

Gov: Feds stiff Wyo again on forest funds

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CHEYENNE -- For the second time, the U.S. Department of Agriculture has excluded national forests in Wyoming from its handout of federal economic stimulus program money, a decision that has again angered the state's governor.

The agency on Tuesday announced nearly \$275 million in new federal funds for improvements to U.S. Forest Service trails and facilities in 32 states. Although it funded projects on national forests in most surrounding states, it excluded projects in Wyoming.

Gov. Dave Freudenthal said Wednesday he has no insight into why the department denied the state's latest funding request.

"All it does is go to show that the more things change in Washington, the more they stay the same," he said. "We hoped the results would be different, they're not. And we'll just go on about our business."

The agency looks for projects in the neediest areas, U.S. Forest Service spokeswoman Allison Stewart said Wednesday.

The Bureau of Labor Statistics reported Wyoming's unemployment rate for May was 5 percent, while the national average that month was 9.4 percent, Stewart said in a statement. Wyoming's unemployment rate climbed just 2 percent since May 2008, while Michigan, for example, saw its rate climb by more than 5.9 percent, she said.

Roughly 5 percent of the national forest system lands are in the state, including the Shoshone National Forest the nation's first designated national forest, Wyoming state forester Bill Crapser said.

Wyoming forests need work in campgrounds and along trails, and trees that have been damaged by beetles need to be cleared to mitigate fire risks, Crapser said.

"We've got the same resource needs that any of the surrounding states have," he said.

Last month, Freudenthal wrote to Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack saying he was indignant that Wyoming was excluded from the first round of funding.

Freudenthal, a Democrat, wrote that he doubts most people in the nation's capital could understand the dire natural resource issues facing the state or could even find Wyoming on a map.

In the same letter, the governor asked Vilsack to give Wyoming \$26.5 million for projects to address wildfire concerns and beetle infestations.

"The current bark beetle epidemic does not stop at the state line, nor do other resource concerns and needs," Freudenthal wrote.

Freudenthal said Tuesday that Vilsack hasn't responded to his letter.

Attempts to reach a spokeswoman at Vilsack's office for comment on Wednesday were unsuccessful.