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## Post Register

### Opinion: Reducing the risk of a big fire season

By REP. BRITT RAYBOULD | Guest columnist

- Apr 22, 2023

The snow hasn't disappeared yet from eastern Idaho. But before we know it, warmer temperatures will arrive. As things heat up and dry out, our risk of wildfire increases. Green grass and leafy trees that appear after a wet spring look amazing in our valleys and forests. But they also represent potential fuel sources for fires as we move into July and August. In preparation for the upcoming fire season, the 2023 Legislature supported several steps by Idaho's Department of Lands to build up our in-state firefighting capacity.

First, DOL will soon wrap up final negotiations with the U.S. Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management to update firefighting boundaries. The new agreement determines which agency leads the firefighting based on location. Starting this year, DOL will take over responsibility for a section of east Idaho, which requires reforming the Cottonwood District. The Legislature approved DOL's request for additional equipment and personnel to staff this new area to protect public and private property. Responsibility for Cottonwood represents an increase in DOL's overall firefighting obligations.

Second, we supported DOL's request to increase funding for forest management to reduce potential fuel sources. These projects include

planting new trees, thinning trees, pest control and herbicide application. Over the last five years, DOL increased the amount of harvested board feet by 33%. We anticipate that amount will increase in future years. In addition, we're supporting continued efforts to use the Good Neighbor Authority in Idaho. It allows the state to manage federal lands in place of national authorities while reducing wildfire threats and improving habitat.

Third, we approved a pilot program to test the application of a fire retardant along roadways and around buildings. Sparks for traveling vehicles represent one of the most common sources of wildfires. Initial estimates suggest that pre-fire application can decrease the number of accidental human fires, lowering the overall costs of firefighting. Also, by applying retardant around buildings in targeted locations, fire crews can deploy more strategically to areas that need hands-on attention while reducing property loss.

Finally, we used the savings from the fiscal year 2023 budget to add more funds to our firefighting account. An average fire season costs Idaho about \$22.5 million per year. But that number could easily double in a big fire year. Also, because we operate under a cost-sharing arrangement with federal agencies, the state may end up on the hook for expenses related to fires that occur on federal lands. It can take time to receive the reimbursements.

With this year's transfer, the account will hold roughly four years of funding, assuming the average cost remains the same. This fiscally conservative approach reduces the risk that a single big fire season will create a hole in our balanced state budget. The decision to add to our

savings and make critical investments during this last legislative session ensures that Idaho remains a leader in the Western U.S. when it comes to managing and protecting our natural resources.

Rep. Britt **Raybould** represents District 34 (Madison County) in the Idaho House.