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Firefighting costs eat into U.S. Forest Service budget for recreation

Sen. Gardner says cuts hurt Colorado's outdoors industry



Photo by:
Gardner

By Edward Graham
Herald Staff Writer

WASHINGTON – Efforts to combat larger and more severe wildfires mean less money for other U.S. Forest Service endeavors – including recreation, members of the Senate

Committee on Energy and Natural Resources noted at a hearing Tuesday on the agency's 2017 budget request.

Sen. Cory Gardner, R-Colo., a committee member, said it's difficult for the Forest Service to keep up with the growing recreation industry – particularly skiing in Colorado – that uses Forest Service lands. He specifically pointed to the lack of resources at the White River National Forest in Colorado as an example of the Forest Service's inability to adequately partner with local industry.

"Since 2009, they've seen a 40 percent reduction in their budget at the White River National Forest," Gardner said.

Thomas Tidwell, chief of the U.S. Forest Service and the main witness, told Gardner the issue is a national problem.

"We're doing what we can to be able to be a good partner, to be able to be responsive," Tidwell said. "But the problem you mentioned, the staffing, it's just something that's occurred because of the cost of fire suppression. And it occurred gradually over quite a few years – over 10-plus years – to the point where we have 33 percent fewer employees outside of fire than we had just a few years ago."

Tidwell told the committee that the 2017 fiscal year budget request was similar to the agency's 2016 budget, and it "requires us to make some really tough decisions with a flat budget."

"The president's proposed overall budget for discretionary funding for the Forest Service in (fiscal year) 2017 is \$4.9 billion," Tidwell said in his submitted testimony. "That is \$787 million less than the (fiscal year) 2016 enacted level and reflects strategic investments to reduce wildfire threats to communities and maintain forest restoration investments."

Sen. Lisa Murkowski, R-Alaska, chairwoman of the committee, said she was "not enamored with the budget." But she added that the members agreed on the need to better prioritize firefighting efforts to combat the severity and length of the wildfire season.

"We know that we cannot continue to fight fires by diverting funds from other parts of the Forest Service budget," she said.

Murkowski, who said wildfire spending issues were "not just a budget problem, but also a management problem," cited successful efforts to include wildfire suppression funding in last year's omnibus spending bill as one potential way of easing constraints on the Forest Service budget. The bill included \$1.6 billion for fire suppression, \$545 million for hazardous fuels reduction and \$360 million for the Forest Service timber program.

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