

Politicians hear from fire experts about challenges

By Clare Foran, National Journal

In a forum convened Tuesday by the Bicameral Task Force on Climate Change, a panel of experts on climate, wildfires, and forestry met with task force co-chairs Rep. Henry Waxman, D-Calif., Sen. Sheldon Whitehouse, D-R.I., and other lawmakers to discuss the impact of climate change on wildfires.

"We've been experiencing wildfire activity that is different and more dangerous," Waxman said in his opening statement, calling recent fires some of the "largest and most intense ... we've seen."

Panelists cited a number of reasons for wildfire flare-ups, including land-use patterns and insect activity. But the discussion kept circling back to climate change.

"Scientists tell us these changes are not just random variability," Waxman said. "Bigger and more-intense fires are one of the red flags of climate change."

Climate-change expert William Sommers, a researcher at George Mason University's EastFIRE Laboratory, agreed. Sommers cautioned that rising levels of atmospheric carbon dioxide will only worsen wildfires in decades to come. "If current greenhouse-gas emission trends are not sharply reversed in the immediate future, we will see observed trends in wildfire risk accelerate," he warned.

Waxman and Whitehouse asked firefighting and forestry experts for policy recommendations to help mitigate the situation.

Panelists, including Santa Fe, N.M., Fire Chief Erik Litzenberg and Rick Swan, director of supervisory personnel

and health and safety for the California Department of Forestry Firefighters, cited budget cuts as a major stumbling block in efforts to combat wildfires, and called for increased funding for park services and firefighters.

“We are seeing a dramatic increase in the number of fires, especially in California,” Swan said. “But we are not seeing the same increase in staffing levels and funding.”

Litzenberg called on lawmakers to increase funding for the federal Volunteer Fire Assistance Grant program, noting that volunteers frequently serve as the first line of defense against wildfires.

Waxman and Whitehouse promised to consider the recommendations, but acknowledged that cutbacks due to sequestration would make funding increases difficult to achieve, at best.

Nevertheless, Waxman stressed that Congress cannot ignore the link between climate change and wildfires. “It’s going to continue to get worse and ... this isn’t the only problem that we’re facing because of climate change,” he said. “We’ve got to wake up the American people and their representatives and we’ve got to deal with this issue.”