

Drought, wildfires among Western issues facing Congress

By Bill Theobald, Statesman Journal

WASHINGTON – From drought to wildfires, Congress faces numerous issues of special importance to Westerners when it returns today.

The cost of fighting the fires has already exceeded what had been budgeted for fire suppression this year, Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack said. That means the Forest Service and the Interior Department will have to shift funds intended for other uses to pay for fighting fires. This “fire borrowing” siphons money targeted for clearing undergrowth and other steps to prevent fires or reduce their severity.

For several years, legislation has been proposed to change the method for paying to fight wildfires to avoid fire borrowing. There are two competing proposals in the Senate this year.

In its fourth year, drought’s footprint continues to expand in the West, according to the National Drought Mitigation Center. The most serious level – exceptional drought – covers most of central California and western Nevada. That area is ringed by the next most serious level – extreme drought – which extends throughout much of Oregon and Washington and into western Montana and northern Idaho.

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