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JFAC votes down wildland firefighter funding requests

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BOISE — The Joint Finance-Appropriations Committee voted down two separate requests from the Idaho Department of Lands to restore wildfire funding. The pair of votes establish cuts for the department that went beyond the 3% reductions recommended by Gov. Brad Little and were previously warned to significantly impact Idaho’s ability to combat more costly fire seasons.

The funding vote for this fiscal year concerned \$125,000 for the department’s forest and range fire protection program, which would have mostly restored the \$131,800 the Joint Finance-Appropriations Committee (JFAC) previously voted to cut as part of broad agency cuts.

Rep. James Petzke, R-Meridian, urged the committee to vote against the funding request and referenced the \$1 million fire bonus the legislature [approved last year](#) as the reason behind his lack of support for the restoration. Petzke said he took issue with this money — which provided “wild land firefighters and other critical support staff” with one-time bonuses — going to IDL personnel outside of just firefighters.

After these concerns were raised, the committee voted 7-12, failing to restore the fire preparedness funds for this fiscal year.

Petzke’s concerns also colored the funding vote for fiscal year 2027 — impacting the second half of this year’s fire season. In that decision, the committee took up the Department of Lands’ request for \$140,500 for the Idaho Falls-based Eastern Idaho Forest Protective District.

Idaho Department of Lands Director Dustin Miller [previously went before JFAC](#) and spoke to how JFAC’s 2% cuts would result in the fire district being unable to assemble the crew needed for the current fire season, as was previously reported by the Idaho Press.

Division of Financial Management Administrator Lori Wolff similarly [wrote a letter to JFAC](#) outlining the cuts for this fiscal year and the next would come at the cost of IDL’s ability to hire seasonal firefighters, in turn “increasing the risk of uncontrolled fires.”

Miller reiterated Wednesday a restoration of this funding was necessary to support the Eastern Idaho Forest Protective District, hire firefighters and pay seasonal firefighters when they are not responding to an active fire incident. The latter is of particular importance as Idaho code only allows for the Idaho Land Board to draw from state general funds for these firefighters during active fires.

Addressing Petzke's concerns, Miller said the firefighting bonuses approved in August went to all employees involved in the firefighting process, as per the direction of Little and the Idaho Legislature. Though the majority of the bonuses went to firefighters, Miller said there remained a desire to incentivize those in the department who maintained qualifications to assist firefighters during the fire season.

"We rely heavily on so many people within our organization to fight fire, not just the primary firefighters," Miller said. This includes staff in field offices such as administrative assistants who transition to supporting fire operations in the summer as well as foresters that assist firefighters with decision-making and work around firelines, he added.

Despite Miller's saying the bonuses were applied in accordance with the legislature's own direction, the committee voted 14-4 to leave fire preparedness funds for the next fiscal year unrestored.

The pair of decisions Wednesday arrive as IDL's wildfire suppression fund has fallen from balances of over \$70 million in recent years to a balance hovering around just a few million dollars. With the state's five-year-average of fire suppression costs totaling \$47.2 million, the legislature will be in a position where it has to pay for this year's fire suppression costs in next year's budget, as was previously reported by the [Idaho Press](#).

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