

13 states to share \$10 million to reduce wildfire risks

By KEITH RIDLER, Associated Press

BOISE, Idaho (AP) — Interior Secretary Sally Jewell has announced \$10 million for land restoration projects in 13 states in a strategy to reduce catastrophic wildfires.

Jewell said Friday making land more resilient to fire is essential for vulnerable species and for healthy rangelands, forests and watersheds.

"These projects will restore critical landscapes, which is essential for mitigating the impacts of fire and climate change," Jewell said in a statement. "These projects support our efforts to protect our nation's landscapes for this and future generations."

Eight of the states are in the West, with projects in conifer forests and sagebrush rangelands, where wildfires have been especially destructive in the last decade. Sagebrush also is habitat for sage grouse, an imperiled bird under consideration for federal protections.

To the east, Georgia, Florida, Virginia and North and South Carolina are receiving \$770,000 to help restore longleaf pine forests, home to the endangered red-cockaded woodpecker.

The projects are part of the Interior Department's Wildland Fire Resilient Landscapes Program intended to unite federal agencies, tribes, states and other groups to create fire-resilient landscapes. The projects also are in line with Jewell's secretarial order in January requiring projects include multiple jurisdictions collaborating on a large scale.

Of the \$10 million, about \$4 million is designated for the Greater Shelton Hart Mountain project located in Oregon, Nevada and California.

The project there aims to restore sagebrush and native perennial grass and forbs by controlling juniper expansion. Among the participants are the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, U.S. Bureau of Land Management, Summit Lake Paiute Tribe, county agencies, private landowners, hunting and conservation groups, and universities.

Four projects on the list benefit greater sage grouse and cost a combined \$7.3 million. The wide-ranging bird found in 11 states is under consideration for federal protection, and another giant habitat-consuming fire could factor into the decision. Experts say an endangered-species listing could damage Western states' economies.

John Freemuth, a Boise State University professor and a public lands expert, said the list reflects Jewell's business background and penchant for trying to find ways to get things accomplished despite differences among participants.

"To me, the message is, 'Sage grouse is the biggest issue right now, but we understand and know that there are issues in other places,' Freemuth said.

One of those is the Santa Clara Pueblo project in New Mexico where \$400,000 is being spent to restore the natural frequency of fire on mesa top lands to protect ancient cliff dwellings and traditional food sources. The Bureau of Indian Affairs is the lead agency on that project.

Another is in California, where \$89,000 is being spent on the Grants Grove Peninsula to restore fire resiliency in sequoia groves and other forests needed by the weasel-like Pacific fisher, a candidate for federal protections.

The National Park Service and the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection are taking part in that project.

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