

Forest Service's mission goes up in flames

By Jodi Peterson, High Country News

We've written quite a bit lately about "fire borrowing" – what happens when the Forest Service runs out of the funds it's budgeted for firefighting, which are based on average wildfire costs over the last 10 years. Then it's forced to start dipping into money meant for other programs, including those intended to reduce the risk and intensity of wildfires.

Agency chief Tom Tidwell recently told the *Coloradoan*, "The reality of the last two years – and where we'll be headed this year – is that we have to use almost all the (prevention) funding (to pay for firefighting instead). ...This is also the time of the year we do a lot of the planning for next year. That planning (won't) get done."

But not only do these budgetary borrowings, usually to the tune of about \$500 million per year, hurt current projects, there's a huge long-term cost as well. Critics ranging from members of Congress to agency staffers have charged that the Forest Service is rapidly becoming the Fire Service, an agency whose duty to "sustain the health, diversity, and productivity of the Nation's forests and grasslands" has been utterly overrun by its need to put out fires.

Now, a new report from Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack lays out the problem created by the rapidly-rising cost of fighting forest fires, which have gotten much more severe in recent years thanks to climate change, drought, disease and insects, development near forests, and the overgrowth of flammable shrubs and small trees. Firefighting now consumes 42 percent of the Forest Service's budget (if you count all fire-related expenses, it's 51 percent), compared to just 16 percent in

1995.

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