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IDL aims to hold wildfire resources steady despite budget cuts

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By [Brad Carlson](#)



Mike McManus, Idaho Department of Lands deputy division administrator of fire. (Courtesy IDL)

Firefighter headcount and equipment availability are expected to stay around year-earlier levels for the Idaho Department of Lands this season despite recent budget cuts.

“Our plan is to not allow the deductions to affect our ability to get the job done,” said Mike McManus, IDL deputy division administrator of fire. “We’re going to do our best to not let that happen ... We don’t think we’re going to see an impact to (total) firefighters on the ground.”

Availability of equipment and other resources “should be good,” and in alignment with Gov. Brad Little’s Wildfire Report Recommendations and the department’s [Strategic Plan for Managing Wildland Fire](#), he said.

“We continue to evaluate and move the fire program into the future, McManus said. “It’s definitely not stagnant. We’re making changes. If anything, it’s a move toward more resources or more appropriate types of resources.”

As for budget cuts that the 2026 legislature enacted, “we chose to put some of this impact onto some of the bigger projects we are looking at as opposed to impacting firefighters on the ground,” he said. IDL is installing fewer fire detection cameras than planned, delaying an update to the statewide burn permit system, and delayed hiring a couple of jobs until later in the fiscal year that ends June 30.

Budget action

The governor last August ordered a 3% budget holdback for state agencies. Legislative budget writers in the 2026 session enacted further reductions, but the legislature passed bills that added back some money for IDL fire.

For IDL, including the department’s forest and range fire protection program, the cut that legislative budget setters approved was 5% for fiscal 2027 — the 3% ongoing reduction recommended by the governor and 2% added by the legislature, said Janet Jessup, Idaho Legislative Services Office principal budget and policy analyst. The fiscal 2026 reduction was 4%, including the governor’s recommended 3% rescission and 1% added by the legislature.

But by passing a supplemental appropriations bill, Senate Bill 1427, the legislature returned part of the additional budget reductions that it had approved for 2026 and 2027, she said. IDL’s forest and range fire protection program accounts for 68% of total state general fund budget for fiscal 2026.

The combined reduction for IDL fire operations is around 3.5% for fiscal years 2026 and 2027, McManus said.

Suppression fund

Lawmakers this year also passed House Bill 968, which transfers interest from the American Rescue Plan Act state and local fiscal recovery fund to IDL’s fire suppression deficiency warrant fund.

The department draws on the suppression fund during fire season. If the fund is overspent, the legislature in its next session typically covers the gap.

“We are appreciative of the funding that was allocated to that account,” McManus said, referring to HB 968. “It’s critical to allowing us to respond swiftly and be able to use all the resources at our disposal to put fires out as quickly and safely as we can.”

The department anticipates this funding won’t be enough given projections for a heavy peak wildfire season, he said.

Nevertheless, having substantial money in the suppression account at the outset, which the legislature began in 2016 following a busy 2015 season, helps IDL be best prepared, McManus said.

“Having some money enables us to pay bills up-front, one big one being aircraft,” he said. The department pays a rate to guarantee aircraft are available.

IDL generally focuses on safe and efficient initial attack, toward its goal to keep 95% of fires at smaller than 10 acres, McManus said. Crews often work close to communities.

Cuts to Idaho agency budgets reflected lower anticipated sales and income tax collections and the state’s compliance with the One Big Beautiful Bill Act signed last July 4.