

Nevada lacking in wildfire prevention funds

By Andrew Doughman, Las Vegas Sun

Call it the Jerry Maguire theory of budgeting.

At a time when large wildfires have charred wide swathes of land in both Northern and Southern Nevada, the state's forestry division faces millions of dollars of cuts in federal fire prevention grants and has little recourse but to go to Congress and repeat the line from the famous Hollywood movie: Show me the money!

Nevada's ability to prevent wildfires faces further pressure as the federal agencies that control nearly 90 percent of the land in Nevada prepare to cut their fire prevention budgets and as a state nonprofit agency that once informed communities about fire safety and brought millions of dollars into the state for fire prevention has gone bankrupt.

For now, the state forestry division's budget dropped from \$18.8 million during the last fiscal year to \$6.9 million for the fiscal year that started this month.

The state largely relies on U.S. Forest Service grants to mitigate fire risks, but much of the mitigation money technically doesn't exist without a federal budget, which Congress may approve in September.

The pages of the state budget literally show blank white space where the grant dollars should be. No federal budget means no money for Nevada.

The threat of a potential federal government shutdown over disagreements about what the nation should spend in 2014 leaves state officials without a clear idea of what they can

spend on fire mitigation.

"We don't know if our budget has been reduced," said David Prather, a deputy administrator at the Nevada Division of Forestry. "As long as they're having their budget battles in the Capitol, we just have to wait and see what the fallout is. Really, that's one of those things that's beyond our control."

Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid, D-Nev., indicated Wednesday that he'd support more money for fire prevention, perhaps allaying concerns that federal budgets for fire prevention will decrease in the coming years.

Reid said climate change is to blame for the increasing severity and prevalence of Western wildfires.

"I mean you can't deny it, it's here," he said. "Why do you think we're having all these fires? ... We should be spending a lot more on prevention, and that means thinning some of these forests."

In addition to the uncertainty around prevention funds, a statewide nonprofit agency that brought millions of dollars to the state for fire prevention and helped study wildland fire risks and mitigations has filed for bankruptcy amid findings that it misspent federal stimulus money.

It was the Nevada Fire Safe Council that first alerted Nevada to the "extreme" fire risks in the Spring Mountains around Mount Charleston, where the Carpenter 1 fire has burned more than 28,000 acres to date.

"It was an organization that promoted fire-safe planning in local communities, kind of at the local level," said Sheila Anderson, senior research specialist at Resource Concepts, Inc., a consulting company that the Nevada Fire Safe Council retained to study fire risks in Nevada communities a decade ago. "They formed chapters all over the state."

After the council's demise, no other organization has stepped forward to bring in the millions of dollars of grants, partner with communities to promote fire-prevention education, and fund risk studies.

Read the whole story