

editorial

## Fires will come; fight them now

**The federal government should provide adequate funding for wildfire prevention, instead of raiding other forest funds later.**

By The Denver Post

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Coloradans get firsthand the importance of maintaining and protecting national forests, so we're mystified by Washington's inability to set up a reasonable — or even a basic — budget that allows the U.S. Forest Service to both deal with wildfires and see to its normal responsibilities.

Here's a news flash: Another hot and dry summer out West meant large forest fires. Why should that come as a surprise to those holding the purse strings at the Forest Service?

Climate change's longer and drier summers, the mass pine-beetle destruction and the season's frequent lightning strikes construct a familiar equation by now. We hope Congress will start factoring it in by seriously considering legislation that was dropped this year that would have created a separate fund for fire suppression.

By the end of August, the cost of fighting fires forced the Forest Service to redirect \$700 million from traditional programs like maintaining roads

and trails and creating other recreational improvements to cover a \$1.9 billion firefighting tab. Some campgrounds were closed. More bizarre have been cuts in recent years from programs meant to prevent runaway fires, like thinning dead forests or engineering buffer zones for the growing number of new homes in or near forested areas.

Research at the University of Montana meant to discover critical information about how wildfires behave was on the cutting board, as was research focused on the pine beetle crisis in the Rockies.

We suggest those programs are the wrong ones to threaten.

Ultimately, the Forest Service received an emergency "patch" from discretionary funds, but only after Congress saw the disruption the agency faced in pulling money from vital projects to fight fires.

Colorado, meanwhile, benefits from 11 national forests and two national grasslands that make up about 20 percent of the state.

Yes, we are facing wildfires of a different sort right now. Wall Street's federal deficit clock has run out of numbers, we're mired in two wars and our leadership has become understandably consumed by the credit crisis and its lightning-fast spread to local and global economies alike.

But failing to protect our national forests when we know the fires will come isn't cost-effective. Spending the money it takes up front to responsibly manage forests makes far greater sense.

Colorado's Rep. Mark Udall, a member of the House Natural Resources Committee, supports a proposal by The Wilderness Society that would create a separate firefighting account like Congress employs to deal with hurricanes and other disasters.

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The House this July approved the Federal Land Assistance Management and Enhancement Act (or FLAME Act), that should have provided such an account. But deliberations stalled in the Senate.

We suggest the stop-gap funding currently in process prevents thoughtful planning, and urge lawmakers to give the FLAME Act responsible consideration.

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