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Governor Little responds to concerns of fire management staffing

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“Believe me, the firefighters are going to be there,” Idaho Governor Brad Little told a crowd of reporters at a Feb. 25 press conference in response to a question about federal government layoffs including Bureau of Land Management and U.S. Forest Service workers involved with firefighting. Melissa Davlin, a producer at Idaho Public Television and the president of the Idaho Press Club, posed the question.

Little claimed that while some issues are “around the fringe, around the edges that are probably going to be looked at,” the public safety aspect of firefighting is going to be fine.

“We’ve already talked to workers, though, who were directly involved with fire supply chain issues and clearing out the forests, who said that they were already laid off,” said a skeptical Davlin.

“We’ll be fine,” replied Little.

At the same press conference, The Arbiter asked Little for his thoughts about wildfire management in the coming wildfire season and the Governor had a number of things to say.

“We had a big fire season for the state of Idaho and we spent, it looks like, \$50 million. The federal [United States] Forest Service alone, not the [Bureau of Land Management], spent over \$300 million in Idaho,” said Little.

Little lauded U.S. Sen. Tim Sheehy (R-Montana), a former firefighter co-sponsoring a bill in the U.S. Senate alongside U.S. Sen. Alex Padilla (D-California) that would establish a National Wildland Fire Service (NWFS).

The bill has seen positive reception from groups like the Grassroots Wildland Firefighters advocacy group, who enthusiastically endorsed the bill in a [Feb. 11 newsletter](#).

“We have worked behind the scenes for years developing a framework for a NWFS to the benefit of the wildland fire workforce and the American taxpayers. We are the ideal subject matter experts for what this should look like, and the timing is right to release [our proposal](#),” said the newsletter.

The referred-to proposal opens as follows:

“It is past time to establish a National Wildland Fire Service and remove federal wildland firefighting responsibilities from the five separate land management agencies (US Forest Service, Bureau of Land Management, National Park Service, US Fish and Wildlife Service, and Bureau of Indian Affairs)

The new agency should be a comprehensive wildland fire management agency directly under the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), and should be run by experienced wildland fire practitioners and managers.”

At the press conference, Little also spoke about increasing the use of technology for early warning systems like camera lookouts, weather detection and satellite imaging.

“Right now in the [Idaho] Department of Lands, we’re talking about [how] we used to have manned lookouts scattered around the state. Now, we’re putting in cameras. I’m quite certain the next level will be satellite detection then also weather detection,” said Little.

Camera lookouts, satellite-based thermal imaging and weather detection have all been in use for a number of years already, National Interagency Fire Center (NIFC) spokesperson Rebeca Paterson, told The Arbiter on a phone call. Paterson’s overview of early warning systems largely matched the Governor’s, but provided more detail.

“Something used for early detection quite a lot is weather data, especially about lightning strikes,” said Paterson.

NIFC uses a large network of Remote Automatic Weather Systems, or RAWS. Those systems will detect air quality changes, temperature changes and wind speed changes, said Paterson.

Paterson said NIFC also uses a network of camera lookouts called the Alert Camera Network. An online map of the camera system is available on [NIFC’s website](https://nifc.maps.arcgis.com), nifc.maps.arcgis.com.

“All of these systems are constantly evolving ... something like RAWS has been in place for a long time, there’s a lot of machines in the field but we’re constantly proliferating it more,” said Paterson. “But all those tools are used for info on fires that have already been reported.”

Little explained that fire management involves organizations being “all-in”, expressing that putting out fires is most effective through including the voices of Forest Service firefighters, BLM firefighters and local fire departments.

“It needs to be all-in, and that’s actually a part of shared stewardship, [a mission of] the Forest Service. It says that all landowners have a say,” said Little.

Little also spoke about the process of deciding how to fight wildfires — like whether or not to fully suppress a fire. He also referred to the [Great Fire of 1910](#), which burned three million acres in two days.

“Where’s the line about where you do full suppression? Whether the line on the map or the line on the calendar ... if a lightning strike hits at Sulphur Creek in the middle of the wilderness area on Sept. 15, I’m not very worried about it.

“But if it hits there and you’ve had a dry summer in the middle of the wilderness area in May and the fire starts to get big, that’s what happened in 1910, was that [multiple, early] fires started and they got together.

“So we’re going to have lots of discussion about that,” said Little, ending his statement.

Of all the developments Little mentioned in regards to wildland firefighting, the most novel was likely Sen. Sheehy and Sen. Padilla’s NWFS bill, which, if passed, would be a dramatic rearrangement of the United States’ approach to fighting wildfires. To some, like the Grassroots Wildland Firefighters, it would be a change for the better.