

Fire and Forest

Feds Move to Fix Funding but Homeowners Still Key

by Mike Esnard

(from The Town Crier - March 2014)

Facts are stubborn things, as John Adams said, and a very stubborn thing over the last two decades has been how much we have spent on putting out forest fires. Not surprisingly, wildfire protection costs have risen substantially. A recent paper from Headwaters Economics puts the federal annual average fire suppression cost in the 1990s at slightly less than a billion a year, and the average cost since 2002 at more than \$3 billion per year.

This tripling of fire fighting costs is a result of longer fire seasons, higher temperatures, and fuel build-up in the forests, all leading to more frequent and more intense fires. An arresting fact is that fire fighting now accounts for nearly half of the Forest Service (USFS) annual budget.

A huge problem for the Forest Service and the Department of the Interior (DOI) is that they are the only agencies who must pay for natural disaster response out of their regular annual budgets. This being the case, these agencies found that they had to “borrow” from other programs, such as fire prevention, to pay the costs of fire suppression. This puts them in the position of having less money to prevent fires, because they need more money to put them out. In the last two years the Forest Service had to take over a billion dollars from other programs to pay for fire suppression.

The good news is that lawmakers want to change this. A heavily supported bill, the Wildfire Disaster Funding Act, has been introduced this session in both the House and Senate, brought up by Senators Wyden (D-OR) and Crapo (R-ID), and by Representatives Simpson (R-ID) and Schrader (D-OR).

The bill would allow the federal fire fighting agencies to treat unusually large fire fighting expenses as FEMA does for natural disasters. High suppression costs would be drawn from special disaster funding outside USFS and DOI budgets, making sure ongoing programs such as forest management would not be raided in bad fire years.

This is one of the few times this congress is likely to act with full bipartisan support and the strong support of the White House, made possible by support from almost every group that has anything to do with forests and rangelands.

But none of these federal funding changes relieves property owners from our own responsibilities. We all hope this bill will allow for more consistent fuels treatments on the mountain. But even with more and better fuels work around us, we will still have fires, some will be big, and what we do on our own properties is still crucial.

In a recent study by scientists from the Rocky Mountain Research Station (Calkin, et al., 2014) proposing a risk management model for fire protection, the authors emphasize the importance of the Home Ignition Zone (HIZ), since most homes are destroyed in wildfire by embers contacting surface fuels touching the house. They argue that landscape projects that ignore the ignitability of homes will not prevent home loss in large fires. They want policy makers to define the problem not as a wildfire control problem, but as a home ignition problem. In their words, "mitigation of the HIZ is the most cost-effective investment for reducing home destruction." In our words, home fire abatement is the smartest thing we can do to keep our houses safe.