

US fire marshals battle more wildfires as budgets are cut

By Nick Barrickman
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As the United States enters the summer months, recognized as the most dangerous time period for outbreaks of wildfires and other catastrophes in the Southwestern region of the country, fire marshals are forced to cope with dwindling resources to fight off an increasingly large number of blazes.

According to the National Interagency Fire Center, of the nine worst fire seasons the US has seen, eight have occurred since 2000. The current season appears to be no different, with increased chances of fire across the country. The agency predicted that fires will be concentrated on the West Coast and in the Southwest, as well as in the Northwest in states such as Montana and Idaho.

The year 2012 was the hottest on record, with an average temperature year-round of 55.3 degrees Fahrenheit, 3.3 degrees hotter than the highest recorded level for the entire 20th century. Last year, approximately 9.3 million acres were scorched across the US, with 51 fires burning more than 40,000 acres each.

Where government agencies once worked to prevent outbreaks of wildfires and other such heat and drought-related disasters, currently the focus is only on “suppression” after they have already occurred. “Because the fires have gotten bigger and bigger, we’ve spent more of our money on suppression and less on fuel removal,” said Colorado Senator Mark Udall of the government’s prevention methods. He added that in terms of combating infernos of the kind seen recently in his state, “We’ve gotten behind the eight-ball on this.”

As of 2012, combating fires took up 40 percent of the National Forest Service’s budget, as compared to a mere 13 percent in the early 1990s. Likewise, the shift from prevention to response has seen a 35 percent

reduction in staff for needs not related to putting out blazes once they have begun.

The Hazardous Fuels Reduction Program, run jointly by the Department of the Interior and the National Forest Service (NFS), has seen massive cuts to its budget, going from \$500 million in 2012 to less than \$420 after last March’s federal sequester went into effect. The Obama administration has planned additional cuts of more than \$120 million to the program to go into effect within the next several months.

Under the cuts being administered, the program will be forced to treat as much as 1,000,000 fewer acres in the coming year for hazardous fuels, leaving the program as just a shell of its former self. “It’s a wicked public policy question,” stated Tom Harbour, director of the Forest Service. “We’ve got to make trade-offs. We’re living in a time of constrained budgets.”

The program, which clears regions in risk of dangerous materials seen as conducive to deadly fires, has also seen its budget whittled away by inflation, placing the program’s overall funding to 10 percent less than what it was in 2001.

The news of massive impending budget cuts comes just days after officials announced the containment of the largest wildfire in the history of the state of Colorado. That fire, which burned for over 16,000 acres, destroying over 500 homes and killing two outside of the central-Colorado city of Colorado Springs, first made headlines a little over a week and a half ago. The record-setting blaze outstripped the carnage which occurred just a year earlier in Waldo Canyon, also near Colorado Springs, which scorched nearly 350 homes and took two lives in a roughly 18,000 acre radius. (See “Worst wildfire in Colorado history destroys hundreds of homes, kills two”)

At the time of the Black Forest inferno last week, President Barack Obama gave a perfunctory salute to “the brave men and women fighting tirelessly to combat these devastating fires,” while failing to mention that budget cuts imposed by his administration have placed these same people on increasingly precarious footing against the outbreaks of such natural disasters.

The danger of wildfire occurrence is further compounded by the proximity of neighborhood housing to regions that have been hit by de-forestation. Since the 1990s, between 15 million and 17 million new homes have been built in regions at risk of dangerous fires. In Colorado alone, one in four homes are located within “red zones”—areas threatened by a fire outbreak.

In order to protect these new homes, it is estimated that the National Forest Service must clear a much as 65 million acres of de-forested land. As suburban sprawl and instances of extreme weather increase, a simultaneous decrease in safety precautions is being driven through by politicians, leaving populations unprepared and vulnerable in the event of an environmental disaster.

The Obama administration has moved rapidly to slash basic safety and health programs amidst the greatest financial crisis in recent history. Most recently, his administration announced a planned cut of nearly \$300 million from the Environmental Protection Agency for the upcoming fiscal year. This represents a deepening of previous budgetary attacks on the agency, after last year’s slashing of \$105 million from the program.

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