

Idaho boosts 2016 wildfire protection budget by \$920,000

By KEITH RIDLER, Associated Press

BOISE, Idaho (AP) — Idaho officials boosted the state's wildfire protection budget on Tuesday by about 10 percent for the 2016 fire season following one of the state's worst fire seasons on record in 2015.

The Idaho Land Board voted 5-0 to spend an additional \$920,000 aimed at preventing small fires from getting big and keeping firefighters available during wildfire seasons that experts say are lasting longer.

Idaho Gov. C.L. "Butch" Otter said bolstering the state's Forest and Range Fire Protection budget will save money by reducing the number of giant fires that can cost millions of dollars to fight.

"This has a lot more to do with prevention and early initial attack," he said after the meeting.

The money still has to be approved by the Legislature in the upcoming session starting in January as part of the state's budget process. For that reason, Otter typically recuses himself from budgetary votes on the Land Board.

However, he said during the meeting he wouldn't recuse himself on the supplemental wildfire money because of its importance, leading to the unanimous vote.

Idaho taxpayers are on the hook for about \$60 million in firefighting costs this year. The state has also offered 15 salvage logging sales on state endowment land adding up to about 84 million board feet on torched forests. The 15 salvage sales are the most officials could recall.

Land Board members in September approved a Forest and Range Fire Protection budget of about \$9.9 million. However, Idaho State Forester David Groeschl on Tuesday told Land Board members that an analysis of the season showed the

state could improve its firefighting abilities with the supplemental request of \$920,000.

About \$210,000 would go toward four highly skilled firefighting positions, including a manager of helicopters used in firefighting.

Another \$152,000 would go toward extending 12 seasonal firefighters from five months to eight months. These firefighters, Groeschl said, are fire engine bosses with five to six years of experience and who have attained a good understanding of tactics.

"We've not adjusted our seasonal pay scale for a number of years, and we lose our engine bosses to other entities," he said. "Once they start getting up to that qualification level, they're very desirable both to other states and with our federal partners, and they're typically hired away."

Additional money for firefighting would go to two northern Idaho areas that have been plagued with wildfires. The goal is to retain qualified seasonal firefighters and add more, which officials said would offer some flexibility in moving resources, depending on the location of wildfires.

"We're trying to catch more fires so that we can reduce, hopefully, the number of (big) fires that we're seeing here," Groeschl told the board.

Attorney General Lawrence Wasden, Secretary of State Lawrence Denney, State Controller Brandon Woolf and Superintendent of Public Instruction Sherri Ybarra also voted to approve the supplemental wildfire money.