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Senate rejects wildfire funds for D.C. parks

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The Senate this week told the Obama administration to stop spending stimulus bill wildland firefighting money on urban parks in the nation's capital - the first time either chamber has voted to reject one of the administration's stimulus spending decisions.

With fires raging out West, lawmakers said, it was ridiculous to spend firefighting money in Washington, which has no national forests and isn't considered a forest fire danger spot. In a voice vote Tuesday, senators voted unanimously to prohibit the U.S. Forest Service to spend any of its \$500 million in wildland fire money in the city.

"This is ridiculous, it is outrageous, and we should not stand for it," said Sen. John Barrasso, the Wyoming Republican who sponsored the amendment to the Interior Department spending bill.

The money, part of the \$787 billion stimulus bill, came from a \$500 million fund the Forest Service was given for "wildland fire mitigation."

Earlier this month, the Forest Service announced that among its wildland fire grants were two D.C. programs: \$90,000 for a city government summer green job corps program and \$2.7 million for Washington Parks & People, a nonprofit, to start a green job corps.

The grants, first reported by The Washington Times, drew condemnation from lawmakers, who said forest fire money should be spent on stopping forest fires.

But Caleb Weaver, press secretary at the Agriculture Department, which oversees the Forest

Service, said the money going to Washington is part of a fund set aside for state and private land, not national forests. Even though the money was in the "wildland fire mitigation" section of the stimulus bill, he said, Congress allowed it to be spent on healthy forest and ecosystem improvement activities.

"The point of these economic recovery funds was principally to create jobs, especially in areas that were struggling. The District of Columbia has one of the highest unemployment rates in the country," Mr. Weaver said.

Stephen W. Coleman, executive director of Washington Parks & People, said his grant was filed under a program aimed at boosting forest health.

"There was never anything about firefighting. We have fought fires in parks in D.C., but that's not what this is about," Mr. Coleman said. "Obviously everybody recognizes there are urgent needs in firefighting, but there are also urgent needs in urban neglected green spaces."

His stimulus grant application says the group would create DC Green Corps to "link inner-city communities into lasting green jobs, and to spark lasting stronger investment in using urban and community forestry to meet vital community needs."

Mr. Coleman said they don't have a grant agreement with the Forest Service and don't know the details of exactly what the final project description would be, but that it's inaccurate to portray the group as a frivolous endeavor.

He took exception with those who questioned the value of his group's projects, saying their goal is to reclaim urban spaces for parks and "make it safe, so folks aren't dying there anymore."

"We're not about merrymaking; we're about using green space to bring life to communities that have been desperately lacking any kind of basic public health or safety," he said.

Lawmakers, though, said wildland fire money should be used on firefighting.

"This was not the intention of the Interior part of the stimulus bill. It is not the intention of this bill," said Sen. Dianne Feinstein, California Democrat and chairman of the spending subcommittee that handles public lands.

A group of Republican senators from Western states - Sens. John Ensign of Nevada, Jon Kyl and John McCain of Arizona, and Michael D. Crapo and Jim Risch of Idaho - joined in the push for the amendment.

The Senate vote is only a first step in denying the money. The House had passed its own version of the Interior Department spending bill, and the two will have to be merged into a final version, then signed by the president.

Mr. Weaver said no changes had been made in Agriculture Department spending plans.

Mr. Barrasso, who read from The Times' story as he proposed his amendment, questioned how firefighting money decisions are being made. He said an earlier round of grants left out Wyoming altogether, and it was only after the state's congressional delegation and governor appealed to the Agriculture Department that Wyoming was allotted money.

"Meanwhile, the agency wants to spend \$2.8 million on wildland fire in Washington, D.C.? The people and forest communities in my state deserve better, and the people of America demand better," he said.

Wyoming argued that the Forest Service has used inaccurate data and a secret funding model.

Congress approved the stimulus bill on the strength of Democrats' votes, and President Obama signed it into law in February. Since then, he has battled Republicans who have argued that parts of the spending are wasteful.

Several congressional offices said Tuesday's vote marks the first time either chamber of Congress has voted to overturn one of the administration's stimulus spending decisions.

Other efforts have fallen short, including amendments in the House and Senate to cut funding for the John Murtha Johnstown-Cambria County Airport, named after the local member of Congress, and an amendment last week to halt spending on road signs to tell voters that the projects they're seeing are being funded by stimulus money.

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