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Fires still burn the BLM

It says downsizing not to blame for Murphy Complex

By Matt Christensen

Cutting the number of Bureau of Land Management fire engines by more than a third in the BLM's Twin Falls District had little effect on Idaho's largest fire in a century, BLM officials said Friday in a meeting with the Times-News editorial board.

The district reduced its engines from 38 to 22 this spring - about the same time it requested "severity funds" in anticipation of a harsh fire season, and just months before the Murphy Complex Fire was started by a lightning strike in late July. The blaze would eventually burn about 600,000 acres, nearly all in the Twin Falls District, and cost \$13 million to suppress.

Climate change, fuel loads related to grazing and a lack of experienced firefighters were more significant impacts than fewer engines, said Peter Ditton, associate state director for Idaho's BLM.

"There's no disputing the fact that when there are more fuels on the ground (the fire) is easier to get going, and there's no disputing the fact that there's some sort of climate change happening," he said. Fewer engines, Ditton said, were not a factor.

The engine cuts followed a 2006 fire season that injured several BLM firefighters, many of whom were run over by their own trucks. BLM managers said in the spring they wanted to trim the number of engines to rid the department of inexperienced firefighters who are more prone to injury.

No BLM firefighters were injured this year, when just 10 rookie firefighters were hired compared with 70 last year.

BLM officials stand by their decision to cut engines, despite pleading for more resources at the height of the Murphy blaze. Managers needed more experienced firefighters, who were tied up at other wildfires, not more firefighters with little experience, said Bill Baker, manager of the Twin Falls District.

The BLM is reassessing its approach to the Murphy fire, which drew criticism from Gov. C.L. "Butch" Otter and Idaho's congressional delegation. The politicians said the BLM didn't act quickly enough when the fire first broke because of federal regulations against disturbing archeological and environmentally sensitive sites.

The BLM said that's not true and that federal regulations don't block them from fighting fires.

The department is also examining grazing regulations, another issue that sparked criticism from Otter and the delegation who said environmental groups are responsible for stricter grazing regulations in southern Idaho that have led to a buildup of flammable grasses.

The BLM officials said fuel load contributed to the fire's size but were unsure of the extent.

"It's really hard to say one way or another," Ditton said. "We're looking into that, too."

The federal Department of the Interior, headed by former Idaho governor Dirk Kempthorne, has formed a task force to study climate change, which he and Ditton have blamed for the fire's size and aggressive behavior.

Unusually high temperatures, low humidity and strong winds created a perfect storm for a catastrophic fire, officials said in Murphy's aftermath.

Those conditions could extend into next fire season. By then, officials hope to be better prepared and have more resources to fight a large fire.