

Proper fire funding continues to elude Congress

By Rebecca Worby, High Country News

On Sept. 14, Secretary of Agriculture Sonny Perdue officially declared that the 2017 fire season was the Forest Service's most expensive ever, with costs topping \$2 billion. Perdue noted that fire suppression, which accounted for just 16 percent of the agency's budget in 1995, now takes up over 55 percent.

"We end up having to hoard all of the money that is intended for fire prevention," he wrote in a press release, "because we're afraid we're going to need it to actually fight fires."

The Forest Service's fire funding is subject to a budget cap based on the average cost of wildfire suppression over the last 10 years. But even as that average increases, the agency's overall budget remains relatively flat.

So when costs go higher, the agency, in a practice known as "fire borrowing," must pull from funds intended for other programs – including those that help reduce fire danger, like prescribed burns, thinning and insect control. This vicious cycle has continued for years.

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