

U.S. Jews, evangelicals help Israel rebuild after fires

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JERUSALEM (RNS) American Jews and evangelical Christians are taking a central role in rebuilding the Carmel region in northern Israel after a deadly fire decimated large swaths of the Carmel forest and left many people homeless.

Several Jewish and evangelical Christian organizations have launched fund-raising drives to assist the region after a massive wildfire in early December killed 43 people in one of Israel's few green belts. It took a team of international fire fighters to put out the blaze.

The fire highlighted the woeful state of Israel's fire service, which employs fewer than 1,500 fire fighters in a nation of 7 million people. There is a severe shortage of fire trucks and the under-funded service does not own a single fire-fighting plane.

American Jews and evangelical Christians, who have a long tradition of funding everything from Israeli tree plantings and soup kitchens to ambulances and bomb shelters, will be supplementing Israeli government aid for fire relief. They hope to raise several million dollars.

Israel's Ministry of Tourism and the Jewish National Fund USA announced a joint plan to raise funds from American Jews and U.S. evangelicals. Tourism Minister Stas Misezhnikov instructed his North American representatives to increase marketing and fundraising to fund

the planting of trees on Tu Bishvat, a holiday celebrating trees and nature, in late January.

The New York-based Orthodox Union said it will donate 100 percent of donations collected for fire relief to organizations providing "rescue, relief, emergency services and support."

The International Fellowship of Christians and Jews has earmarked \$3 million in emergency aid "to help stricken families and communities." Israeli media reports accused Eli Yishai, the ultra-Orthodox Jew who oversees the fire service, of previously refusing IFCJ's previous offer of several fire trucks because he considers it a missionary organization.

Some have suggested the Israeli government, and not foreign donors, should foot the entire bill for the damage caused by what they consider gross government negligence.

"The fact that (Israel) doesn't possess adequate firefighting equipment is its own fault," commentator Jeffrey Goldberg wrote in Atlantic magazine. "At some point, the good-hearted Diaspora Jews who still think of Israel as a charity case are going to have to tell their cousins to learn to fully fund basic services like fire fighting."