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3. WILDFIRES: Oregon joins fire emergency list (09/06/2007)

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Oregon Gov. Ted Kulongoski (D) this week invoked that state's Conflagration Act to mobilize emergency resources related to the fast-growing GW fire, which began from a lightning strike in the Mount Washington wilderness on Aug. 31 but has since moved toward the Black Butte Ranch area. Almost immediately, the Federal Emergency Management Agency declared the fire eligible for federal assistance under the President's Disaster Relief Fund.

Although residents of Black Butte Ranch were ordered to evacuate the area on Labor Day, subsequent rains have helped slow the blaze's movement toward residential areas. As of midweek the fire had burned about 7,300 acres and was reported at 40 percent containment. So far, the state and federal agencies have spent \$2.2 million on the GW fire, said Rem Nivens, spokesman for the governor's office.

The emergency declaration is just the latest in the West this summer, as Oregon joined Idaho, Montana, Hawaii, Wyoming and California in seeking federal assistance for wildfire costs accrued this summer. According to FEMA, in the past month alone, state emergencies were declared for nine major blazes in Western states triggering requests for federal funds.

FEMA spokesman John Shea said that the disaster relief bank operates to reimburse up to 75 percent of the costs of dealing with such national emergencies, so there is no figure available currently for how much might be allocated to the states. "There's a 9 to 12 month period for the states to supply worksheets that are the basis for reimbursement so that's still in process," Shea said. "We don't have anything to show obligated federal funds for current situations. The first priority is to put the fires out."

FEMA also administers a program of "assistance to firefighter grants" that fund equipment purchases, training and other tools that can be put in place before emergencies. The agency has budgeted up to \$490 million for 2007, with about \$96 million obligated so far this year, Shea said.

These funds are separate from expenditures by federal land management agencies, which this year are already approaching \$1 billion. So far this year, more than 7.2 million acres have burned in wildfires across the country, with more than 1,790 structures destroyed. At present, nearly 16,500 firefighters and support personnel are



Firefighters assess their approach to the GW fire near Oregon's Mount Washington. Rains this week helped limit the blaze. Photo by Brandon Hendrix. Courtesy of inciweb.org.

engaged in fighting blazes, reports the National Interagency Fire Center.

Illustrating the funding plight for states was Montana Gov. Brian Schweitzer's call for a special session of the state Legislature this week to reallocate some of the state's surplus to fire costs. Montana's share of costs already exceeds \$35 million, the Democratic governor said, about \$20 million more than had been budgeted for disasters of all types through 2008.

During the 10-hour special session yesterday, lawmakers agreed to devote \$82 million in new resources and reserves to firefighting for the next two years. The Department of Natural Resources and Conservation will receive \$39 million for this year's firefighting costs, and another \$3 million will go to the Department of Military Affairs.

The lawmakers also created a \$40 million account to pay firefighting costs in the future, but the fund will not be available until next July.

Idaho, Montana remain hot spots

Currently, there are at least three-dozen significant fires burning in the West, covering about 1.25 million acres, according to the U.S. Forest Service's National Incident Information Center. The majority of these blazes are located in Idaho and Montana, which together account for 27 active fires covering more than 1 million acres.

Most Costly Fires Eligible for Federal Disaster Relief, Summer 2007

Fire	State	Declaration date	Acreage	Costs to date (millions)
Zaca Canyon	Calif.	July 8	240,300	\$119.4
Cascade	Idaho	Aug. 30	278,300	\$43.2
Jocko Lakes	Mont.	Aug. 4	36,060	\$27.5
East Zone	Idaho	Aug. 30	246,000	\$26.1
Castle Rock	Idaho	Aug. 29	48,500	\$24.7

Sources: NIFC, FEMA

The two most significant conflagrations continue to be the Cascade Complex fire and the East Zone Complex, both in Idaho. The Cascade blaze, 27 miles east of Cascade, has burned more than 278,300 acres and was reported at 30 percent containment, while the East Zone fires, centered 25 miles northeast of McCall, combined to burn 246,000 acres but is only 16 percent contained. Both fires were subject of emergency declarations on Aug. 30.

Two other large Idaho fires are pulling resources from throughout the region. The Shower Bath and Red Bluff fires, 20 miles north of Challis, have been combined for logistical purposes and now cover more than 120,000 acres at zero containment. Some headway was reported at the Rattlesnake fire in the Nez Perce National

Forest near Elk City, which has burned nearly 100,000 acres and is 25 percent contained.

Some good news was reported over the Labor Day weekend, as California firefighters finally declared victory over the 240,000-acre Zaca fire in the Los Padres National Forest and surrounding wilderness areas, which began July 4. Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger (R) had declared a state emergency in Santa Barbara County in early August and broadened the disaster zone into Ventura County on Aug. 19. The Zaca fire caused about \$119.4 million in firefighting costs but managed to avoid structural damages.

NIFC also reported on Sept. 5 that the stubborn Castle Rock fire, near Ketchum, Idaho, was finally contained at 48,520 acres.

Currently, the largest active fire that has been designated for "wildland fire use" (WFU) is the Krassel Complex in the Frank Church/River of No Return Wilderness of Idaho. Six separate blazes have combined to cover 64,300 acres. So far, about \$3.2 million has been spent to monitor and maintain a containment perimeter, while allowing the fire to burn through the affected area.