

OURAY COUNTY

Cow Creek Fire marked by communication kinks

BY CAROLINA BROWN
news@ouraynews.com

County officials debriefed during a work session last week about the response to the Cow Creek Fire in October, to discuss what went well and what could be improved the next time a similar incident happens.

Communication improvements were one of the main concerns among those who participated in the work session with commissioners. Much of the discussion centered on the first 911 call reporting the fire and when the fire was upgraded to a Type 2 incident and the federal government assumed management for the response.

Communication between individuals within the county was good, according to Ouray County Fairgrounds Manager Erin Stadelman. The fairgrounds became ground zero for the firefighting operations, as it was

close enough to the fire for access and had the facilities needed by management teams.

Though communication within the county was satisfactory, Stadelman and Emergency Manager Glenn Boyd said confusion arose between agencies when federal officials became more involved.

Multiple officials, including Boyd and Ridgway Fire Chief Chris Miller, were directed by federal officials to report to Commissioner Ben Tisdell.

"I am completely not the right person," Tisdell said, adding it was inappropriate to first report to him.

Chief Paramedic Kim Mitchell said there was confusion in the initial response because the original 911 call went to EMS, instead of the fire department. Miller agreed.

"It started off as a mess because the hunters called in at 6:15 (a.m.) and said, 'There's a fire,... and they called the state and

BLM forest and we didn't get called for another 30 minutes," Miller said.

The Western Colorado Regional Dispatch Center in Montrose received a call from hunters who identified themselves as Cow Creek Outfitters to report the fire. The initial report said there were potentially other hunters in the area. Because the location identified by the hunters falls outside of any fire protection district's jurisdiction, Westco had to first obtain permission from the Ouray County Sheriff's Office to dispatch the Ridgway Fire Department, which was the closest fire department to the blaze.

Other hunters were never confirmed to be either in or out of the area during the fire. Commissioner John Peters asked if the fire could have originated from the missing hunters.

"That's still under investigation," Boyd said.

Officials were otherwise pleased with the effectiveness of their efforts and smoothness of their operations. Boyd said the road closures went smoothly, and Miller described his streamlined procedure, including the first priority of looking for the missing hunters reportedly in the area and requesting an infrared-equipped helicopter.

County Administrator Connie Hunt said she was pleased with the county's response. She said the U.S. Forest Service quickly reimbursed the county for the supplies used at the 4-H Center. Showers for responders were quickly set up at Ridgway School, and they school was quickly reimbursed.

"I think overall for Ouray County this is one of the biggest things we have dealt with, and it went well. As humans we focus on the negative but that is really minor," Boyd said. "As an emergency manager, I couldn't be more proud of our county."

STATE OF COLORADO

Slower growth may set tone for legislative session

BY JOHN FRANK
The Colorado Sun

Colorado lawmakers are adjusting to a new reality when it comes to the state budget: The boom years are over.

A pair of forecasts presented Friday to state budget writers suggests the state's economy will continue to grow, but it will come at a slower rate, which will limit discretionary government spending in the future. The revenue cap in the Taxpayer's Bill of Rights is another factor that will constrain the budget.

"The forecasts confirm that this year's budget will be much tighter than before and will require difficult decisions on how to balance our state's important priorities," Rep. Dancya Egar, the chairwoman of the Joint Budget Committee, said in a statement.

The December projections serve as the baseline for the lawmakers as they start to put together the \$30-plus billion state budget for the fiscal year that starts July 1.

Here are the three numbers that will set the tone for the budget debate in the 2020

legislative session:

4%
The discretionary state spending controlled by lawmakers (in what's known as the general fund) is expected to increase 4% in fiscal year 2020-21 compared with the current year, according to the different forecasts from the governor's office and legislative economists.

It's a far cry from the 2017-18 fiscal year when discretionary spending spiked 14% and the next year when it increased 7.2%. The significant increases ended in the current budget year, when year-over-year growth hit 3%.

For the coming fiscal year, legislative analysts project \$13.5 billion in general fund revenue for lawmakers to spend.

\$55.5 million
Much of the general fund is earmarked for existing programs, so the total available for budget writers to spend in the upcoming session is far less than it appears.

To give lawmakers an idea about how much is available, the legislative council analysts put together three scenarios. The lawmakers will start with about \$832.5 million in new money to appropriate for current or new programs.

But the costs to provide services increase each year. So if current state spending increased at 3.3% — the rate of inflation plus population growth — it leaves \$407.1 million for lawmakers to dole out.

The rate of spending growth is usually higher, however. The state spending typically increases in growth years an average 6%. If the trend holds and spending in the next fiscal year increases by this rate, there's only \$55.5 million in additional money for lawmakers to put toward new legislation — a small sum given the expensive proposals being considered by lawmakers.

To find more money for their priorities, the Democratic-led budget committee would need to cut existing programs. Alternatively, the lawmakers could not spend the additional money or put it in reserves.

"It's not enough to do everything we want," said Sen. Bob Rankin, a Republican budget writer from Carbondale. Noting the slower budget growth rates, he said it "obviously creates some different expectations."

\$1.1 billion

One reason state spending is limited in the next budget year is TABOR. The constitutional amendment — which survived a challenge in the 2019 election — sets a cap on state revenue and mandates any excess tax dollars get refunded to taxpayers.

The TABOR surpluses are projected to reach \$1.1 billion over three fiscal years, according to legislative economists. The governor's office estimates it could reach as high as \$1.3 billion by fiscal year 2021-22.

In addition, another \$428.3 million will get sent back to taxpayers in the 2020 calendar year.

Democratic leaders supported Proposition CC in November to remove the revenue caps — a move that would have let the state keep and spend the money — but it failed by a wide margin.

The result didn't stop Democratic budget writers from bemoaning the effect of the TABOR caps on the budget. "Despite increased revenue forecasts, we won't be able to invest those additional resources in transportation, K-12 education, or higher education because of TABOR," said Rep. Chris Hanson, a Denver Democrat, in a statement. "The budget is tight, and we know it will be a challenge to continue this progress."

Republicans suggest Democrats need to stop blaming TABOR and they should instead point the finger at themselves. "The truth behind the budget is that Democrats continually add new spending obligations to our budget at every opportunity instead of spending available revenue on priorities such as education and transportation," said Sage Naumann, a spokesman for Senate Republican lawmakers.

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