

Rural fire departments dodge bullet

Written by Scott Rains, Lawton Constitution
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An agreement reached Wednesday by the Environment Protection Agency (EPA) and the Department of Defense (DOD) will continue to allow local fire and law enforcement agencies to receive surplus military equipment for use.

Through two long-standing federal excess property programs, Federal Excess Personal Property (FEPP) and Firefighter Property Program (FPP), Oklahoma Forestry Services has been able to assist rural fire departments by providing nocost military trucks that are then re-manufactured into wildland engines and water tenders through its Rural Fire Assistance Program.

“Today the agencies decided to extend the national security exemption for this vital program on the grounds that the vehicles’ titles remain under DOD after being repurposed in order to ensure the vehicles are eventually destroyed,” said Sen. Jim Inhofe in a statement following the decision. “I applaud the DOD and EPA for coming to an agreement on a 25-year-old rule that the Department of Defense (DOD) recently decided

to start enforcing to the detriment of a program supporting Oklahoma’s local fire departments and their ability to fight wildfires.”

“This is the best short term answer to maintain the program with the DOD, and I will be working with my colleagues to address the unnecessary regulation created by the agreement,” he said.

In Oklahoma, more than 75 percent of wildfires are fought by local volunteer departments, according to the Oklahoma Forestry Services.

\$13-15 million in surplus to Oklahoma each year

Each year, Oklahoma’s fire departments receive and rely on \$13 million to \$15 million worth of surplus equipment from the DOD. The cost of new vehicles falls between \$150,000 and

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\$200,000, but the departments are able to take these surplus vehicles and equip them for as low as \$30,000. Currently there are 8,812 vehicles and pieces of equipment, valued at over \$150 million, being utilized by Oklahoma's rural fire departments, according to Oklahoma Department of Agriculture, Food and Forestry.

The attempted stoppage of the program was announced Tuesday after a decision by the Army Tank-Automotive Command (TACOM) based on an old agreement between the DOD and EPA aimed at reducing emissions. Under the agreement, vehicles not meeting EPA emission standards would be destroyed instead of sold. Now, the state and DOD will have to track the surplus equipment around the state so that it can be returned once it is no longer in use.

"The greenhouse gas emissions associated with the vehicles are marginal at best compared to emissions of an uncontrolled wildfire," said George Geissler, State Forester and Director, Oklahoma Forestry Services.

Critical to fire departments, protection

Flower Mound Fire Chief Josh Sullivan agreed. His department's fleet of six trucks all come from the service. He said he didn't know how his department as well as the homes and property it defends would survive without the program.

"We might put 2,000 miles on a truck in a year and the emissions one of those trucks put out are so few compared to what we'll be fighting at a grass fire," Sullivan said. "These trucks protect people's homes and range lands."

Sullivan said that for a volunteer department that works with a shoestring budget cobbled from donations, fundraisers and funds from the county and state, the need for capable equipment is the first hurdle. He said the military grade trucks, along with being more cost friendly, are made to do the job his department is tasked with.

"The kind of terrain we go through, the military trucks are built to go through it," Sullivan said. "You go out and go through canyons where military trucks will go through it where other

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vehicles just can't do it."

In northern Comanche County, these military-caliber trucks have very specific jobs that can be the difference between a manageable fire and one that consumes land, property and possibly lives.

Paradise Valley Fire Chief Doug Wright said that, while only three of his department's fleet of 10 trucks are repurposed military trucks, they are essential.

"We use those when we get into the terrain that would destroy other trucks; they're handy as heck," Wright said. "We don't fight fire often in the Slick Hills (of the Wichita Mountains) but when we do, they're outstanding for that purpose and that purpose only."

"They're high maintenance but we do it because we need to and we need to use them," he said.

Though his department has been building its arsenal with newer trucks, he said the ones received over the years from the program are as essential as every other tool at the firefighter's disposal. He noted that many other departments "couldn't really operate without those trucks."

"I think it was stupid, the reason not to have them, because of emissions," Wright said. "If you're fighting a 400-acre grass fire putting off more emissions than all the trucks in America, I think that's kind of idiotic."

Although his department doesn't have any surplus vehicle, Cache Fire Chief Dale Winham said it's primarily because of terrain issues. However, the essential purpose of these all terrain "tanks" of the firefight makes them "a valuable work horse for rural departments — they can go places normal brush trucks can't."

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“I’m pretty lucky, we cover a lot of flatland and wheat fields, so we don’t have as big a need for it,” Winham said.