



C.L. "BUTCH" OTTER
GOVERNOR

OPINION

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
October 4, 2012
12:042

CONTACT: Jon Hanian
(208) 334-2100

THE TRUE COST OF IDAHO WILDFIRES

By Governor C.L. "Butch" Otter

State and federal tax dollars spent on wildfire suppression in Idaho so far in 2012 add up to a whopping \$189 million – and it's increasing by the hour.

But the actual cost of a bad wildfire season isn't just about dollars spent on suppression. It's also about impacts on the environment and public health, loss of life and property, and of course the lost opportunities for improving the lives of our citizens through the economic benefits offered by healthy, actively managed forests and rangelands.

Despite the best efforts of our congressional delegation, Idahoans and all Americans will continue paying in many ways for the lack of direction – or misguided direction – that federal laws and policies provide public land managers. And while our exceptional firefighters put their lives on the line, the challenges they face on the ground are aggravated by litigious single-interest environmental groups devoted to economically undermining such traditional industries as ranching and forest products.

Estimates indicate that Idaho wildfires this year already have been responsible for more air pollutants being released into the atmosphere than all automobiles and industrial sources in Idaho combined. Severe wildfires also create ash, fine sediment and debris that wash into nearby streams and impact important fish habitat and drinking water sources – rolling back progress made by the millions of dollars paid every year by Idaho taxpayers and utility ratepayers to help restore salmon runs.

Wildfires also cause long-term soil instability, reducing the chance for natural restoration and re-vegetation. That compromises wildlife habitat in some areas, affecting travel corridors for species and in some cases eliminating habitat altogether. That enables the feds to further restrict multiple use of lands designated as "critical habitat" under the Endangered Species Act.

This year will be one of Idaho's worst fire seasons since the Panhandle's deadly "Big Burn" of 1910. To date, 1.7 million acres have burned in Idaho during a fire season that likely will extend for several more weeks. And it's important to remember that 93 percent of the acres burned in Idaho this year are owned and "managed" by the federal government.

The existing approach to managing these lands and the fires on them is unacceptable. Public land management and priorities have been studied and debated to death. Federal land managers are hamstrung by laws that try to be everything to everyone on every acre. Their path forward is being determined by environmental lawsuits and bureaucratic inertia.

Some folks want to return our public lands to their most natural state, when the West was populated only by relatively small numbers of native people. But our federal land managers need a legal framework that encourages proactive management and takes into consideration the 21st century challenges we face.

Fire behavior is affected by weather, terrain and fuels. Fuels are the only piece of that equation that humans can modify in a short time through active management. Particularly in areas where homes meet wild lands, active management not only removes fire-prone fuels but also contributes to increased economic activity. For instance, every million board feet of harvested timber supports 13 family-wage jobs at \$55,000 per year.

Idaho families need that kind of opportunity now more than ever.

Managed fuels and better access make fighting wildfire less expensive in a managed area, too. Road systems make it possible for people, engines and bulldozers to respond to fires on the ground so that expensive aerial firefighting resources aren't the only option. Removing fuel by logging or grazing isn't the answer for every acre of public land, but it certainly should be considered where it's needed.

Catastrophic wildfire is a western issue that needs western leadership to find a solution. Idaho's congressional delegation knows the challenges federal land managers face, and Idaho wants to pave the way for change. We have a history of working together and a desire to see public lands in Idaho managed under the principles of active stewardship. It's the right thing to do, not only for enhanced economic opportunity but also to protect our people and property from the shortsightedness of absentee federal landlords.

Idaho and the nation can't afford the enormous and unnecessary costs of another fire season like 2012. It's time for a new dialogue and a new approach to federal land management.

###