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As the country struggles to reign in escalating firefighting costs, New Mexico may be further along in easing expenditures than most other states.

With the toll of firefighting in 2006 soaring past \$1 billion for the third year in six, the U.S. Department of Agriculture has released a new report on how to reduce those costs in coming fire seasons. The USDA Office of the Inspector General completed the audit last month.

Dan Ware, a spokesman for the state Forestry Division, said it is too early to be certain how the report will impact New Mexico.

“After our initial review, we’ve got some concerns when it comes to some of the reimbursement issues in there on federal fire that threatens private land,” he said.

According to Ware, New Mexico spent close to \$15 million on wildfire suppression during 2006.

“The state is an equal partner in many respects to the costs of fighting fires,” he said. “We spent millions of dollars this year, because our fire season was so lengthy.”

One of the report’s recommendations is to shift more of the burden for suppression to non-federal entities. According to the audit, increasing the financial responsibility for state and local governments will encourage better planning in the wildland-urban interface, where homes and other structures meet forested areas.

“Homeowner reliance on the federal government to provide wildfire suppression services places an enormous financial burden on USFS, as the lead federal agency providing such services,” the audit states. “It also removes incentives for landowners moving into the WUI to take responsibility for their own protection and ensure their homes are constructed and landscaped in ways that reduce wildfire risks.”

While the OIG report states one of the major problems is the wildland interface and slow progress in protecting homes from wildfire, Ware counters that New Mexico is at the forefront of such efforts.

“We have done just a fantastic job as a whole on the community level,” he said. “There are many more fire-wise communities in New Mexico than other places in the country, and that’s because we have a very good interagency relationship with our state and federal land partners to private land owners to communities in general.

“I think, in many ways, New Mexico leads the nation in our ability to get on the ground and get things done.”

In the Grant County area, the Forestry Division has worked with hundred of homeowners to clear brush and other vegetation surrounding their properties. Gary Benavidez, New Mexico Forestry's assistant district forester, and then-wildland fire coordinator Fred Potter initiated this "defensible-space" project several years ago. Homeowners can request an assessment of their property, and some financial assistance is available to help clear brush and low-hanging trees.

The OIG report also suggests the Forest Service allow more fires to burn, as such "wildland fire use" blazes can reduce the amount of hazardous fuel. According to the report, of 80,000 naturally occurring fires on Forest Service land between 1998 and 2005, only about 1,500 were allowed to burn for wildland fire use.

"Consequently," the report states, the Forest Service "may have missed opportunities to reduce the hazardous fuels that contribute to large, expensive fires, and may have unnecessarily spent millions of dollars suppressing wildland fires."

In southwest New Mexico, fuels reduction projects are a common occurrence. Last month, crews wrapped up a pile-burning project in the Burro Mountains, and the Forest Service has announced plans to complete seven fuel-reduction projects in the Reserve Ranger District during December and January.

Despite efforts to improve conditions in the Gila National Forest and along the WUI, the three major wildfires that swept through the area this summer threatened private homes and residences. The Skates Fire was being managed for wildland fire use before high winds swept it toward homes in the Lake Roberts area, forcing the Forest Service to employ costly suppression measures in the wildland-urban interface.

Mary Zabinski, fire information officer for the Southwest Coordination Center, said the USFS spent \$4.5 million on the Skates Fire. The Reserve Complex and Bear fires cost \$6.3 million and \$6.2 million, respectively. Forest Service firefighting expenditures for wildfires in New Mexico and Arizona's 11 national forests totaled \$75 million in 2006.

The OIG audit did make some recommendations for internal USFS improvements, including better management of fuel reduction and suppression efforts. In addition, under Forest Service policy, fires cannot be managed for both suppression and WFU, and once a fire is fought for suppression it is no longer eligible for fuel reduction. The audit recommendations include a policy change to allow concurrent fire management, rather than the existing either-or approach.

The report also calls for additional fire managers — there are only 82 of an estimated 300 required for operations — and for better cost-containment procedures and reporting.

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