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if the deployment is long term. Firefighters must be housed and fed while working out of the district and the costs associated with bringing vehicles and equipment to fires is also a financial consideration. These expenses are expected during this type of deployment, but the delay in reimbursement to fire departments which participate in these types of conflagrations is often months long.

SVFR Chief Michael Schick believes the new funding process will be a clear benefit for his department and the community it serves.

"I absolutely support this legislation. We have been funding the forest service for many years as if we don't expect to have large wildland fires. As we can see, this is unfortunately going to be the norm for many years to come. In many parts of the country, especially in the West, our forests have become extremely overgrown, resulting in exceptionally high fuel loads. And with the warmer, dryer weather patterns, we now see these extremely large fires," Schick said.

He added, "As we have seen over the last few years, even though we may not live close to a fire, the smoke from the fire can severely impact our citizens over a very large area. We can continue to just react to these fires, or we can try to start solving the underlying issues."

The recent Oregon Coastal Caucus Economic Summit (OCCES), held Aug. 21 and 22 in Florence, attracted hundreds of educators, politicians and public officials to participate in panel discussions touching on a wide range of topics, one of which was significantly changing the process for paying for these types of fire suppression costs.

Two of the more recog-

nizable speakers, U.S. Sen. Ron Wyden and U.S. Rep. Peter DeFazio, were involved in keynote presentations that updated attendees on a number of legislative changes, many of which will impact local residents.

One of particular interest to SVFR is a legislative initiative introduced by DeFazio, U.S. Rep. Kurt Schrader, Wyden and U.S. Sen. Jeff Merkley, which would change the way in which firefighting is funded in the future.

The new legislation, which will soon become law, would replace what many see as an outdated system which bases wildland fire suppression budgets on the average costs of the prior 10 years. This amount is often wildly divergent from the current actual cost of fighting fires and doesn't take into account the significantly higher costs associated with firefighting in the present day — or the increasing number of blazes needing to be suppressed.

One of the peculiarities of the outdated system is the fact that U.S. Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management (BLM) must operate within their appropriated budgets or divert money from other work being done by those departments. This is different than a response to other natural disasters, like hurricane and floods, which allow incident

commanders to draw from an emergency fund rather than paying for emergency efforts out of departmental operating budgets.

In his remarks regarding the new legislation which passed with bipartisan support, DeFazio was introduced by Oregon Rep. Caddie McKeown, who voiced concern with the available resources for fire season.

"So far, this season of wildfire has not been as severe as seasons past and we hope it continues in that way," McKeown said. "But we also all know that last year, smoke from a number of fires negatively affected residents and tourism on the southern coast particularly, and many of us can't forget the 2017 Chetco fire which burned hundreds of thousands of acres and came within five miles of Brookings. What is Congress doing to ensure that when a wildfire breaks out we have the resources to fight it effectively?"

DeFazio was prepared for the question and replied, "I have been fighting for a number of years to change the way we fund firefighting ... and starting this fiscal year, which begins Oct. 1, the Forest Service will have a limited budget for fighting forest fires. When they exceed that budget, FEMA (Federal Emergency Management Agency) pays for it, but the Forest Service will

still manage — because they know how to fight fires," DeFazio said. "Now, they won't have to pull back on fuel reduction contracts and other things any longer. With this, we can start to get ahead of this problem across the western United States, because we have mismanaged fire for more than 100 years."

While this year's fire season has started out with few major conflagrations, the need for vigilance and the ability to pay for the services of local firefighters and the SVFR as an independent fire district will be enhanced by this change in the funding process.

"I hope this legislation will allow us to see more efforts placed on preventing large wildland fire disasters by managing the fuel loads in our forests before they burn and hopefully supporting local agencies, like SVFR, with funding for training and equipment," Schick said. "If we can get properly trained and equip local fire agencies on a small fire in a properly managed forest quickly, it can help it from becoming a large disaster. The men and women of SVFR are very willing to help fight these wildland fires in our area, but it has been difficult to find the funding to make sure they are properly trained and equipped so they can do it safely."

For more information consider volunteering to be about Siuslaw Valley, or to a firefighter, visit svfr.org.

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