

Oregon lawmakers to Congress: Treat wildfires like natural disasters

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STATESMAN JOURNAL

As devastation from Oregon's near-record fire season mounts, local and state lawmakers are renewing calls for a long-term solution to inadequate funding that they say contributes to larger and more dangerous fires.

Oregon's two senators have led a bipartisan push since 2013 to legislate an end to so-called "fire borrowing," which is when the Forest Service diverts money away from restoration, conservation and maintenance to fight fires.

This creates a cycle where firefighting takes up an increasingly bigger chunk of the Forest Service's budget, limiting fire prevention that could keep large, costly fires smaller, proponents say.

Federal agencies estimate the largest 1 percent of fires consume about 30 percent of firefighting budgets. Of the 76 large fires burning nationwide, 18 are in Oregon.

"This year is virtually guaranteed to be the worst fire season in history in terms of the total area burned," said Sen. Ron Wyden, D-Ore.

The Forest Service estimated that by the end of the month, which corresponds with the end of this fiscal year, it would spend an estimated \$300 million more than budgeted for wildfire suppression efforts.

But Hurricane Harvey gave lawmakers an opportunity to address these costs. On Thursday, a disaster relief bill passed the Senate with an amendment that would backfill up to \$300 million in



A wildfire, as seen from near Stevenson, Wash., across the Columbia River, burns in the Columbia River Gorge above Cascade Locks. TRISTAN FORTSCH, AP/KATU

wildfire fighting costs.

Oregon's senators considered this a victory in the short term, effectively allowing the Forest Service to avoid "fire borrowing" this year, but in a joint statement they called on Congress to devise a permanent solution.

"Passing this wildfire funding is a huge step forward, but there's more to do," said Sen. Jeff Merkley, D-Ore.

"Congress needs to step up and treat these infernos like the natural disasters they are," Wyden said.

Their suggestion — the Wildfire Disaster Funding Act — was first introduced in 2013 with more than a dozen co-sponsors from both sides of the aisle. The crux of the bill, which was supported by 261 organizations in 2015, is the creation of a separate disaster fund that would kick in if fire suppression spending exceeded 70 percent of 10-year average cost.

Wyden said this proposal falls in line with a national idea that disasters should be handled by all citizens. Currently,

wildfires are not considered disasters in the same way as, for example, hurricanes are.

Even if the "fire borrowing" problem is addressed, climate change could continue impacting the severity of Oregon's fire seasons with hotter and drier summers, particularly after wet winters.

In a 2015 report, the Forest Service indicated that wildland fire management had grown as a percentage of their budget from 16 percent to 52 percent in the previous 20 years.

"This is probably the most important time in recent history to fix our broken system," Wyden said.

Other state officials have requested federal help with Oregon's historic fire season.

Oregon's congressional representatives sent a letter to House leadership on Tuesday describing the fires burning through the state. They asked for money for wildfire suppression to be included in the Hurricane Harvey legislation — the House should vote Friday on the bill that just passed the Senate.

In Salem, Oregon Senate President Peter Courtney echoed those sentiments in a letter to Congress the same day.

"My state is on fire. Washington, Idaho, California and Montana are on fire. Congress needs to act," Courtney said. "Flooding has left thousands homeless in Texas and Louisiana. The West is burning down. This is no time for politics. It's time for action."

Contact the reporter at cradnovich@statesmanjournal.com or 503-399-6864, or follow him on Twitter at @CDRadnovich.

Fires bring hazardous air quality to Detroit

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STATESMAN JOURNAL

Four wildfires blanketed Detroit Lake in hazardous smoke Sept. 3 and brought increased evacuation levels to the Breitenbush area.

The four fires — Whitewater, Little Devil, Scorpion and Potato Hill — are currently burning around 22,000 acres to the north and east of Detroit.

"The smoke was actually burning our eyes," said Gary Terlecki, who owns a cabin in Detroit and brought his family for the weekend. "It was awful. We decided to leave early."

Meanwhile, Marion County issued a level 2 evacuation — meaning "get ready to go" — for the Breitenbush and Highway 46 area north of Detroit.

Breitenbush Hot Springs is already closed and officials said they'd close Breitenbush, Humbug and Cleator Bend campgrounds for the season.

The heightened evacuation comes as the Scorpion Fire and Little Devil Fire burn just two to three miles away from the Breitenbush area.

"People are breathing a lot of smoke and have not been happy when they get here," Detroit district ranger Grady

McMahan said. "We decided to get through the Labor Day Weekend and then close the campgrounds."

Fire teams were able to get a line around the Potato Hill Fire, burning near U.S. Highway 20 near Santiam Pass. That allowed officials to reopen two lanes of traffic on the main thoroughfare between Salem and Bend.

"In some ways the smoke does us a favor," said Arlene Perea, spokeswoman for fire teams working the Detroit area blazes. "It shades the fire from direct sunlight, so there's not as much heat on the flames. And, it deprives the fire of oxygen."

"That said, it's pretty hard to look at the smoke as a benefit."

A burn ban remains in effect in Marion County. The ban prohibits all fires, including recreational, backyard, and fire pits in parks and campsites. All fires are prohibited in Willamette National Forest, including campgrounds.

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Smoke blankets Detroit Lake on Sept. 3. GARY TERLECKI / SPECIAL TO THE STATESMAN JOURNAL

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