

Forest Service says funds will help create 'green jobs'

Stimulus money for wildfires going to D.C. parks

MATTHEW DALY - Associated Press writer | Posted: Thursday, September 24, 2009 12:00 am | [\(3\) Comments](#)

WASHINGTON -- Nearly \$3 million in stimulus money targeted for fighting wildfires is being spent to restore public parks and watersheds in the nation's capital, which has no national forests.

The Forest Service has directed that \$2.8 million in "Wildland Fire Management" funds, approved under the economic stimulus law, go to groups that will create "green jobs" in the District of Columbia. The projects are intended to restore public parks and watersheds in the city and highlight the value of urban parks, including a park 2 miles north of the White House that once was plagued by crime.

The spending angered a group of Western lawmakers, who noted that the District of Columbia has no national forests and that forests throughout the West continue to burn. A huge wildfire in Southern California blackened nearly 250 square miles of the Angeles National Forest and resulted in the deaths of two firefighters whose truck plunged off a mountain road.

"The last major fire in D.C. was likely lit by British troops in 1814," said Sen. John Barrasso, R-Wyo., who is leading Western lawmakers' effort to strip the city of the money. "There are many wasteful and wild schemes born in Washington, but this takes the cake."

Sen. Mike Crapo, R-Idaho, called it unreasonable that federal firefighting money is going to areas where there are no forest fires.

A spokesman for the Agriculture Department, which oversees the Forest Service, said the lawmakers' anger is misplaced. While the stimulus law targets "Wildland Fire Management," the term encompasses a broad range of activities, including forest health protection and rehabilitation and activities on state and private lands, said spokesman Caleb Weaver.

"Wildland fire management is not just for fighting fires," Weaver said, noting that the stimulus law allocates \$500 million for that broad category. Half the money is to be used for wildfire prevention on federal lands through activities such as clearing underbrush and other hazardous fuels. The other half is for similar work on state and private lands, as well as for projects to improve forest health and ecosystems, Weaver said.

Steve Coleman, director of Washington Parks & People, a D.C.-based nonprofit that will receive nearly \$2.7 million under the program, called the criticism unfair.

"This grant is seeking to improve forest health in the region," Coleman said. "The condition of forests in the city is directly related to crime."

Washington Parks & People began nearly two decades ago at Meridian Hill Park in Washington, also known as Malcolm X Park, and helped transform it from the most violent in the city to one of the safest, Coleman said. The group received an award from the National Park Service for its work.

The stimulus money was awarded to the D.C. Department of Transportation's Urban Forestry Administration, which passed most of it on to Washington Parks & People. A city transportation spokesman could not be reached for comment Wednesday, but the agency said in a news release that the grant would create green jobs in the District and improve the health of the city's urban tree canopy.

About \$90,000 is slated for "a green summer job corps" that will employ about 100 District teenagers, who will collect data as well as mulch, water and prune trees around town.