

USFS diverts money from fire prevention to suppression

By Jack Healy, New York Times

WOODLAND PARK, Colo. – A light breeze riffled the tops of ponderosa pines and old Douglas firs on the mountains above this tourist town. It was a serene summer day, but as Jonathan Bruno wandered through the trees, he wondered how long before it all went up in flames.

Jonathan Bruno, who works for a local environmental group, is worried about cuts to programs that help prevent fires.

“It’s just a matter of time,” said Bruno, who works on forest restoration projects for a local environmental group. “I’ve been losing sleep. There’s just not enough money.”



2007 was the worst fire season in Lake Tahoe when 254 South Shore houses were destroyed. Photo/Lake Valley Fire

As another destructive wildfire season chars the West, the federal government is sharply reducing financing for programs aimed at preventing catastrophic fires. Federal money to thin out trees and clear away millions of acres of deadfall and

brittle brush has dropped by more than 25 percent in the budgets for the past two years, a casualty of spending cuts and the rising cost of battling active wildfires.

The government has cut back on programs to reduce fire risks in areas where homes and the wilderness collide. The U.S. Forest Service treated 1.87 million acres of those lands in 2012, but expects to treat only 685,000 acres next year. Conservation advocates say that is likely to mean fewer people working to prevent runaway fires, fewer controlled burns and fewer trucks hauling away dry brush and tinder.

Trimming trees and clearing brush can make blazes less destructive, and the Forest Service said it had treated more than 26 million acres since 2000. But as the government spends an increasing amount to battle wildfires, critics say it makes little sense to cut back on prevention.

“There is a growing consensus in the West that dollar for dollar, these kinds of prevention efforts are paying off,” said Sen. Ron Wyden, Democrat of Oregon. “And when the big fires break out, the bureaucracy steals money from the prevention fund and the problem gets worse. The Forest Service has become the fire service.”

Twenty years ago, the Forest Service spent 13 percent of its budget on fighting fires. These days, 40 percent of its money goes to firefighting, and that is still not enough to cover the bills. Forest officials went \$400 million over budget fighting last year’s fires, and they expect to run over again this year.

Automatic spending cuts approved by Congress have pinched in other places. This year, forest officials hired 10,000 seasonal firefighters – a decrease of 500 from a year ago – and say that despite updates to their aging fleet of air tankers, they are also fighting fires with fewer fire engines.

“Obviously, there isn’t enough to go around,” said Tom

Harbour, the Forest Service's director of fire and aviation management. "If you can get the forest in the right condition, we know that homes are going to be safer, forests are going to be safer. But we took a hit there."

In 2012, the Forest Service and the Interior Department – which also manages huge swaths of public lands – spent about \$500 million combined to clear out what they call "hazardous fuels" in fire-prone areas. In budgets for next year, the agencies are on track to receive less than \$300 million, according to numbers compiled by Chris Topik, the director of Restoring America's Forests, a Nature Conservancy program.

Harbour said forestry crews were focusing their prevention work on high-risk areas closest to homes, highways and businesses.

Conservationists and Western politicians say the cuts could not come at a worse moment.

Last year, more than nine million acres went up in flames during one of the worst fire seasons on record. Years of drought and beetle epidemics have turned entire mountainsides into matchboxes, and fire experts say rising temperatures and changing climates are making wildfires hotter, longer and more destructive.

"We're heading in the wrong direction," said Sen. Jon Tester, Democrat of Montana, where 150 homes burned in last year's fires.

This month, Colorado's most destructive wildfire erupted 25 miles from Woodland Park, in a pine-shaded suburb north of Colorado Springs. It killed two people and burned 511 homes. In southwestern Colorado, fire crews were still struggling on Thursday to contain a blaze that is burning through 83,000 acres, feeding on thousands of beetle-killed spruce trees in the San Juan National Forest.

A walk through the woods or a drive into the mountains shows how vulnerable parts of the West are to fire. Dry soil crunches and crumbles underfoot, and huge patches of dead evergreen trees dot the mountainsides. Across the country, officials say 65 million acres of national forest are at a high risk for fires – an area bigger than Oregon.

Towns like Woodland Park, population 7,200, are tucked into the mountains across the West, islands of development in an ocean of trees. Houses on roads like Forest Edge Road or Ponderosa Way brush up against national forest land, enjoying all the beauty and risk that comes with the location.

As operations director of the Coalition for the Upper South Platte, Bruno spends his days here convincing homeowners to trim low-hanging branches and identifying thick hillsides that could be the next to set off an inferno.

Studies have shown that thinning out forests – whether on one homeowner’s land, or a huge national landscape – can help keep fires in check, burning along the ground rather than racing from treetop to treetop. In the Southwest, treating land helped to control wildfires 87 percent of the time in 2011, and in 75 percent of cases last year, according to Forest Service data.

Some sections of Pike National Forest here have been thinned, spacing out the trees and removing low-hanging branches. But thousands more acres are dense tinderboxes, Bruno said.

“If the fire got in,” he said, “this town would not be here.”