

Brushing Away Fire Hazards

By Lauren Gardner, CQ Staff

It isn't always easy to persuade landowners to clear away highly flammable brush on their properties — even if it might mean saving their own homes from a wildfire. Safety officials recommend a 200-foot buffer; the work can be expensive and the brush awkward to dispose of.

The Department of Agriculture, though, is developing programs that it hopes will encourage and maybe even reward landowners for brush removal by finding energy uses and a market for the woody debris.

In September, the USDA granted more than \$1.1 million to five groups that seek to form statewide teams to develop wood energy projects in concert with companies and other organizations. Another \$1.8 million in state and local money will go toward the effort.

This kind of mitigation program isn't new — the USDA launched a cross-agency initiative three years ago to synchronize programs that could help the administration meet its objectives for forest health, renewable-energy use and rural job growth. The latest initiative is aimed at making the removal of brush and dead tree limbs more economically viable, says Thomas Tidwell, chief of the U.S. Forest Service.

"We have markets for soft timber, we have markets for the trees that produce lumber," Tidwell says. "We need to have markets for the smaller material because otherwise it's just expensive to remove it, and it's very expensive then to deal with the wildfires that come."

Such a market might include Forest Energy Corp. of Show Low, Ariz., which makes wood pellet heating fuels and has been part of a project to thin about 5,000 acres a year in the surrounding Apache-Sitgreaves National Forest, buying material from the project and turning it into fuel. A 40-pound bag of pellets would heat a typical home for a day, the company says, and it estimates heating would cost \$120 a month or \$660 a season.

Tidwell hopes such projects will reduce the amount of territory in the Wildland-Urban Interface where the Forest Service is concerned about brush-clearing and fire-fighting. That would cut costs.

"Because that's what it's going to take," Tidwell says, "a combination of the private landowners doing what they need to do on their lands in conjunction with the Forest Service being able to thin out our forests and reduce the amount of fuel there."

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