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Bristol Fire Department reimbursed for rescues

by Zach Despart

BRISTOL — The Bristol Fire Department has been reimbursed through a federal program for expenses incurred while conducting rescues within the Green Mountain National Forest. The department was awarded \$3,363 for providing services March 5-6, 2012, during the rescue of a mother and son that were stranded on the Bristol Cliffs within the Green Mountain National Forest. A second request of \$3,118, for the search and recovery of a Bristol man who drowned in the New Haven River this past July 4 is pending.

Brett LaRose, first assistant chief of the Bristol Fire Department, said the Addison County Firefighters Association, which represents the county's 17 departments, was notified by the state treasurer's office that the Bristol department might be eligible for residual funds left over from a national fire service program. Agencies were eligible for funds if they responded to a call within National Forest boundaries.

To get the funds, departments had to file an application with the state treasurer's office, which included a cover letter, copies of expenses, personnel rosters and incident reports.

"I included a Forest Service map in our application to show exactly where we were," LaRose said.

The role of local fire departments has evolved over time, and the Bristol department is prepared to respond to calls outside town boundaries.

"We're emergency services, not just a fire department anymore," LaRose said. "For example in March, we had a unified command incident, with the Vermont State Police, game wardens and Middlebury Technical Rescue."

When LaRose heard of the opportunity to secure more funding for his department, he seized it. "If there's a possibility to get more funds, I'll go for it," LaRose said. "Our budget is adequate, but we always have needs."

State Treasurer Beth Pearce said the funds were available through the Secure Rural Schools Act, first passed by Congress in 2000 and reauthorized in 2006. Among other things, the act provided funding to the U.S. Forest Service to reimburse county governments for services performed on federal land. Since Vermont does not have a county government system, the task fell to the state treasurer. The funds were apportioned based on how much Forest Service land each state had.

The legislation expired in 2012, which is why LaRose's second request for reimbursement is pending. Pearce said she hopes Congress reauthorizes the act so she can process Bristol's and other applications.

In the last few years, Pearce's office has channeled \$110,000 of federal funds to Vermont agencies, for projects such as a fire pond in Pownal, debris removal in Hancock, and reimbursement to Bennington Rescue for services provided during Tropical Storm Irene.

"We reached out to the Agency of Natural Resources and the Vermont League of Cities and Towns," Pearce said. "We're pleased we can help towns out with small but important expenses."

Pearce said her office has also helped towns and local agencies negotiate with the Federal Emergency Management Association to secure funding for repairs after Tropical Storm Irene in 2011. Again, the treasurer's office partnered with the Vermont League of Cities and Towns.

"That's the difference between Vermont and Washington," Pearce said. "We work together as a team — that's why we get things done."

On Oct. 3, the Vermont League of Cities and Towns presented Pearce with the Town Government Award. The award is given to an individual who is not a local official but "has shown an exceptional awareness of the problems of local government and has demonstrated an active commitment to strengthening local government," the organization said in a statement.