

Budget cuts leave California with fewer hands to fight wildfires

By Peter Hecht, Sacramento Bee

Just north of Highway 180 in Fresno County, a wildfire in mid-June ate through thick grass, burning into oak woodlands and roaring up steep hills.

For firefighters, it appeared to be a routine event. Six engine teams, including five from Cal Fire and one from Fresno County, attacked from two sides. Firefighters carrying heavy, 300-foot hose extensions ascended the rocky terrain. They doubled back for additional hose, stretching their water lines and attempted to circle the fire before it leaped a ridge.

But, under state budget cuts, Cal Fire was battling the blaze with three firefighters per engine instead of the normal four-man crews used in the wildfire season. They couldn't get water around the fire in time. It jumped the ridge and devoured the next canyon.

The incident on what one fire captain called "a standard wildfire" stoked fear over whether staffing cuts are affecting first-strike capabilities of firefighters to stave off severe wildland events.

"I really thought we could catch it," Cal Fire Capt. Doug Freeman said. "Basically, with the fatigue factor (of using a three-man crew), we just couldn't."

Freeman summoned reinforcements as the blaze that he thought could have been kept to less than 10 acres spread to 133 acres and cost \$300,000 to put out.

As California closed a gaping budget deficit this year with

sweeping cuts to numerous agencies, it saved \$34 million by cutting 750 seasonal Cal Fire firefighters. That means one less person per engine unit to haul thousands of feet of hose lines and share the exhausting physical rigors of battling wildfires.

In the Sacramento region, the cuts mean a total of 29 fewer Cal Fire firefighters in El Dorado and Amador counties and 44 fewer firefighters assigned to the Nevada, Yuba and Placer County region.

Read the whole story