

The Idaho Statesman

Coalition distributes fire assistance

The Associated Press

Agencies help communities get share of federal aid

The National Fire Plan written after the 2000 wild-fire season freed up new resources, and the fledgling Western Forestry Leadership Coalition wants small communities to get their shares.

Seven Western U.S. Forest Service regions and 17 state foresters recently formalized a 50-year-old working partnership by launching the Denver-based coalition.

"A big part is it gave Western forestry one voice," said Brian Shiplett, Idaho Lands Department fire bureau chief. "That's always been a struggle here."

Of the \$1.8 billion Congress provided for fire plans, \$78 million was channeled through the Forest Service to state and private forestry programs to help rural fire departments, reduce hazardous fuels, educate homeowners about fireproofing their property, and replace streamside areas.

"We are trying to address forest health and those at-risk

communities, which are in the thousands," said Charlene Schildwachter, marketing director for the Coalition.

The states make the case for what they need to lessen the risk from wildfires. For every federal dollar, more are gleaned from other public and private sources.

Idaho received \$7.9 million to prepare for the 2001 season. Nearly \$2 million went for thinning fuels around the mountain communities of Dixie, Hope, Yellow Pine, Island Park, and Wilderness Ranch and around Heyburn State Park.

Another \$1 million was earmarked to attach noxious weeds that tend to invade burned-over land.

The Lands Department was able to supply or upgrade personal protective gear and radios for 37 rural fire departments, Shiplett said.

The Montana Forestry Division partnered with the

Frenchtown Fire District to assess more than 600 homes next to forests, drawing a map of building with a good chance of burning because they're too close to trees and ground fuels.

Communities also have funding to consider how to use dead timber left after fires, such as milling small-dimension logs for fence posts.

Fire bosses worry the infusion of federal money might be pared down in the next budget as Congress shifts its focus to other matters, such as hunting terrorists.

"Nobody wanted it to burn like last year: 8.4 million acres in one summer and the destruction of homes," Schildwachter said. "But it did serve to get attention and make some changes."