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Forest Fire Funds Aid D.C. Festivals

Stephen Dinan, Washington Times
September 11, 2009

Even with forest fires raging out West, the U.S. Forest Service this week announced it will spend nearly \$2.8 million in forest-fire-fighting money in Washington -- a city with no national forests and where the last major fire was probably lit by British troops in 1814.

The D.C. aid is going to two programs: \$90,000 is slated for a green summer job corps, but the vast majority of the money -- \$2.7 million -- is going to Washington Parks & People, which sponsors park festivals and refurbishes urban parks in the Washington area.

Forest Service officials didn't return messages left seeking comment on why they spent money from their "wildland fire mitigation" stimulus fund in Washington, but members of Congress said city parks don't deserve the money while fires are scorching millions of acres of land and owners are losing homes.

"As catastrophic wildfires continue to burn throughout the West, destroying people's homes and businesses in the process, funds that should be used to thin our overgrown forests and protect the public are being frivolously spent on park restoration," said Rep. Wally Herger, a California Republican whose district has seen some of the worst fires. "While the administration is spending millions of taxpayer dollars on improving picnic grounds, communities and citizens' lives tragically remain at risk."

The \$2.7 million in stimulus aid also appeared to come as a surprise to the folks at Washington Parks & People.

"We do not yet know anything beyond the information that we saw on the [Agriculture Department] Web site yesterday," the group's executive director, Stephen W. Coleman, said in an e-mail response. The Forest Service is part of the Agriculture Department.

Washington Parks & People is a 19-year-old organization that says its mission is to revitalize "once-forgotten parks and communities throughout the inner capital region."

The stimulus bill, which passed Congress and was signed by President Obama in February, was designed to create jobs and take care of urgent priorities. The \$787 billion package set aside \$500 million for the Forest Service for fire mitigation, and included another \$15 million for Interior Department firefighting efforts.

On Thursday, the White House Council of Economic Advisers released a report arguing that the stimulus bill has created or saved at least 1 million jobs, and will mean economic growth is up to 3 percentage points higher this quarter than would have been the case if Congress had not acted.

Republicans disputed the jobs number, saying 2.5 million people have lost their jobs since Mr. Obama signed the bill, and arguing it's impossible to calculate what constitutes a "saved" job.

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Under the new money announced this week, Rhode Island received an additional \$449,000 in wildfire suppression money, Delaware received \$895,000 and Massachusetts was awarded \$4.5 million. The Massachusetts money is slated to go to "Asian Longhorn beetle Area Watershed Health and Ecological Enhancement," according to the Forest Service announcement.

While those states have state forest land, Washington, D.C., does not, and forest fires are not generally considered a risk.

In fact, according to the National Interagency Fire Center's definition of wildland fire -- which is a fire that consumes undeveloped areas with sparse habitation -- Washington can't even have a wildland fire.

NIFC doesn't even list the city in its online reports of annual wildland fire statistics.

Nationwide, forest fires have burned more than 5 million acres of land this year.

This is not the first time Washington has received an outsized benefit from stimulus money.

Despite being one of the smallest jurisdictions, the capital city has received about \$2.3 billion as of late August, or more than 19 states have received, including some with populations five or six times bigger.

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