Office of Forestry faces fire season with budget cuts

By ANGELA SIMONEAUX

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And, as budget cuts have been forcing the department to trim down its crews, the average size of a forest fire in Louisiana has been growing.

"We've seen a gradual increase in the average size of a fire," he said. "With the added reduction in personnel, we are

"Even if we had brand-new equipment, we don't have the people to man it," Mercier said.

Bob Odom, state commissioner of agriculture and forestry, said the figures speak for themselves.

"If you'll look at the figures, you'll see," he said.

The budget for the forestry department has dropped from $12 million in 1982 to $7.4 million this year, Odom said.

He said he authorized each district forester to call part-time and retired employees back to work to help ease the crunch during rush periods.

Besides fighting budget cuts and dwindling funds, the forestry department also has to fight arsonists. Louisiana every year are set by arsonists. In some "hot" parishes, the figure is closer to 95 percent.

"In terms of the sheer numbers of fires, we are one of the hottest states in the union," Trahan said. "Most other states have an arson rate of about 50 percent. Louisiana consistently averages 51 to 80 percent."

Trahan said there are a variety of reasons arsonists set fires in Louisiana, ranging from family tradition to hunting.

"It's a tradition, I guess, more than anything else. They used to burn in the spring, to get green grass for the cattle," he said. "It was also a way to group the cattle, because they would all go to the area where the new grass was.

"They also burn to clean up the brush. It's easier to walk and hunt in the woods when they're clean," he added. Trahan said that fire is a useful tool for farmers and hunters - but only when carefully used and controlled.

Fires are often set to satisfy a grudge the arsonist may have against someone else, Trahan said.

"Somebody's mad at somebody, or maybe there is a boundary dispute," he said. "There are a few real pyromaniacs scattered in there, but most of them just do it for the fun of it. They just like to set fires.

Louisiana, like other Southeastern states, saw an unusually hot fall, Trahan said. In October of this year, 1,625 fires burned almost 17,000 acres. The average for October is 465 fires and 3,000 acres. In November of this year, 654 fires burned more than 12,000 acres - with the average for that month being 326 fires and 2,600 acres.

"There were some times when we were nearing the point where we just couldn't do it," Trahan said of the last two months.

And, fall isn't Louisiana's usual fire season, he said. Traditionally, the hottest months for this state are January, February and March.

"We have good cooperation with the volunteer fire departments, but they are really not equipped to fight forest fires," Trahan said. "They can help us out by putting out the smaller roadside fires, and we don't have to use time to put those out."

Trahan said that he isn't looking for more money any time soon.

"Everybody's tightening their belts. We're hoping for the best," he said. "I hate to say it, but it takes a catastrophe to get more money. If the damage is tremendous, chances are we'll get more money."