

USFS firefighting budget cut despite dry terrain

By Chuck Raasch, USA Today

Dry conditions have persisted in many of the areas ravaged by fires last year and bark beetles have invaded millions of acres in western forests, creating a tinderbox of dead wood.

Persistent drought and an infestation of tree-killing insects have left broad swaths of the United States vulnerable to unusually fierce wildfires for the second straight year just as the U.S. Forest Service is dealing with cuts in its firefighting budget.

Areas most at risk include Southern California, Arizona, New Mexico, the eastern Rockies and Florida, according to the federal government's most recent fire analysis.



In 2007, 254 houses burned and about 3,100 acres – mostly USFS land – on the South Shore. Photo/Lake Valley Fire

More than 9.3 million acres of public and private land – an area larger than Maryland – burned in 2012, the third most-active wildfire season since 1960, according to the Forest

Service. The agency spent \$1.4 billion fighting them.

Mega-fires from Oregon to New Mexico made headlines from Father's Day to Halloween. Dry conditions have persisted in many of the fire-ravaged areas. Bark beetles also have invaded an estimated 46 million acres in western forests, creating an additional tinderbox of dead wood over an area bigger than Missouri.

"Our predictions for this incoming fire season are almost identical to where we were a year ago at this time," said Tom Tidwell, the chief of the U.S. Forest Service, whose agency manages 193 million acres.

Tidwell said that spending cuts imposed by Congress and the White House will force his agency to hire about 500 fewer firefighters than the 10,000-10,500 it normally employs. He said the Forest Service will "mitigate the impact" by pre-positioning firefighters in vulnerable areas and moving them around more rapidly when outbreaks occur.

Fires are burning hotter and faster than a decade ago, a condition Tidwell attributes to warmer, drier weather. That creates drier vegetation and better fuel for fires.

Last year was the warmest on record for the continental United States, according to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration.

"There is no question we are seeing these large fires become established more quickly, and at times they are almost explosive," he said.

A fire near Los Alamos, N.M., two years ago burned 40,000 acres in its first 12 hours, Tidwell said. A decade earlier, a fire in virtually the same location took seven days to reach 40,000 acres.

He also said that over the past decade, warmer weather has

extended wildfire seasons by 60-70 days a year.

The fire season normally begins this month in the East and progresses westward.

Areas of the Southeast, particularly Florida, are also coming off a drier than normal winter, raising concerns there, too. A fire in St. Lucie County over the weekend forced the evacuation of about 2,500 people, said James Karels, director of the Florida Forest Service.

Karels said he is worried about federal cuts on top of already stretched state firefighting budgets.

The feds "are partners in this kind of fire business, especially (in fighting) the big wildfires," Karels said. "There isn't anyone that can do it alone, and when we see further cuts in the federal end, that is a partner that is not going to be able to come to the table as strong as in the past. And that is a concern."