

Congress on recess without addressing fire funding

By Cliff Weathers, AlterNet

Congress is heading home for summer vacation, failing to act on emergency funding to combat the wildfires that are raging in the West.

President Obama had requested \$615 million in emergency funding to help the U.S. Forest Service and Interior Department pay for firefighting efforts, and the Democratic-controlled Senate proposed a \$2.7 billion spending bill to deal with the wildfires and the influx of unaccompanied minors along the Southwest border. But Senate Republicans used a procedural objection to block its consideration. The House did not introduce a bill to combat wildfires.

Although Congress returns next month, the fire season in some states will have passed its peak.

Ironically, without emergency funding from Congress, the Forest Service and Interior Department will need to transfer money from elsewhere in their budgets, including funds earmarked to remove flammable vegetation from forests, projects that help prevent such fires from raging in the first place.

The two federal agencies have budgeted over \$1 billion for firefighting this year – five times more than 20 years ago – but that may not be enough.

Wildfires are currently raging through the Pacific Northwest and California, in regions that have been affected by unseasonably warm temperatures and drought. The long-range forecast in the region calls for above-average temperatures through October, which can translate into fuels that are much

drier than usual.

Fires continue to rage in Oregon, and communities in the southwestern part of the state are being asked to evacuate their homes, as fire spreads along the border with California. Some 5,300 acres in the Cascade-Siskiyou National Monument have been scorched and the town of Ashland, just to its east, is threatened by the fire. Meanwhile, lightning has sparked two new large wildfires in the state.

About 780 square miles of land is currently burning in Oregon, and a continued heat wave, along with forecasted lightning storms, are expected to bring more fires to the region.

Fires in central Washington, which have raged since early July, are threatening the state's famous orchards at the time apple harvest begins.

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