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BUDGET CUTS ADD FUEL TO FLORIDA'S WILDFIRES

TALLAHASSEE, FL -- Florida's wildfire season continues to accelerate. The number of fires entered triple digits in the past week alone, touching all areas of the state and prompting Gov. Rick Scott to declare a state of emergency.

By mid-April, still early in the season, the Florida Forest Service (FFS) has battled nearly 1,500 wildfires that burned about 80,000 acres. More than 1,800 homes have been evacuated, 27 destroyed.

According to the National Fire Center in Boise, Idaho, Florida's longterm forecast only gets worse through June. The National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) also points to expanding drought conditions in the coming months, which stands to intensify the number and size of fire events.

"From St. George Island in the Panhandle to just north of one of the world's most famous tourist attractions in Orlando," said Commissioner of Agriculture and Consumer Services Adam Putnam, "we're seeing that every area of our state is susceptible to fire. With such an active wildfire season and much of Florida experiencing significant drought with no relief in sight, residents and visitors should take every precaution to help prevent wildfire."

The potential for more destruction has some Florida residents asking what can be done on the front-end to prevent widespread damage.

"Proper land management is key," said Florida Forestry Association Executive Director Alan Shelby, "for both public and private landowners. Prescribed fire, herbicides and maintenance cost money, but they can also save a lot of money – not to mention lives, homes and property – by reducing the fuel load that feeds fires and makes them grow."

FFS also places a high priority on prescribed burns and has won a national commendation for its burns on public lands.

According to FFS, 29 percent of Florida's forestlands are publicly owned, with a majority of those lands being held by the state and overseen by various agencies such as the Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services, the Department of Environmental Protection, the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission and Water Management Districts.

Funds for management of those public lands are allocated by the state legislature.

"Currently both the House and Senate budgets reflect notable reductions to land management programs," Shelby said, "but a lot can happen in the budget conference. And hopefully it will."

"Cuts in land management budgets have lasting impacts," he explained. "They literally add fuel to the fire. And that is not something Florida needs right now."