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Flap over federal cash for trees hits Idaho

Boise, Meridian and Nampa will get stimulus money for urban forestry - funds Idaho's senators voted to refuse for the nation's capital.

BY ROCKY BARKER - rbarker@idahostatesman.com

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Idaho's Republican senators co-sponsored the amendment last week that stops the Forest Service from spending money listed in the stimulus law under "wildland fire management" in Washington, D.C.

But Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack said Tuesday in Boise that urban forestry programs in Washington and Boise were authorized by language in the law that included spending for "forest health and ecosystems" under the same heading as wildland fire management.

The amendment passed on a voice vote with support from prominent Western Democrats, like California Sen. Dianne Feinstein.

"It is unreasonable that federal firefighting money was going into areas where there are no forest fires," Idaho Sen. Mike Crapo said in a news release after the vote. "In this time of tight budget dollars, it would seem to be a priority is to put the money where it is needed."

But Vilsack said urban forestry programs, which care for city trees, are important.

"I don't know that he wants to take the \$600,000 away from Boise, but if Congress wants us to spend a portion of the stimulus dollars a different way, we'll do that," Vilsack told the Idaho Statesman.

The Valley cities' urban-forestry money actually totals \$516,000. The money will be granted to the cities by the Idaho Department of Lands.

Vilsack, who oversees the U.S. Forest Service, was in Boise Tuesday to tour the National Interagency Fire Center and a wood pellet plant in Mountain Home that benefited from stimulus funding.

A spokesman for Crapo expressed doubts that the programs for the Valley cities and for Washington, D.C., are similar.

"We saw different uses for the money than we saw in Idaho," spokesman Lindsay Nothorn said.

The controversy started when Wyoming Republican Sen. John Barrosso responded to a story in the conservative Washington Times that said wildfire funding was going to Washington, D.C.

"The last major fire in D.C. was likely lit by British troops in 1814," Barrosso said.

But Agriculture officials said the \$500 million listed under wildland fire management in the law is split between \$250 million for cutting and thinning trees and underbrush on federal lands and \$250 million for state and local programs. Those include reducing fuels but also include forest health and ecosystems, said Caleb Weaver, a spokesman for the Department of Agriculture.

The Washington, D.C., Department of Transportation's Urban Forestry Administration got the forest stimulus money to be passed on to the Washington Parks & People program. The department said in a news release that the funds would be used to create green jobs and improve the health of the city's trees.

Boise plans to use its money for tree maintenance, said Ross Borden, director of intergovernmental affairs for the

city.

"We are the City of Trees, and we are certainly going to make good use of it," Borden said.

Kootenai County got \$649,000 in funding from the same stimulus program. Its money is going to reduce fuels and trim trees to make defensible spaces for wildland firefighting.

Crapo and Risch voted against the stimulus bill, but before the vote they joined a bipartisan group of senators urging that the bill include \$1.52 billion to log and thin national forests to reduce the potential for huge fires. Eventually the bill included the \$500 million listed under wildland fire management.

Republican Senate leaders included the wildland fire management line item in a memo they released on waste in the stimulus bill.

Overall, Idaho has been one of the big winners in stimulus spending from the U.S. Forest Service, with more than \$98 million in projects already allocated. The Forest Service's portion of the bill is expected to create or retain more than 1,200 jobs in the state. The state's high unemployment rate is the reason it got so much.

Rocky Barker: 377-6484