



Colorado to Invest \$20 Million in Aerial Firefighting

By: Megan Schrader, McClatchy News on May 13, 2014



In 2012, the High Park fire destroyed more than 250 homes and burned 87,000 acres in Larimer County, Colo. U.S. Air Force photo/Senior Master Sgt. John Rohrer

Gov. John Hickenlooper said Monday that although the state is expecting an average wildfire season this year, Colorado needs to prepare for the worst — and that includes investing \$20 million in aerial firefighting.

Hickenlooper joined wildfire experts from across the state in a hangar at Centennial Airport to not only release a report on the severity of the upcoming fire season, but also to sign three wildfire-related bills.

"It is important that we sign these three bills into law today to make sure that we further secure our ability to fight fires, get to fires sooner, do a better job of diminishing the damage that they cause and most importantly, increase public safety," Hickenlooper said, adding he wished for more of the rain and snow that was falling outside.

The most prominent of the trio of bills was championed by Sen. Steve King, R-Grand Junction, to fund an aerial firefighting fleet managed by the state. Senate Bill 164 sets aside \$19.4 million to purchase two high-technology fire-detecting aircraft and also contract with up to four firefighting helicopters and four single-engine air tankers.

Paul Cooke, director of the Colorado Division of Fire Prevention and Control, said the request for bids on the fire-detecting planes — what they are calling multi-mission aircraft — could go out as early as May 19. He also said the division is actively working on procuring contracts for the use of helicopters during the 2014 fire season.

"We really don't know what the fire season is going to bring," Cooke said. "Our hope is that this moisture is a sign of things to come. We are hopeful that we can have a mild fire season, but as the governor said, we believe we are prepared for the eventuality we are going to see fire."

Hickenlooper emphasized that even a normal fire season in Colorado will burn up to 100,000 acres.

The past two fire seasons for El Paso County have been devastating. In 2012, the Waldo Canyon Fire destroyed almost 350 homes; last summer's Black Forest Fire eclipsed that, destroying 488 homes.

"We have had over the past two years tremendous losses in our community," said Rep. Bob Gardner, R-Colorado Springs, who co-sponsored the aerial firefighting bill. "These resources will help us in the future in all of our communities fight those fires, which are inevitable. We are better prepared."

The bill doesn't include funding for large air tankers that are used to drop fire retardant or slurry. Instead, the state will rely on federal resources for those aircraft.

Brian Ferebee, deputy regional forester for the U.S. Forest Service, said the agency will have available 10 air tankers to drop slurry on active fires. He said the division hopes to acquire an additional seven tankers, which would be part of the next generation of air tankers and bring updated technology to the fleet.

Additionally, Ferebee said the Rocky Mountain Region — Colorado, Kansas, Nebraska, and most of South Dakota and Wyoming — will have 64 engines, 550 firefighters, seven Hot Shot crews, and three incident management teams.

Ferebee said the resources on hand this year are about the same as what they've had in previous years.

In years past, Colorado has also relied on 12 C-130 aircraft stationed at Peterson Air Force Base in Colorado Springs. But hefty federal budget cuts, known as sequestration, have raised the question of whether all of those planes will be available during the 2014 wildfire season.

U.S. Sen. Mark Udall, D-Colorado, and U.S. Rep. Doug Lamborn, R-Colorado Springs, have both raised concerns over those planes being included in budget cuts.

"I raised this issue when the chief of staff and the secretary (of the Air Force) appeared before our committee," Lamborn said. "I let them know it was a big concern to us here in the West."

Lamborn said he is hopeful that an amendment to the defense budget will ensure those air tankers don't fall victim to budget cuts. The amendment requires the cuts at Peterson's 302nd Airlift Wing don't take place unless it's ensured they won't harm the national response to wildfires.

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