the proposal.

The plan couldn't come at a better time, says one policy group.

"The Forest Service used to be a forest-management agency," said Jay Jensen, executive director of the Council of Western State Foresters. "They're turning into a fire suppression agency."

It's time lawmakers recognize what agency heads and southern Idaho residents have learned over the past few summers, Jensen said: Fighting fires is expensive.

The Forest Service has spent at least a quarter of its \$4.2 billion annual budget putting out fires in each of the last seven years. In 2007, the agency spent almost half its budget - 45 percent - on suppression, compared with 13 percent in 1991.

That's leaving fewer dollars to spend on fire prevention programs, Jensen said, which leads to more big fires.

Department of Interior officials and policy groups like Jensen's say climate change will also increase the ferocity of fires and fuel soaring suppression costs.

The Murphy Complex Fire, Idaho largest in nearly 100 years, burned 653,000 acres last summer in southern Idaho and northern Nevada and cost taxpayers about \$10 million to extinguish.

It's unclear where more fire suppression money may come from, the governors' proposal planners say, though Western lawmakers are indicating they'll support some form of a funding boost.

Republican Sen. Larry Craig, R-Idaho, could be among those lawmakers. "In general, Larry has grown tired of under-funding wildfire management," said spokesman Dan Whiting. "He's been looking for a long time to fix this."

Just how it's fixed, though, remains to be seen.

"This is definitely on everyone's tongue," said Sarah McCreary, a spokeswoman for the National Association of State Foresters. "But where the money is going to come from is still the big question."

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Fueling fire suppression in 2007

1,473 - The number of wildfires in Idaho

1,980,552 - The number of Idaho acres burned by wildfires

9,321,326 - The number national acres burned by wildfires

\$1.8 billion - The amount of money the U.S. Forest Service spent on fire suppression