

CLIMATE:

Forest firefighters stressed by warming and budget cuts -- briefing

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Wildland firefighters are seeing their budgets slashed at a time when climate change is lengthening fire seasons and making them more active, firefighters and forest management officials told Democratic lawmakers today at the Capitol.

This one-two punch of more work and fewer resources is affecting forest managers' ability to combat fires and to keep firefighters safe, witnesses said. It is also leading them to siphon resources away from other functions -- including wildfire prevention -- to react to fire emergencies, they said.

The firefighters and forest managers spoke at a briefing this morning sponsored by the Bicameral Task Force on Climate Change, an all-Democratic congressional caucus that agitates for executive and legislative action to address global warming.

The briefing came weeks after an Arizona blaze claimed the lives of 19 firefighters during a summer fire season that is already breaking records.

"Bigger and more intense fires are one of the red flags of climate change," said Rep. Henry Waxman (D-Calif.), co-chairman of the task force, at the start of the briefing. "According to scientists, climate change is causing hotter and drier conditions, earlier snowmelt, and more outbreaks of pine bark beetles and other pests, and these factors are combining to make fires bigger and more destructive."

Witnesses agreed that climate change is making disastrous fires more frequent and likely. Dave Cleaves, who advises on climate change for the Forest Service, said warming linked to human activity "increases the house odds" of more high-intensity wildfires.

"It's a consensus that the science and the season and in some cases the severity of the fires are exacerbated by climate change," he said.

And more human-induced warming in the future will mean even longer fire seasons with even more blazes, said William Sommers of the International Association of Wildland Fire.

"As long as greenhouse gas emissions continue to accelerate -- and there is nothing to indicate the contrary -- fire regimes will continue to shift to more frequent, larger, higher-risk fires in the future," he said.

Warming-fueled droughts and heat waves help turn forestland into tinder, he said, helping to explain why fire seasons are beginning earlier in recent years and the number of fires has increased.

"These impacts will only worsen in the future," he said. "Recent fire trends are not the new normal. Rather, they are the early steps of what will be an increasingly steeper fire risk."

While wildfires affect the western United States most heavily today, changing weather conditions in the East might make wildfire a more frequent occurrence in the more densely populated areas along the Atlantic Coast, he said. That could increase the frequency and cost of forest fires exponentially.

Witnesses at the briefing made a pitch for more federal resources to hire firefighters and equip and train them. They noted that tighter federal budgets have often led to dips in funding for programs like the Volunteer Fire Assistance grant program, which helps equip local firefighting agencies. Interior and Environment Appropriations Subcommittee Chairman Mike Simpson (R-Idaho) made fire mitigation a central priority of his subpanel's bill, which will receive a committee vote tomorrow.

But Waxman said agencies would not receive the resources they needed until Congress reverses the mandatory cutbacks that went into effect earlier this year as a result of sequestration.

"Whatever appropriation we have been passing, they have been reduced by sequestration in a mindless, arbitrary way," he said. "Fighting fires has been another example of the nonsense of shortchanging the efforts [of federal agencies]."

The task force's other co-chairman, Sen. Sheldon Whitehouse (D-R.I.), said that talking about the link between fire risk and warming is a way to reach lawmakers of both parties from Western states who might not otherwise be interested in the issue.

While Rhode Island's experience with climate change tends to be "wet" -- more storms and more sea-level rise - - "that's not as important a thing for senators from landlocked states, and we need all of our colleagues to take this seriously and to engage on it," he said.