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## Challis Messenger

# Budget cuts could mean fewer firefighters for wildfires

- Clark Corbin Idaho Capital Sun

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A new round of state budget cuts approved by the Idaho Legislature's budget committee will likely force the state to hire fewer seasonal firefighters and cut back on fire prevention work, which increases fire risk across the state, the director leading Idaho's state wildfire response efforts said.

At a time when Idaho's population is increasing, fire seasons are growing longer and more intense and more people are living next to forest lands in the wildland urban interface, Idaho Department of Lands Director Dustin Miller said the smart move would be to invest in and modernize Idaho's wildfire response program, not cut it back.

"Everybody is concerned about fire risk in Idaho. ... You've seen the growth in the state, the expansion of the wildland urban interface and the increase in number of human-caused fires we have been experiencing in the past several years," Miller said last week.

"Now we're seeing more erratic fire behavior and longer fire seasons, and we've been staying focused on a track of modernizing our wildland fire program to meet this growing demand and continue to work to keep fires as small as possible to protect natural resources and protect private property," Miller added. "These budget holdbacks certainly slow us down in our effort to modernize our program and to meet the growing demand for services."

Miller said the cuts will have a real impact on essential services that protect Idaho from wildfire and help provide a margin of safety for state firefighters.

Starting with the upcoming 2026 fire season, the Idaho Department of Lands will be forced to hire fewer seasonal firefighters in the Eastern Idaho Fire Protection District, Miller said. Department officials have signed agreements with the Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management to establish a fire protection district for eastern Idaho. The department

planned to use its general fund portion of the state budget to hire staff and firefighters and build out the district. But the cuts will hamper the department's ability to do that.

Here is the irony. Because the state is cutting funding available to the Idaho Department of Lands, the state will likely have to pay someone else to fight those fires.

"Because of the reduction in the fund and the inability to build out our crews, we will likely be required to rely more on our federal partners to suppress wildfire in eastern Idaho, and consequently, we will be paying for those (bills) in a new way," Miller said.

Miller said to absorb the cuts, the department will likely also cut back fire prevention activities.

"These holdbacks proposed by the Idaho Legislature will cause us to have to cut back the number of acres treated and increase fire risk across the landscape, especially in areas prone to fire," Miller said.

Miller said it will be extremely difficult to implement the cuts because he said the funding requests for seasonal firefighters and fire prevention activities aren't arbitrary enhancements. For example, fuel treatments, such as removing flammable vegetation, can reduce fire risk and severity and increase safety for firefighters, he said.

"I want to ensure that we are able to provide a quick and decisive initial attack to keep fires small and limit natural resource damage and damage to private property," Miller said. "We want to make sure we continue down the track of implementing fuel treatments to protect fire prone communities and give firefighters a safe place to engage fire in."

"Safety within our wildland fire program is paramount," Miller said. "Any time you engage with fire, the safety of firefighters and the public is the top priority, and with these budget cuts, I am concerned the risk is going to continue to grow."

Under the latest master fire agreement, the Idaho Department of Lands is responsible for fighting wildfires on about 9 million acres of state, federal and private land, Miller said.

Miller is worried about the additional new 1% and 2% across-the-board budget cuts the Idaho Legislature's Joint Finance-Appropriations Committee approved on Feb. 6.

Those cuts are in addition to the 3% cuts Idaho Gov. Brad Little approved last summer to avoid a shortfall, which means the total impact of the cuts for most state agencies will be 5% beginning in fiscal year 2027 and continuing on an ongoing basis.

For the Idaho Department of Lands, the additional 2% cut translates to a \$265,500 funding reduction, state budget records show.

Meanwhile, the wildfire suppression fund that the Department of Lands relies on to fight wildfires is nearly empty. Miller said there is about \$1.2 million in the wildfire suppression fund, which is not enough to pay the state's wildfire expenses in 2026.

During the 2025 legislative session, Little asked the Idaho Legislature to beef up the wildfire suppression fund with a \$60 million deposit and recurring ongoing transfers, but legislators only agreed to a one-time payment of \$40 million and not provide ongoing funding, the Idaho Capital Sun previously reported.

Miller said the \$1.2 million balance in the wildfire fund is not enough to even pay for the state's upfront contracted aircraft costs, let alone pay the bills for an entire fire season. Miller said a significant fire season could cost the state \$70 million or more.

Because the state does not have that kind of money in the wildfire account, Idaho must use something called the deficiency warrant process to pay for wildfire expenses in 2026 if the Idaho Legislature does not provide an increase in funding.

Little and Miller favor pre-funding the wildfire account so they know the money is guaranteed to be available. They have been concerned about using the deficiency warrant process, which they compare to placing the state's vital wildfire bills on a credit card.

Under the deficiency warrant process, the state would use the deficiency warrants to pay the wildfire bills. Then, those bills would be brought back to the Idaho Legislature during the next legislative session, where the bills will still impact the state budget — this time on the back end of the budget process, not up front.