



Bill would stabilize fire funds

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By *ROB CHANEY* of the *Missoulian*

Western Montana had blue skies and green forests last summer, but Lolo National Forest Supervisor Debbie Austin isn't feeling relaxed about the fires next time.

"We don't often get two of those in a row," Austin said of 2008's ever-so-quiet fire season. Even though snowpacks look close to average and meteorological doomsayers aren't beating the drums of drought, Austin's job involves preparing for flame in the forests.

That job and how to pay for it could see a big change this year.

Firefighting costs have made a crown run through the U.S. Forest Service's national budget over the past decade, consuming 21 percent in 2001, then growing to 45 percent by 2008. They're expected to eat nearly half of the budget this year.

Last week, a group of lawmakers introduced the Federal Land Assistance, Management and Enhancement, or FLAME, Act. Bemoaning the "rob Peter to pay Paul" budget juggling that firefighting has forced, the sponsors proposed a new supplemental budget for "catastrophic emergency wildland fire suppression activities." The bill would also require a new national firefighting strategy.

House Resolution 1404 is already out of committee and set for a House floor vote on Wednesday. It's similar to a bill that won House passage last year, but died in the Senate. U.S. Sen. Jon Tester, D-Mont., is co-sponsoring a parallel bill, S. 561.

"We're excited that it was reintroduced," said Caitlyn Peel of the Council of Western State Foresters. "There was a lot of support for trying to fix this issue. And the (Obama) administration has already talked about this in its budget outline."

Making a separate catastrophic fire account would do two things, Peel said. It would focus more attention on the costs of firefighting and how to control them. And it would insulate the rest of the Forest Service's budget from firefighting overruns.

That would benefit places such as Montana, where national forests blanket the land and the economy. Catastrophic fires destroy timber, houses and tourist seasons. Fighting them takes away money the Forest Service could have spent maintaining campgrounds, ski areas and wildlife habitat.

Last year, the Forest Service spent almost \$234 million on 115 fires in the Northern Rockies, including about \$185 million in Montana alone. And that was a light year, firewise.

In Missoula, Austin said managing the rest of her national forest duties without knowing the summer's fire tab is challenging.

“That 50 percent of the budget (for firefighting) is appropriated upfront, so we know what we've got for the rest of the (nonfire activity) budget,” Austin said. But if firefighting exceeds its allocation, she has to raid other accounts dedicated to things like recreation, timber management and research.

The Forest Service's own 2009 budget justification documents spell out some of the history. Nationally, Forest Service firefighters have spent more than \$1 billion annually in five of the past seven years, according to the agency's budget records. At the same time, the agency's non-fire budget has dropped more than 35 percent since 2001.

And the money tends to go to a few “mega-fires,” Austin said - blazes that demand huge responses because they threaten homes or developed property.

To save money for those big fires, Austin said the Forest Service is trying to “herd” fires that burn in remote areas until they present an opportunity for effective counterattack. In the Sawmill Gulch fire of 2007, fire crews let the flame front run through steep, uninhabited areas until it approached Rock Creek, where they threw up a hard defense.

“We didn't put a line around the back of that fire,” Austin said. “And now there's a good fire break in Rock Creek, and it's more natural.”

Firefighter safety is also a higher priority than it's been, she said. While the Forest Service maintains a commitment to hard initial attack, it won't risk crew lives to confront fires where approaches are poor and resource values are low.

When fires don't play by those rules, the costs explode. About 2 percent of forest fires account for 80 percent of the total wildfire expenses.

And that cuts into the rest of the Forest Service's mission. The 2009 Forest Service budget reduced funding to state and private forestry programs by 58 percent, cut fire preparedness programs by 13 percent and decreased hazardous fuel treatments by 4 percent, according to information provided by Republican U.S. Rep. Denny Rehberg's office. Rehberg supported the 2008 FLAME legislation.

Red Lodge Fire Chief Tom Kuntz serves on the International Association of Fire Chiefs and is a member of its Wildland Fire Policy Committee. In addition to lots of experience fighting large forest fires, he's spent time figuring out how they're paid for. He said the Forest Service's past attempts to be cost effective and budget capped in firefighting usually hurt its on-the-ground performance.

“When the Forest Service tries to reduce costs, they do that at the expense of their relationship with their partners,” Kuntz said. “They'll make rules that ‘fire not on our land is not our responsibility,’ or ‘protecting homes is not our responsibility.’ So they end up in a conundrum of what they can and can't do. When push comes to shove and the house is threatened, they help protect it, and then somebody comes back and says you weren't supposed to do that.”

The way out of that bind, Kuntz said, is to budget for forest fires the same way we do for hurricanes, tornados and floods. That is, through special disaster accounts that don't hold an agency's budget to an unpredictable disaster.

“Trying to treat fires like controllable expenditures with the scientific evidence we have currently does not make sense,” Kuntz said. “We can't let people's homes burn down as a calculation of cost. When fires are threatening a community, nobody wants to figure out a cost-effective way to protect homes.

They want the most effective way. I think the FLAME Act helps us get a little bit closer to that.”

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