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Forest Service burns through its budgets

By Les Blumenthal - lblumenthal@mcclatchydc.com

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WASHINGTON – The Forest Service has struggled for years to pay for fighting fires that last year alone scorched almost 10 million acres, mainly in the West. As fire seasons grow longer and the blazes more intense in forests stressed by global warming, the agency's funding woes mount.

In fact, the Forest Service has already spent roughly \$900 million this year, almost 75 percent of its fire-suppression budget, and the season is just nearing its peak.

Nearly half the Forest Service's annual budget now is spent on battling wildfires or trying to prevent them. In 1991, 13 percent of its budget was spent on fires.

As the costs have grown, so has the toll on the agency's other programs. To pay for its fire programs, the Forest Service has raided accounts used for everything from reforestation to fish and wildlife to building campgrounds and trails. In theory, those accounts are expected to be repaid. In practice, it's not that easy.

"The whole damn thing is imploding," said Casey Judd, business manager of the Federal Wildland Fire Service Association, in Inkom, Idaho. The group represents firefighters in five federal agencies.

Every year, Congress provides emergency money to bail out the Forest Service and other federal land management agencies. Over the past 10 years, it has provided \$3.9 billion in emergency funding to fight fires. But some on Capitol Hill are getting tired of the Forest Service coming hat-in-hand every year because its budgets fail to adequately reflect firefighting costs.

"The Forest Service would be on its knees except for the money Congress provides," said Rep. Norm Dicks, D-Wash., who as chairman of the House interior appropriations subcommittee oversees the agency's budget. "This thing is pretty close to being out of control."

Dicks' counterpart in the Senate, Sen. Dianne Feinstein, D-San Francisco, chairwoman of the Senate interior appropriations committee, agrees.

"We go through this every year," Feinstein said. "The Forest Service bases its budget for forest fires on wishful thinking. It's a constant juggling act and that's not the way it should be done."

Dicks and Feinstein are preparing a \$900 million emergency spending bill to cover firefighting costs and other pressing needs of the Forest Service. But the appropriations process has ground to a halt because of a dispute over offshore oil and gas drilling.

Forest Service chief Mark Rey unrolls the map that charts the 8,000 lightning strikes during late June storms in Northern California. The lightning strikes started 2,000 fires, triggering what became the largest fire event in California history. Eventually 25,000 firefighters fought the blazes, which covered 1,500 square miles.

"We were doing pretty good until then," said Rey, the Agriculture Department's undersecretary for natural resources and the environment who oversees the Forest Service. "We usually see something like this in late August or September."

Since late June, the Forest Service has spent more than \$75 million a week fighting fires. It has already spent \$210 million more than it did at the same point last year.

Rey acknowledges the current system to pay for firefighting is far from perfect and has caused some disruption in other programs.

"It is what it is," Rey said in an interview. "Until someone comes up with a better system, this is what we have. This is what Congress gave us."

The Forest Service determines its budget for fighting fires based on a 10-year average of its firefighting costs. Unfortunately, it tends to lowball the costs at a time when there are more fires, bigger fires and more severe fires.

Through belt-tightening, the agency has been able to cut its costs by about \$200 million in the past several years. But Rey said that has only slowed the increase in the fire budget.

One answer to the funding problem may be to reduce the amount of hazardous fuel, dried brush, dead trees and other woody debris in the forests, he said. Since 2001, federal land agencies have cleaned 21 million acres, or an area larger than the state of Ohio.

The agencies are clearing between 4 million and 5 million acres a year, but 180 million acres remain untreated, including 80 million to 90 million acres in critical condition or locations.

Dicks and others agree that removing hazardous fuels is important. But they argue the Bush administration sought to cut the Forest Service's budget for dealing with hazardous fuels by \$22 million.

Feinstein said the emergency supplemental she's writing would include an additional \$175 million for hazardous fuels reduction.

Both Dicks and Feinstein say the administration has a responsibility to request emergency funding for firefighting when it is needed and not just leave it up to Congress. They said President Bush had an opportunity to request additional funding when he visited the Northern California fires last week.

"They try and make us look like big spenders," said Dicks. "They just don't care."

Rey responds that Congress is responsible for the funding mess.

"The difference is in January they ask you at a hearing, 'Why are you spending so much on fires?' " he said. "In July it's, 'Why don't you spend more fighting fires in my district?' "

Rey and Dicks also disagree over the main cost of the Forest Service's increased fire costs.

The biggest "cost driver," according to Rey, has been new home construction in forested areas. Over the past 20 years, 8.4 million homes have been built in such areas, he said. Firefighters have had to change their tactics in battling many fires because of forced evacuations and threatened housing, Rey said.

Dicks said global climate change has added a month onto each end of the fire season and often makes the blazes more extreme.

"This administration won't admit climate change is a reality," he said.

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