

Bush administration, western governors endorse wildfire plan

COEUR D'ALENE, Idaho – The Bush administration and Western governors have signed off on a 10-year plan that would help reduce the wildfires that plague the Western United States.

Secretary of the Interior Gale Norton and Secretary of Agriculture Ann M. Veneman endorsed the strategy Monday at the Western Governors' Association's annual meeting. The document and a letter of endorsement will be forwarded to Congress.

"This plan is an important part of a great partnership among the federal, state and local authorities to protect our communities and our natural resources," Veneman said. "The 10-year fire plan will be an integral part of our mission and we will work in a coordinated fashion to ensure that its implementation is effective and timely."

The National Interagency Fire Center, based in Boise, Idaho, said more than 20,000 firefighters currently are battling wildland blazes in the West.

The center reported 43 active large fires burning in 10



The current round of wildfires has scorched more than 375,000 acres in 10 states.

states, with more than 375,000 acres consumed.

Firefighting efforts have focused on Oregon and Washington, where fires have increased because of hot and dry conditions. Lightening from isolated thunderstorms predicted in the Cascade Mountains of Oregon and Washington could spark more blazes.

Norton said the 10-year plan calls for "improving wildland fire prevention and suppression, reducing hazardous fuels, restoring ecosystems and improving community assistance."

Arizona Gov. Jane Dee Hull said the cooperation between states and the federal government is a "notable" part of the plan.

"If we are going to tackle this immense problem, we will need to work together as one team. Arizona and New Mexico are working collaboratively in our states with our federal partners and other interests, and we are making progress in restoring health to our forests and rangelands."

Idaho Gov. Dirk Kempthorne said "sustained funding" is necessary to

make the program work. In part, funding could help pay wages to people who perform the work the program calls for – such as education, firefighting, restoration work to areas destroyed by fire and preventative measures such as thinning out small trees and creating survivable space around structures.

Jay Jensen, legislative director of the Western Forestry Leadership Coalition in Denver – which is made up of the U.S. Forest Service and forest agencies in 17 Western states – said \$1.9 billion in new money was allocated in the 2001 federal budget for wildland fire programs.

He and others who support an all-out fight against the wildfires are hoping the federal government maintains the same funding level in 2002.

While the wildfire problem is a prominent one now in the West, Jensen said: "This is more than just a Western problem. It is national. All regions of the country are impacted."