

## **Feds: Forest towns should become more resistant to fires**

KEITH RIDLER, Associated Press

BOISE, Idaho (AP) — Forest-dwelling communities in the West must do a better job at making their homes resistant to wildfires so that wildland firefighters can better defend those homes and surrounding forests, federal, state and local officials said.

The officials meeting on Thursday in Boise said that's one lesson learned following one of Idaho's worst fire seasons with more than 1,300 fires and about 1,200 square miles burned. About 30 officials also considered other aspects of the National Cohesive Wildland Fire Management Strategy approved in April 2014, and that includes firefighter response and making landscapes resilient to fire.

"We will always prioritize life and property as a very high priority," said Intermountain Region Forester Nora Rasare of the U.S. Forest Service. "But when you draw resources into the community to protect life and property, you're drawing them away from the larger landscape. That larger landscape has some critical values. It's the watershed for communities. It's the economic livelihood for some communities."

The meeting was part analyzing the past fire season and part brainstorming for ways to face expected challenges in the next fire season.

Sue Stewart, intermountain region fire director for the Forest Service, said 1,000-person crews that battle gigantic blazes could be used in the offseason to descend on communities to remove brush or trees and help make those communities more defensible for when fire does arrive.

"Maybe we need big, long-term thinking," said Mark Larson, a former Idaho fire marshal who served as facilitator at the meeting.

Some local officials said a problem during the recent fire season was that some smaller areas were reluctant to share firefighting resources because their communities could have been left vulnerable if a local fire broke out.

Idaho taxpayers will have to pay at least \$60 million in firefighting costs this year. The state is also offering 15 salvage logging sales. Those sales will produce only about 50 to 60 percent of the revenue expected had the trees not burned.

Idaho State Forester David Groeschl said part of the state's job was "helping people recognize that they have a shared responsibility if they're going to build in the forest. We can't park an engine at every home. We can't protect every home."

Overall, though, he said the main problem during the fires season wasn't homes built in the forest, but the number of wildfires in the West that ultimately led to a national shortage of firefighters and resources.

"There was just a lot of fire on the landscape," he said.

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