



Wildfire Disaster Funding Act

Summary: During heavy fire-fighting seasons, the U.S. Forest Service is forced to withdraw funds from other accounts, including recreation and fire prevention, in order to direct resources to fighting wildfires. This “fire borrowing” comes at the expense of projects that often are left incomplete, perpetuating the likelihood of greater fires in the future and—in the case of recreation—adding to the backlog in trail maintenance. Congress must authorize the Wildfire Disaster Funding Act (H.R. 167, S. 235) to put an end to fire borrowing.

Wildfires Growing in Severity

Fire management remains a critical function of the U.S. Forest Service, as it has since the agency’s inception. Yet for over a century, the benefits of natural fire were poorly understood. The agency’s policy of suppressing most wildfires came with the unintended consequence of increased fuel loading. As the U.S. population expanded, more communities pushed into wildfire-prone forests. The effects of global warming have only compounded the problem. Today, fire seasons are 2.5 months longer than they were in the 1970s. The U.S. Forest Service announced that 2015 is shaping up to represent yet another “megafire” season.

Fire Borrowing Comes at a High Cost

Wildfire spending has more than doubled since the 1990s, going from \$1.6 billion in FY1994 to \$3.9 billion in FY2014.¹ Each year, Congress determines the amount of wildfire management funding for the agencies. If wildfire suppression funding becomes exhausted during any given year, agencies are authorized to transfer funds from their other accounts in order to pay for suppression activities. Yet the practice of fire borrowing undermines other land management programs including those intended to decrease long-term wildfire risk and costs. Moreover, the Forest Service has documented the adverse effects of fire borrowing on recreation programs, including trail maintenance repairs in 17 states that were deferred or cancelled indefinitely and losses in its ability to leverage over half –a-million dollars in federal grants for trail projects in 2013 alone.²

Era of Fire Borrowing Must Come to an End

The agencies must be allowed to treat wildfires like other natural disasters, like floods and hurricanes. The Wildfire Disaster Funding Act (H.R. 167, S. 235) would put an end to the practice of fire borrowing and restore budgetary stability to the U.S. Forest Service without increasing federal spending. It would ensure that agencies comply with the will of Congress by allocating money as Congress instructed, rather than taking money from non-fire accounts to pay for wildfire suppression. It would also recognize the cost-effectiveness of preventing wildfires through the promotion of healthy forests, thereby reducing the risk of catastrophic fires.

These bills would not change federal fire suppression policies or strategies and would not change the cost of fire suppression and, thus, are expected to have a neutral impact on federal spending and the federal budget deficit. The Wildfire Disaster Funding Act would provide a reliable funding structure, consistent with that used by other agencies responding to natural disaster emergencies. The time has come for this long-needed reform.

¹ Congressional Research Service, *Wildfire Spending: Background, Issues and Legislation in the 114th Congress*, June 26, 2015

² USDA Forest Service, *Fire Transfer Impact by State and Territory*, June 9, 2014