



Nathan Howard/AP Photo

A sign damaged by the Bootleg fire is seen among the haze near Paisley in July.

## US adds \$103M for wildfire hazards, land rehabilitation

By **KEITH RIDLER**  
*Associated Press*

BOISE, Idaho — The U.S. is adding \$103 million this year for wildfire risk reduction and burned-area rehabilitation throughout the country as well as establishing an interagency wildland firefighter health and well-being program, Interior Secretary Deb Haaland announced Friday.

Haaland made the announcement following a briefing on this year's wildfire season at the National Interagency Fire Center in Boise, which coordinates the nation's wildland firefighting efforts.

The U.S. is having one of its worst starts to the wildfire season with more than 30,000 wildfires that have scorched 4,600 square miles. That's well above the 10-year average for the same period, about 23,500 wildfires and 1,800 square miles burned.

About \$80 million will be used to speed up work removing potential wildfire hazards on more than 3,000 square miles of Interior Department lands, a 30% increase over last year. Another \$20 million will be used to bolster post-wildfire landscape recovery.

The money is coming from the \$1 trillion infrastructure deal President Joe Biden signed late last year.

"As wildfire seasons become longer, more intense and more dangerous, President Biden's Bipartisan Infrastructure Law is bringing much-needed support to communities across the country to increase the resilience of lands and bet-

ter support federal wildland firefighters," Haaland said.

The firefighter well-being program that includes the U.S. Forest Service will address physical and mental health needs for seasonal and year-round wildland firefighters, and will include post-traumatic stress disorder care. The fire center in recent years has started making efforts to encourage firefighters to seek mental health help after an increase in wildland firefighter suicides.

"Wildland firefighters work in incredibly stressful environments that can take a significant toll on their overall health and well-being, as well as on those who love them," Haaland said. "Standing up a targeted interagency effort to provide trauma-informed mental health care is critical."

The Interior Depart-

ment's program will establish year-round prevention and mental-health training for wildland firefighters. The Interior Department's Office of Wildland Fire will help create a new system for trauma support services that emphasizes early intervention.

About \$3 million will be used for climate-related research that includes landscape resiliency, prescribed fire, carbon storage and greenhouse gas and smoke emissions.

Some of the money will be used to continue developing a wildfire risk mapping and mitigation tool that's being developed by the Forest Service and the National Association of State Foresters. That tool could help identify high-risk areas and make them a priority for treatment.

"We work with fire years now — it's no longer a fire season," said Jeff Rupert, the Interior Department's director of the Office of Wildland Fire, who took part in Friday's announcement. "That means that we have to do the hard work of reducing fire risk and recovering after fires at the same time that we're responding to fires."

With the latest financial support, "we're investing in all of these phases," he said.

Haaland also visited the U.S. Geological Survey in Boise, where scientists are working to better understand

the sagebrush steppe in the West that has been plagued with giant wildfires in recent decades as invasive species, notably cheatgrass, have moved in. Scientists want to make the areas more resistant to wildfires and help them recover.

"The science is ongoing," Haaland said. "I want you to know that all of us — all of the departments, the bureaus, the offices at the Department of the Interior, of which the USGS is one — we're all working together to make sure that the science compliments the work that

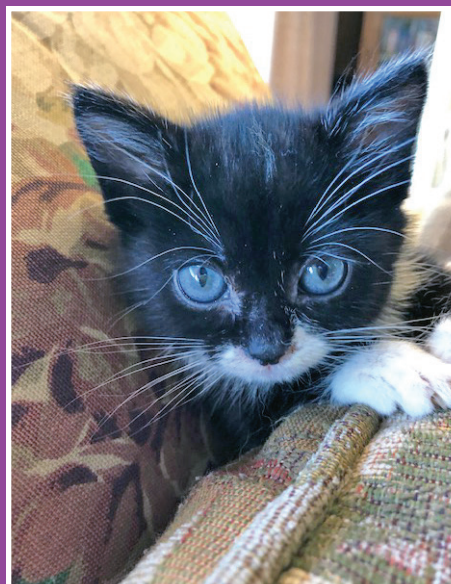
the firefighters are doing."

Wildfire seasons have become increasingly longer as climate change has made the West much warmer and drier in the past 30 years, and scientists have long warned that the weather will get wilder as the world warms.

"One thing is profoundly clear," Haaland said. "Climate change will continue to make fires in the West larger, and we must continue to invest in conservation of our ecosystem. Nature is our greatest ally in our fight against climate change."



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