

Congress considers treating wildfire like other natural disasters

By Elizabeth Shogren, High Country News

As the West girds itself for what looks likely to be a fierce wildfire season, a bipartisan group of Western senators is pushing a bill to rethink the way the federal government pays to fight catastrophic fires. The idea is that the largest wildfires would be treated like natural disasters. As with big hurricanes or earthquakes, funding for them wouldn't have to come from an agency's regular budget.

As HCN has reported, for seven of the last 12 years, wildfires have been so costly that the Forest Service ran through its fire budget in late summer, long before the season was over and had to raid other programs to keep fighting fires. The problem is so well known it's got its own nickname, "fire borrowing."

Forest Service Chief Tom Tidwell warned a Senate committee this week that there's a 90 percent chance his agency will have to do that again this year. The drought and low snowpack across much of the West contribute to the forecast for a bad fire season this year. Tidwell said that with global warming, fire seasons could be expected to be longer – 80 days longer than they were just 15 years ago – and fiercer.

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