



LOWELL'S TENT CITY.

become the public face of "the fire industrial complex."

"Beginning in the '80s they began to privatize a lot of firefighting. Now it's become a big business and business is booming. They're facilitating these large siege-like spectacles which are spending millions of dollars on everything from catering services to fire engines. A lot of money is going to a few contractors."

And federal wildfire budgets are becoming a bottomless pit. According to the Thoreau Institute, a non-profit that watch-

dogs government land management spending, the Forest Service is rapidly becoming the Fire Service. The agency's total budget has grown from \$3.2 billion in 1991 to \$5.3 billion in 2001. But during this same period, money for the actual National Forest System — money that does everything from build trails to sell timber on the 155 National Forests across the country—has shrunk by a

billion dollars, a 37 percent decline. The fire suppression budget has increased by \$1.1 billion, a 253 percent increase.

The cost of fighting the 5,000-acre Clark Fire for three weeks is almost half the amount of money that the Willamette National Forest spends to manage the entire 1.7 million acre forest for an entire year. In the past 10 years, the Willamette has already laid off hundreds of employees and shut down several ranger stations serving rural areas like Blue River and Oakridge.

## The Next Big Fire

"Oh yeah, once they turn it over to an incident management team, it's a big show," says Craig Clifton who can barely be heard over the roar of helicopters shuttling water to the Kelsay Fire, burning 60 miles southeast of Eugene. A Forest Service fire fighter for 14 years, Clifton is one of hundreds of personnel recently reassigned to Kelsay from the now-con-

"The old fire fighting system drew heavily on personnel who had other jobs and were mobilized during the fire season all throughout the different forests," says John Zapell, one of three Forest Service public information officers working for the Central Oregon Interagency Incident Management Team that is leading this suppression effort on the Umpqua National Forest.

"The Forest Service has changed quite a bit," he adds after a pause.

The agency is changing along with weather. According to Forest Service bioclimatologist Ron Neilson, global climate change for the American West means more precipitation, and a corresponding increase in the amount of flammable fuel. With this increase in woody material will come a huge increase in the number and size of fires.

Approximately 7.2 million acres of the west burned in 2002 at a cost of \$1.6 billion, just short of the record 7.4 million acres burned in 1988. Some computer mod-

'THE FOREST EVOLVED WITH FIRE BOTH NATURAL AND HUMAN CAUSED, BUT NOT WITH FIRE SUPPRESSION AND CRIMINAL ARSON. IT'S A BAD SCENE THAT WE'RE IN.' —TIMOTHY INGALSBEE

tained Clark Fire.

It's July 31, at the junction of a dusty logging road now serving as a "division break" between fire fighting units on the Kelsay Fire. The intersection is jammed with fire engines, command vehicles and hundreds of sooty firefighters marching single file to and from various hotspots along the line.

els being developed by Neilson and his colleagues predict as much as twice as much forest will be burned annually at certain points over the next 30 years.

Which means boom years are ahead for the army of agency personnel, private contractors and suppliers who wage war on the West's wildfires. **EW**

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