

Obama administration warns 2015 wildfires could be costly

June 9 2015, by Dan Elliott

Despite a wet spring, the Obama administration warned Tuesday that this summer's wildfires could drain the federal firefighting budget and force government agencies to transfer money from programs meant to reduce long-term fire danger.

The Agriculture and Interior departments said their firefighting costs are expected to range from \$810 million to \$1.62 billion this summer. The high end would exceed their combined firefighting budget of about \$1.4 billion.

Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack and Interior Secretary Sally Jewell are scheduled to discuss wildfire threats and fire outlook later Tuesday in Denver.

Heavy precipitation in May has reduced the likelihood of wildfires this month across much of the nation, but the danger will increase from July through September, according to June 1 report by the National Interagency Fire Center, which coordinates firefighting nationwide.

The risk is below normal in a vast area of the central and Southern U.S. in June, but above normal in drought-stricken California. Hawaii and parts of the Southwest and Alaska are also at above-normal risk.

As the summer progresses, fire danger is expected to increase across the country, especially in the Northwest, Georgia and the Carolinas. Above-normal temperatures are forecast for most of the West and the Atlantic

coast.

In Denver Tuesday, Vilsack and Jewell plan to discuss President Barack Obama's proposal to change the way the government funds wildfire-fighting to ease the strain on the budget.

The worst 1 percent of wildfires eat up about 30 percent of the U.S. Forest Service's firefighting budget, they said. The Forest Service is part of the Agriculture Department.

Obama wants to treat the cost of catastrophic fires like other natural disasters, taking money from an existing federal disaster relief fund so the Forest Service doesn't have to tap into other funds designed to improve forest health and reduce future fires.

The House Appropriations Committee is proposing a budget of \$3.6 billion for wildland firefighting and prevention for the fiscal year that starts in October, \$52 million more than the current budget, committee spokeswoman Jennifer Hing said Tuesday.

The measure doesn't change the way major fires are paid for. Hing said that would require Congress to revise laws that govern the budget process and disaster recovery spending.

In a report released in August, the Agriculture Department said staffing for fighting fires has more than doubled since 1998 but the number of workers who manage National Forest lands has dropped by about a third.

When the report was made public, Vilsack said rising firefighting costs cut into programs to restore vegetation and watersheds after fires. Programs that help states and private landowners conserve wildlife habitat and maintenance of recreational sites also has suffered, the [agriculture](#) secretary said.

Vilsack and Jewell have warned that catastrophic wildfires pose a worsening danger, especially in the West.

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