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### **Money is no object when wildfires burn**

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Wildfires burned more than 250,000 acres in Montana last year. In just three months, the state's share of the firefighting bill was more than \$73 million, with federal agencies incurring the rest of the cost.

That is enough money to run the state's six public and private prisons, as well as the state's five prerelease centers for an entire year. But unlike the Department of Corrections, which keeps track of expenses right down to the last aspirin, no one at the Department of Natural Resources and Conservation knows exactly where the money went.

Reporters Jennifer McKee of the Gazette State Bureau and Eye Byron of the Helena Independent Record analyzed thousands of DNRC firefighting invoices that were paid between July and November 2003 and totaled about \$30 million.

Here's some of what they found: The state paid about \$20 million to rent engines and other equipment when it would have been cheaper to buy them. Out-of-state companies took home roughly \$10,000 a day to bring in firefighters while thousands in Montana were unemployed. In one month alone, temporary tent offices cost the state \$200,000.

All this was paid for with money the DNRC didn't have.

Wade Campbell made just under \$10,000 in one month last summer working forest fires. Some days he hauled a heavy pack and chain saw up and down mountains, felling trees or cutting through snags as part of his exhausting duties.

But other days Campbell and the crew played horseshoes and watched movies, getting paid to be ready just in case a fire started.

Every night the whole gang drove into town and went out to eat on the government dime.

"We did everything we could to stay busy," he said, "but there were definitely slow times."

Campbell's \$10,000 is one small line in Montana's \$73 million bill for the fires of 2003. It's a bill that includes \$86,000 to a California company to wash, dry and fold firefighter clothes, \$2,200 for company workers to drive home after 18 days on the job, or up to \$35 an hour to hire one out-of-state firefighter, even as close to 20,000 Montanans were unemployed.

It's a bill that includes more than \$5.8 million to rent wildfire engines at least 607 times from private contractors when the state, which maintains just 65 such engines statewide, could have purchased a fleet for the same price.

An analysis of fire spending reveals a system of fighting and paying for wildfires that seems cobbled together by a mixture of science and historical practices. With its limited fleet and firefighters who are tasked with initial attack, then pulled off fires after 24 hours, the state seems ill-prepared to battle major blazes.

To make up for this, the state spent more than \$25 million leasing equipment and personnel at the height of the West's fire season, paying crisis prices for everything from water trucks to swamp coolers.

The state allocates no money for firefighting, even though Montana incurred an average \$24 million bill each year for the last seven years battling wildfire. And no one at the top can say precisely where the money went, least of all the lawmakers who sign the state's checks and routinely approve after-the-fact spending.

Where the money went

Montana's Department of Natural Resources and Conservation - the arm of state government responsible for firefighting - owns 65 fire engines, five helicopters and three planes. It employs about 175 full- and part-time employees, and draws on hundreds of volunteer firefighters throughout the state to provide initial attack on small fires on around 5 million acres. The goal, DNRC chief Bud Clinch said, is to douse these fires shortly after they ignite and not to concentrate all the state's resources on one big fire. The state's firefighters are generally pulled off fires after 24 hours to be ready for initial attacks elsewhere.

By all accounts, the state's fleet and local volunteer firefighters performed admirably last summer, responding to 575 fires and dousing 96 percent of them before they grew larger than 10 acres. And they're cheap. The whole force cost only about \$3.5 million, with bills ranging from \$40 to put out the little-known Car on Car fire near Clearwater Junction to \$26,000 for the Shoofly fire near Missoula.

It was the fires that got away that bumped Montana's fire bill to more than \$70 million in 2003.

The state doesn't have the equipment or manpower to fight a large forest fire, Clinch said.

Instead, Montana leases everything imaginable. The state usually calls in federal fire bosses to manage the blaze and hires private contractors listed through a national fire dispatch center to do the work.

A sampling of the going rates includes:

- \$1,330 a day to lease a wildland fire engine, plus workers to operate it. One out-of-state contractor made almost \$3,000 a day for his. (EBay had an

engine for sale in early May for \$5,100.) Engines leased without workers go for \$798 a day.

- \$770 a day to lease a semi-truck flatbed trailer needed to haul a bulldozer. The state pays the contractor \$770 every day, even though the flatbed trailers were mostly idle. All told, taxpayers paid more than \$838,000 for such trailers.

- \$106,000 on hotel rooms for people working fires who, for one reason or another, did not stay at the fire camps.

- \$1.14 million to lease water tenders, trucks that bring water to the fire engines and can spray blazes. Some tenders leased by the state were relatively new, but others were as crude as a heavy-duty pickup with a metal tank bolted into the bed. A used water tender can be bought for around \$45,000.

- Almost \$200,000 to rent wall tents, swamp coolers and lights. A new wall tent can be purchased for \$893 - made locally with fire resistant material. Swamp coolers sell for \$229 at Wal-Mart.

- \$39,000 to a guest ranch for making some 2,600 sack lunches at \$15 apiece.

- \$32,000 to rent chain saws from tree cutters, who already were paid more than \$25 an hour. A new professional-grade chain saw sells for between \$550 to \$1,400.

About \$37 million of Montana's \$73 million bill came from the U.S. Forest Service, which controls firefighting efforts on many of the large blazes and contracts with private companies or fire departments to put the fires out. The state pays a portion of the cost based on land ownership.

The other \$36 million of the state's bill paid for contracts the state signed with public and private firms for their firefighting work.

Most of that \$36 million - more than \$20 million - was paid to lease equipment. Another \$2.5 million paid for DNRC crews' time, plus \$2.7 million to hire people on an emergency basis to do everything from drive cars to cut trees. Contracted firefighters, almost all of whom came from out of state, cost another \$2.5 million, and the state paid around \$800,000 to feed all these people.

The state also spent \$4 million to hire more than 150 fire engines, personal trucks and portable toilets, among other items, to be on standby just in case wildfires started. This money, known as "severity" funding, included about \$3 million to hire the companies, and another \$50,000 to feed their employees.

Only a fraction of the firefighting costs were included in the state budget. And until reporters assembled the receipts this spring, the man in charge of Montana's firefighting effort, State Forester Bob Harrington, said he didn't know specifically how the state spent its firefighting money, nor was he ever asked to produce a list showing where the money went.

Rep. Dave Lewis, R-Helena, a former Forest Service finance officer and current chairman of the legislative committee that drafts the state budget, said he's never seen a breakdown of firefighting costs, even though one of the first tasks of most legislatures is to pay the fire bill.

Senate Minority Leader Jon Tester, D-Big Sandy, who serves on the Senate's budget-crafting committee, also said he's never seen such a list.

That lack of information makes it hard for lawmakers to know if they're spending tax dollars wisely and if the current system is working, Lewis said.

"There hasn't been any legislative scrutiny," he said.

This system may not be perfect, Clinch said, but until recently, it worked pretty well. The state's saving grace was wetter summers and smaller fires.

Clinch said its no accident Montana maintains no long-term firefighters and a small number of engines.

"Engines are expensive. And it's not just a matter of lining up more engines. You need to man these," Clinch said. "If we had 75 more engines, what would we do if next year (was wet) and these crews just sat there? We've tried to develop a baseline."

Clinch agrees that the state could have bought new equipment for what taxpayers spent leasing it in 2003. But he's reluctant to ramp up state crews and equipment based upon what, by most accounts, has been an unusually intense period of fire years. More trucks mean more maintenance, he said, and there's no guarantee the state will need it every year.

"At some time, we are going to see normal precipitation," he said.

The system is not unique to Montana, Clinch said. No single state could hope to absorb the cost - or maintain the ready manpower - to fight a major forest fire. So a system evolved, Clinch said, in which Montana focused on containing small fires, but turned to the federal government, adjacent states and private contractors when those small fires aren't contained.

But Scott Waldron, fire chief of the Frenchtown Rural Fire District and fire warden for Missoula County, said the state's initial attack forces are too small to realistically deal with small fires - a situation that almost guarantees some will get away.

More people live in and near forests today. The state's forests are drier and contain more small-diameter, fire-prone trees, Waldron said. Despite that, the DNRC has not added men or engines to its initial attack crews in 10 years, he said. In fact, State Forester Bob Harrington said DNRC axed two positions due to legislative budget cuts.

In short, Waldron said, the state has done nothing to respond to the combustible combination of drought, overgrown forests and more people living in the woods. It took a long time for conditions in the forest to reach the current level of combustibility, and Waldron said that's not going to change overnight.

"Their funding is just inadequate to meet the needs of wildland firefighting," he said. "I don't believe the state has adjusted to the terribly different fire environment that has occurred. DNRC Initial Attack needs to be better prepared up front instead of being reactive."

Instead, the state prays for rain, allows big fires to start and ends up paying bigger bills.

Lewis said Montana is hardly alone. The system of bringing in federal fire bosses and millions in contracted equipment is the norm across the country.

By doing so, these federal bosses, who are not accountable to Montana taxpayers and are accustomed to spending a lot of money, end up making these costly decisions, he said.

"There is a history of the Forest Service being a blank check," Lewis said, "and that history has infected the whole thing. The history of firefighting in the Northern Rockies is that money is no object."

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