



## Record fire season leaves Forest Service strapped for cash

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By *PERRY BACKUS of the Ravalli Republic*

HAMILTON - The U.S. Forest Service is in the midst of a nationwide scramble to come up with an additional \$400 million to help pay for the most expensive fire season on record.

The agency has already spent the \$1.2 billion allocated by Congress for fire suppression in 2008 and national forests across the country are poring over their budgets to find additional funds to cover an expected shortfall of at least \$400 million.

Huge fires in heavily populated California have driven fire suppression costs up this summer to record levels.

“We are withdrawing funds from regions, stations, areas and the national office to be able to pay for fire suppression,” Forest Service Chief Abigail Kimbell wrote in a memo to staffers. “We are scrubbing and digging, looking for any source of relief. And we’ll continue to scrutinize fire expenditures at all levels.”

The Forest Service's Northern Region - which includes all national forests in Montana - is expected to come up with close to \$18 million to help pay the bills.

Some groups say the agency might have to come up with millions more to cover fire suppression costs accrued before the end of the fiscal year on Sept. 30.

“Could it go higher, I don't know,” said Ed Nesselroad, the Northern Region's director of public affairs. “People are using their best estimates. They don't want to have to go back and say they need more. It's painful enough to have to tighten your belt two notches. No one wants to have to go back and tighten that third notch.”

The Bitterroot National Forest's share is approaching \$600,000.

“It's pretty significant,” said Bitterroot National Forest Supervisor Dave Bull. “We will feel the effects. There are projects that won't get done.”

Those projects include about 263 miles of heavy trail maintenance, five miles of placing new gravel on roads, 610 acres of thinning for fuel reduction, as well as weed spraying, wildlife habitat improvement, and about \$70,000 of young trees for reforestation projects.

The Lolo National Forest returned almost \$1.3 million.

The funds were transferred out of budgets for construction and maintenance, recreation, watershed restoration, state and private forestry, fire preparedness, and land acquisition.

Bull said some of the projects impacted on the Bitterroot Forest have been in the works for several years.

“A lot of these on-the-ground kind of projects represent a lot of years of planning,” Bull said. “But we've been in this spot where we've needed help paying for fire suppression costs before. We appreciated their help

when we were on the receiving end of it.”

This year's wildfire season was centered in California, large lightning storms in June set thousands of acres on fire.

The Wilderness Society and National Association of State Foresters predict the agency will likely need to find another \$300 million to pay for this year's fire suppression costs.

“It's almost certain to go up to \$700 million,” said Chris Mehl of the Wilderness Society. “This is happening almost every year now and the money is almost never replenished.”

With fire suppression costs rapidly approaching the 50-percent point in the agency's annual \$4 billion budget, the groups are calling on Congress to separate fire suppression costs out of the agency's general budget.

“The Forest Service is rapidly becoming the Fire Service,” Mehl said. “No one is saying that we don't need to protect homes or fight fires S but the agency's other obligations to things like private forestry and water quality are important, too.

“Why not split the budget in half - create an asbestos barrier between the two - and that way the agency can meet both obligations,” Mehl said. “It doesn't matter whether you are a hunter or a millworker, these cuts are across the board. They are going to impact everything.”

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