

Northwest fire crews hope for a break in weather

PORTLAND (AP) — Northwest fire officials told U.S. Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack that incoming cooler weather could help calm the massive blazes that threaten thousands of homes, but wind storms may cause extreme fire behavior in the interim.

Vilsack, in Portland Friday for a wildfire briefing, said 14,000 homes in Oregon and Washington are currently at risk and the Forest Service is spending \$10 million a day for fire suppression in the region.

As the warm weather is being replaced this week by cooler conditions from the Pacific Ocean, the cold front could bring rain to western Oregon this weekend, but the transition to the cold front will also bring

strong winds across eastern Washington and northeastern Oregon.

Any break in the weather would be welcomed by weary fire crews.

This year to date, a total of 3,382 fires have burned in Oregon and Washington — with 93 of those categorized as large fires, officials told Vilsack at the briefing. Currently, more than 10,900 firefighters in the region are battling 11 large blazes.

Vilsack said that more and more federal resources are being used to fight Western wildfires.

In 1995, he said, 16 percent of the Forest Service's budget went toward fire suppression. Today, 52 percent of the agency's budget is spent on fighting fires. In the

next decade, if the trend continues, the agency estimates nearly 70 percent of its budget will go toward wildfire costs.

"No one wants our Forest Service to become one large fire department," Vilsack said.

That money isn't spent on forest thinning and other fire-prevention projects. Agencies like the U.S. Bureau of Land Management and Forest Service currently have to borrow funds to pay for such projects.

The problem, Oregon Sen. Ron Wyden, D-Ore., and Vilsack said, is that one to two percent of the wildfires — the largest ones, which put most property at risk — are eating up a third of the firefighting budget. Since most of those fires

were started by lightning, they are natural disasters like hurricanes or earthquakes and should qualify for emergency federal funds, Wyden said.

“ No one wants our Forest Service to become one large fire department. — Tom Vilsack ”

Under a measure being backed by Wyden, agencies could tap federal disaster funds only if nationwide firefighting costs reached 70 percent of the 10-year average.

Eastern Oregon fire destroys two more homes, guest house

JOHN DAY (AP) — Firefighters on Sunday worked to stop the spread of a group of Central Oregon wildfires that have grown to 159 square miles and destroyed two more homes and a guest house.

Firefighters built fire lines around the buildings and set up sprinklers but had to flee Saturday when winds gusted up to 50 mph and threatened their escape routes.

About 950 firefighters are battling the blazes that have previously destroyed more than three-dozen homes in the area.

Some residents in the area have been told to evacuate, and residents of the town of Prairie City have been told to be ready to evacuate.

Fire spokesman Damon Simmons says crews had better conditions Sunday and are trying to stop the flames from spreading to the north and northeast.

Judge rules against using vehicles for juniper removal

SALEM (AP) — A federal judge has ruled that it is illegal to use motorized vehicles to remove juniper in wilderness study areas near Oregon's Steens Mountain.

The *Capital Press* newspaper reports that the judge ruled against the U.S. Bureau

of Land Management, which is cutting juniper from about 336,000 acres in the Steens Mountain Cooperative Management Area because the trees are crowding out native vegetation.

The bureau argued the vehicle ban already in

place did not apply since they would be using vehicles for administrative purposes.

The judge sided with the Oregon Natural Desert Association, which filed the

lawsuit.

Juniper removal is expected to prevent further population declines of the sage grouse, a candidate for endangered species protection.

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