

Climate-driven wildfires consume USFS budget

By Alan Bjerga, Bloomberg

Wildfires blamed in part on climate change are consuming timber in the U.S. West at such a furious pace that half the Forest Service's budget is now spent fighting them – up from 21 percent in 2000.

Add in the firefighting of other agencies, as well as state governments, and the bill to taxpayers runs in the billions of dollars each year. And it's growing fast, driven by an urbanizing West as well as warmer and drier summers.

The cost has touched off a debate about whether the rush to quench blazes is obscuring the need to prevent fires by thinning deadwood and controlling insects or limit their impact by discouraging home-building in danger-prone areas.

"We don't always necessarily need more money," said Kim Rodrigues, a wildfire expert with the University of California's agricultural and natural resources department in Davis. "But we need more proactive efforts."

President Obama, citing a National Climate Assessment in May that mentioned wildfires 200 times, is proposing a shift in the way firefighting is funded and put blazes on par with hurricanes and earthquakes. That would boost funding and end the practice of taking money from mitigation and prevention to pay for disaster response.

Federal firefighting costs passed \$1 billion for the first time in 2000 and have exceeded that mark every year but two. Together, the Forest Service and Interior Department have averaged \$1.54 billion in fire suppression in the past decade. States pay another \$1 billion to \$2 billion annually,

according to Headwaters Economics, a Bozeman, Mont.-based research group. Fires affected about 7.3 million acres a year in the most recent decade, up 66 percent from the previous 10 years.

Read the whole story