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Colorado could buy its own fire fighting fleet

By Reid Wilson, Updated: March 24 at 2:53 pm

Facing the prospect of a dangerous wildfire season made worse by a devastating yearslong drought, Colorado officials are considering spending millions of dollars to invest in a new fleet of fire-fighting air tankers.

A bipartisan proposal before the state Senate would give the state Division of Fire Prevention and Control the funds to purchase or lease three firefighting helicopters this year, and to lease as many as four large aircraft to fight fires next year.

The bill, which would cost between \$8 million and \$12 million a year, would help the state protect critical watersheds on the dry Western Slope of the Rocky Mountains. The Western Slope has been hammered by a three-year long drought, and by a growing infestation of invasive beetles that kill trees, turning forests that might be able to survive fires into forty-foot tall matchsticks.

The threat goes beyond forests, though: A massive fire can poison water supplies, a much bigger concern in the Rockies than almost anywhere else in the country. Snow melt from those mountains flows down the Colorado River and provides water to tens of millions of people, and hundreds of millions of acres.

“Colorado has four million acres of dead trees, mostly on the Western Slope, surrounding our watersheds. Those are watersheds that supply water to 40 million people in six lower basin states and the country of Mexico,” state Sen. Steve King (R), one of the bill’s lead sponsors, said in an interview. “The idea that we are one lightning strike, one arsonist’s match strike, one terrorist’s match strike away from a fire that could change the Western Slope of Colorado for generations to come is a huge concern for our state.”

King is sponsoring the bill with state Senate President Morgan Carroll (D).

States have ramped up their own fire-fighting prevention capabilities as the number of federal resources have fallen. The U.S. Forest Service’s fleet of fire-fighting tankers has dropped by three quarters over the last two decades, even as the number of acres burned per year has skyrocketed.

In the 1980s, wildfires burned an average of 2.98 million acres every year. Between 2003 and 2012, an average of 7.26 million acres burned per year. Colorado has experienced the two worst fires in the state's history over the last two years — the Black Forest fire in 2013 and the Waldo Canyon fire in 2012 burned a combined 32,000 acres of land.

Colorado Gov. John Hickenlooper (D) has urged several Western states to build their own air fleet to fight wildfires.

King said the federal government, which owns millions of acres of land on the Western Slope, hasn't taken care of its own property, putting the onus on Colorado to prevent disastrous burns. He credited Colorado Sens. Mark Udall (D) and Michael Bennet (D) for inserting language into this year's farm bill that allows the Forest Service to lease five additional C-130 tankers.

"Our goal is to give the taxpayer the best value for their dollar and still protect their water, air, land and lives," King said. "I think we're still in the process of determining which is the most cost-effective way to do this."

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