

USFS chief: Expect 'above average' fire season

By Kevin Freking, AP

WASHINGTON – The head of the U.S. Forest Service warned Tuesday of an “above average” fire season that could cost the agency more than \$1 billion and require shifting funds from programs designed to prevent wildfires.

Tom Tidwell testified before the Senate Energy and Natural Resource Committee that the fire season is 60 to 80 days longer than it was just 15 years ago, and he didn't expect any falloff. “These are the fire seasons we're going to continue to have,” he said.

California and several other Western states are battling severe drought, increasing the risk of wildfires.

Tidwell estimated that the agency's cost of fighting wildfires this year would be in the range of \$800 million to \$1.7 billion.

The Forest Service and the Department of Interior can transfer money from other programs once their fire suppressions accounts have been depleted. But Tidwell called that process self-defeating because it requires the agencies to delay work designed to limit the threat of wildfires.

Lawmakers agreed that changes are needed, but they differ on key details that could make consensus difficult. There's some bipartisan support for the administration's efforts to make the biggest forest fires eligible for disaster funding. Two Republican members of the committee, Jeff Flake of Arizona and John Barrasso of Wyoming favor an approach that places more emphasis on forest management projects to prevent wildfires, including a speedier environmental review process for those

projects.

Republican Sen. Lisa Murkowski of Alaska, the committee's chairman, said residents in her state are worried about the coming fire season. She said she visited Fairbanks recently and couldn't remember another beginning of May with no snow on the ground.

The ranking Democrat on the committee, Sen. Maria Cantwell of Washington, called for Tidwell to work with other agencies to improve communications services during a forest fire. Last year's Carlton Complex fire in her home state left many residents without power and the ability to communicate for weeks due to downed power lines. Police had to drive from town to town and use megaphones to spread word of the threat, she said.