

How The Government Shutdown Is Putting My Entire Town At Risk

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It's been an unseasonably snow-less winter here in the southern Rockies, so on Friday I took a bike ride down a National Forest trail a few miles from my house in Taos, New Mexico that would typically be under several inches of snow in January. At the end of the trail I was greeted by an unsettling sight: smoke rising from an apparent small forest fire in the trees above me.

To be clear, we're talking about a potential wildfire at 7,500 feet in the Rocky Mountains on January 19. This is not normal. There's homes and an extension campus of Southern Methodist University located just a few hundred yards below where smoke is seen rising from the trees in the above photo.

Less than twelve hours after spotting that fire, the United States federal government, including the Forest Service that manages these lands, was shut down as Congress failed to reach a deal on a funding bill.

On Saturday morning there were no large plumes of smoke or haze hanging over my town and no word from anyone that the fire had spread, so I presume we dodged a bullet. Normally, that would be it. I'd probably move on and forget about the disconcerting smoke I saw from my bike.

But right now the public lands that literally encircle my town are essentially without a manager on duty, or at least left with a manager that is now crippled and blinded. Everyone in this town pays the taxes that fund those managers and, more importantly, pays the salaries of the lawmakers who are charged with getting those managers the money they need to do their jobs.

And I would very much like to see those jobs being performed now more than ever.

Snowpack in these mountains is currently at between zero and eight percent of the median for mid-January. The nearest metropolitan area, Albuquerque, recently went 96 days straight without any precipitation and that streak was only broken up by a light rain. One has to look no further than apocalyptic and extended California fire seasons to become very nervous about the prospects for such parched lands.

Those lands are now basically without a caretaker. The Forest Service actually has a very detailed plan for how to handle a shutdown, and coating public lands with fire retardant materials so they're safe until everyone returns is not included.

During a federal government shutdown, "essential" personnel stay on the job. And as Agriculture Secretary Sonny Perdue explained on Friday, this includes "fire fighters and all necessary equipment costs to protect life and property."

That's the good news. But here's the rest:



- While firefighters are still on call to fight wildfires, it's not exactly clear if they'll receive their paychecks in a timely manner as long as the shutdown continues. That can't be great for morale, especially for such a dangerous profession.
- I tried to pull up the website of the nearby dispatch center for wildland firefighters, but the site is currently down.
- The Forest Service site also now features a prominent note that it is not being updated during the shutdown, so good luck getting fire information there.
- For much of January, the Forest Service has been tweeting about the importance of prescribed burns, fuel reduction and other forest management techniques that can limit the risk of destructive forest fires. But as of Saturday, none of that work is moving forward any longer.

And, of course, many of my friends and neighbors who are considered non-essential employees of the Forest Service or Bureau of Land Management have been furloughed until further notice at the hands of their fellow (although much better paid) federal employees on Capitol Hill.

This is all to say nothing of the valuable and ongoing federally- funded science being performed to study the changing climate that is contributing to the extreme weather conditions which have, just in the last year: drowned Houston, burned California and British Columbia, dropped a "bomb cyclone" on the northeast and turned January into mountain biking season for me here in the Rockies.

It's all on hold now: the critical research, the preventive measures, perhaps even the paychecks of those essential personnel. And for what?

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