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Fire-fighting senators move to set up wildfire research institutes

Tony Reichhardt, Washington

As almost a million acres of American forest burned out of control last week, senators representing western states proposed setting up three wildfire research institutes to study what is becoming an ecological disaster for their region.

Wayne Allard (Republican, Colorado) and Jon Kyl (Republican, Arizona) introduced legislation on 24 June that would allot \$15 million to create three institutes — one in each of their states and one in New Mexico — to study ecological approaches to the wildfire problem.

If approved, the money would almost double the \$16 million spent this year on a Joint Fire Science Program administered by the US Forest Service, which is part of the Department of Agriculture, and the Department of the Interior. The nationwide programme awards grants to study the wildfire problem, with an emphasis on the natural 'fuels' that feed large forest fires. The new centres would focus specifically on the western United States, although it is unclear how the grant money would be distributed.

Scientists and land managers generally



Arizona's worst forest fire still rages while controversy engulfs the science of forest management.

agree on the underlying causes of the problem. Overgrazing has long since stripped the region of grasses that historically provided the fuel for frequent, but far less destructive, fires. That, combined with

the Forest Service's decades-old policy of extinguishing all forest fires as quickly as possible, has led to a dangerous build-up of dense stands of small trees among the more sparse large trees. It is the small trees that fuel intensely hot wildfires such as the recent ones in Arizona and Colorado.

There is also general agreement that these fuels must be reduced, either through deliberate 'prescribed' burns, or by thinning out the smaller trees, but each solution has drawbacks. Prescribed burns become more difficult as the edge of the forest becomes more populated. They produce smoke, and can themselves get out of control, as happened, for example, during a fire in May 2000 near Los Alamos, New Mexico (see *Nature* 405, 264; 2000).

The alternative approach of thinning the trees, primarily by logging, is the subject of a fierce, perennial debate between environmentalists and foresters in the region. Kyl was among the Republican politicians who blamed the Rodeo-Chediski fire, which began on 18 June and is already Arizona's worst recorded fire, on environmentalists' opposition to logging in national forests. Environmentalists, in turn, have accused timber companies and politicians

Top physics lab names its leader

David Cyranoski, Tokyo

Japan's High Energy Accelerator Research Organization (KEK) has chosen its next director — Yoji Totsuka, a globally renowned neutrino scientist with wide experience of running large projects.

Totsuka is a professor at the University of Tokyo's Institute for Cosmic Ray Research and heads its Kamioka Observatory, where he has spent recent months rebuilding the Super-Kamiokande (Super-K) neutrino detector after an accident destroyed most of its sensors (see *Nature* 416, 118–119; 2002).

He will take over KEK — Asia's largest and most prestigious high-energy physics laboratory — next April, when Hiroataka Sugawara, its present director, returns to research at the University of Hawaii.

Totsuka is best known for providing evidence that neutrinos 'oscillate', or change from one kind to another (see *Phys. Rev. Lett.* 81, 1562–1567; 1998).

"Super-K has done half of its work," says Totsuka, who this year turned 60, the mandatory retirement age for professors at the University of Tokyo. "I wish I could do more, but there is a time limit."

Totsuka was the only nominee put forward by KEK's board of councillors to the science minister, who must still confirm the appointment. But the committee's recommendation has never been rejected.

Sugawara says that he will be advising Totsuka on the challenges ahead of him. "It will be the most active high-energy physics lab in the world," predicts Sugawara. ■