

Wildland firefighting takes funds from other programs

By Jodi Peterson, High Country News

A federal report this week shows how dollars meant for forest restoration and wildfire preparedness often get diverted to fighting wildfires. It's been that way for years, and as fires get bigger and more expensive to fight, the problem only gets worse.

As we reported last summer: "Just a few days before (the Rim Fire scorched Yosemite), U.S. Department of Agriculture Chief Tom Tidwell had ordered an immediate Forest Service spending freeze for restoration programs, employee travel, and other personnel costs to help funnel an additional \$600 million into the agency's suppression account, which had been bled down to a mere \$50 million, about half of what's typically needed to cover a single week at Level 5, reports E&E News. Such borrowing has happened six other times in the last decade, totaling \$2.7 billion. Of that Congress eventually restored \$2.3 billion, 'but not without disruptions to important agency programs' – many of them the kind that could help lessen fire risks in the future. The FLAME Act of 2009 was supposed to help head off that dynamic by creating a reserve fund for firefighting, but it doesn't appear to be working, perhaps because of fluctuating appropriations."

The Forest Service now spends 40 percent of its budget on firefighting, compared to 15 percent in the early 1990s.

This year, it expects to spend about \$1.5 billion on suppression, and will probably overrun the fire budget by close to \$500 million, according to a May report from Interior.

To keep up, the agency transfers funding from other forest

management programs – which means that all kinds of important projects, including those meant to reduce fire danger, go begging.

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