



U.S. agencies criticized on tracking fire funds

09/16/03

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Federal agencies do not know if the millions of dollars they're spending to dampen wildfire risk on public lands is going where it will best protect homes and property, a federal review has found.

Agencies also mislead the public by claiming credit for "treating" overgrown forests when it may not reduce fire threats or must be repeated to do any good, says a report by the U.S. General Accounting Office released Monday.

The report coincided with the Monday opening of an annual meeting of the National Association of State Foresters in Portland dealing in part with rising fire risk across the country.

Several state foresters questioned Bush administration officials about ways of lessening fire danger without draining funds from other programs. Decades of fire suppression have left many forests clogged with flammable underbrush.

Mark Rey, the Bush administration's undersecretary of agriculture who oversees the U.S. Forest Service, said officials were trying to prioritize projects to get the most for each dollar.

The administration is also controlling costs by curtailing lengthy environmental reviews for certain forest thinning projects. But he said further progress must come through a bill in Congress to accelerate thinning even more.

The administration strongly backs the bill, co-sponsored by Rep. Greg Walden, R-Ore., to further restrict reviews and limit court delays of logging projects sometimes challenged by environmental groups.

But the General Accounting Office, the investigative arm of Congress, reported that opposition was not a leading factor in slowing projects that clear out built-up tinder.

Instead, the main reasons projects could not proceed were the weather and the diversion of funds to fight wildfires, the GAO found after visiting land managers across the West. Managers usually cannot light prescribed burns or use heavy equipment to clear away undergrowth in dry, windy conditions.

About a third of the delays grew from a shift in money from preventative projects to firefighting, which last year cost more than \$1 billion, the GAO said.

Lesser reasons for delays included public resistance, regulatory demands and unpredictable funding. At one Oregon national forest, officials gave up on a prescribed burning project because of local complaints about smoke.

A top priority in the drive to reduce fire hazards is supposed to be the "urban-wildland interface" -- where housing intersects with fire-prone wildlands. But federal agencies have defined the

interface so vaguely that it could include subdivisions near forests, drainages far from homes or public land near powerlines, the GAO said.

So money directed at the interface may or may not go toward protecting homes, it said.

Other priority areas for fire hazard funding are also defined so vaguely that almost any acre of public land in the West could qualify, the GAO said. That leaves no clear way to make sure money goes where it's needed most.

Federal officials estimate that about 190 million acres are at high risk of wildfire, but say the margin of error is so great it could be anywhere from 90 to 200 million acres. Michael Milstein: 503-294-7689; michaelmilstein@news.oregonian.com

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