



Wildfires — Space Technology as a Firefighting Tool

If the word “plague” could be used to describe the plight of states and cities in the Western part of the United States, then the plethora of wildfires experienced in the last several years would qualify.

Officials are desperately looking for solutions, more money, more firefighters and better ways to fight and contain fire.

Scientists at the University of California, Berkeley think they’ve hit on an idea that could not only save millions of dollars in firefighting costs, but that will be a prevention tool as well. At one time satellite technology was considered but previous attempts to develop the technology were abandoned because the system was fraught with false alarms and the cost was prohibitive.

That’s no longer the case says Cal physicist Carl Pennypacker.

His group has used state of the art programming to create a satellite that Pennypacker believes will work, and work very, very well. It snaps a picture of the ground every few seconds and lets firefighters instantly know where hotspots are developing.

That gives them a jump start and those extra minutes could keep fires from getting out of control.

The satellite is called the Fire Urgency Estimator in Geosynchronous Orbit — or FUEGO. Pennypacker didn’t put a specific price tag on the bird but says it could be done for a few million. Expensive — yes. But it’s substantially less money than the \$2.5 billion spent fighting fires each year. “It could pay for itself in one firefighting season,” Pennypacker said.