



For Immediate Release
Tuesday, September 15, 2015

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USDA, DOI, and OMB Urge Congress to Fix the Fire Budget

WASHINGTON, Sept. 15, 2015 – On the heels of a notification Monday from USDA to Congress of the need to transfer an additional \$250 million to cover wildfire suppression costs for the remainder of the year, Department of Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack, Department of the Interior Secretary Sally Jewell, and the White House Office of Management and Budget Director Shaun Donovan sent a joint letter to Congress requesting they act to change the way the nation pays for wildfire costs so that we can continue to adequately invest in forest and rangeland restoration, and make lands less vulnerable to catastrophic wildfire and more resilient.

Since 2000, fire seasons have grown longer, and the frequency, size and severity of wildland fires has increased. The cost of the U.S. Forest Service’s wildfire suppression reached a record \$243 million in a one-week period during the height of suppression activity last month. With a record 52 percent of the Forest Service’s budget dedicated to fighting wildfire, compared to just 16 percent in 1995, the Forest Service’s firefighting budget has been exhausted, forcing USDA to transfer funds away from forest restoration projects that would help reduce the risk of future fires, in order to cover the high cost of battling today’s blazes. Monday’s transfer was the third this year bringing the total to \$700 million.

While the Forest Service and the Department of the Interior are able to suppress or manage 98 percent of fires with allocated funds, catastrophic megafires burn through the agency’s financial resources. One to two percent of fires consume 30 percent or more of total actual annual fire suppression dollars.

“Restoring resilient forests helps to protect against future fire outbreaks and is vital to minimizing long-term costs to lives, private and public properties, and to struggling rural economies. Under the current budget structure we are forced to abandon these critical restoration and capital improvement projects in order to suppress these few but extreme fires” Vilsack said. “The President’s budget solution, similar to the proposed Wildfire Disaster Funding Act, takes a common sense approach and treats these events like other natural disasters.”

The Forest Service transferred funds in seven of the last 14 years, while in six of the last 14 years, DOI had to transfer funds.

The costs of wildfire preparedness and suppression now account for 76 percent of the DOI wildfire management program budget and, as in the case of the Forest Service, reduce the amounts of funds available for fuels management and restoration efforts. These activities are essential for reducing risks of catastrophic fires, increasing the resiliency of lands to recover from fire, and to protect communities and infrastructure.

"The rising costs of fighting wildfires come at the expense of other programs that reduce the risk of catastrophic fires, increase the ability of our lands to recover from fire, and help protect communities and infrastructure," said Jewell. "The President's budget and a bipartisan group in Congress recognize this and have a commonsense solution -- treat catastrophic wildfires like the natural disasters they are. Congress can stop this perpetual downward spiral that each year increases fire risk, and jeopardizes critical resources that support prevention and recovery efforts."

The Administration proposes that DOI and the Forest Service would be able to access a discretionary disaster cap adjustment after the amount spent on fire suppression exceeds 70 percent of the 10-year average. This is mirrored in the proposed bipartisan Wildfire Disaster Funding Act (WDFFA) which is budget neutral and also has broad stakeholder support.

This approach allows the agencies to invest additional resources in forest and rangeland restoration and management. In the case of the Forest Service, it would increase acres treated by 1 million acres annually and increase timber outputs by 300 million board feet annually. In the Department of the Interior, it would increase the number of acres treated annually by 500,000 acres and help protect public lands such as the sage steppe ecosystem.

The letter points out that the alternative House-passed Resilient Federal Forests Act of 2015, H.R. 2647 is incompatible with the Federal government's natural disaster management needs because it does not address the long-term shift in the Forest Service's budget and the escalating percent of the Forest Service budget devoted to fire suppression.

"We urgently need to address the runaway growth of fire suppression at the cost of other critical programs – instead of leaving our agencies and the States scrambling to plug budget gaps while they are literally putting out fires," Donovan said. "There is bipartisan support for the President's proposal to change the way we budget for fire suppression. The time to act is now."

Climate change has led to fire seasons that are now on average 78 days longer than in 1970. The U.S. burns twice as many acres as three decades ago and Forest Service scientists believe the acreage burned may double again by mid-century. USDA, DOI and OMB are asking for a fix in time for the challenges that lie ahead. Both the President's budget proposal and WDFFA provide real support to the long-term impacts of increasing wildfires.

Below is the text of the letter.

The Honorable Maria Cantwell
Ranking Member
Committee on Energy and Natural Resources
United States Senate
Washington, D.C. 20510

Dear Senator Cantwell:

With more than 8.5 million acres burned already, the 2015 fire season is proving to be disastrous in terms of the loss of firefighter lives, homes and structures, and natural resources. Unfortunately, the season is far from over. In fact, just yesterday the U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) Forest Service (Forest Service) announced it will transfer an additional \$250 million of funding from non-fire accounts to pay for firefighting through the end of the Fiscal Year (FY). The \$250 million is in addition to the \$450 million the agency has been forced to transfer since August to fund firefighting.

In early August, the Forest Service released a report showing that over one-half of its budget is now spent on firefighting and other fire-related activities, up from one-sixth in 1995. By 2025, the agency conservatively forecasts that it will spend two-thirds of its budget on wildfires. This shift in resources from non-fire programs to firefighting has enormous implications on all agency activities, including recreation, research, watershed protection, rangeland management, and, importantly, forest restoration. This Administration placed a very high priority on increasing the pace and scale of forest restoration on the National Forests to reduce the threat of catastrophic wildfire, and increased both acres treated and timber outputs significantly since 2008. However, the Forest Service's ability to increase the level of forest treatments is limited by the growing proportion of the agency's budget spent on firefighting and related activities.

Similarly, in the U.S. Department of the Interior (Interior), the growing costs of wildfire preparedness and suppression now account for 76 percent of the wildfire management program budget, and are reducing the amounts available for fuels management and restoration activities by the Bureau of Indian Affairs, Bureau of Land Management, National Park Service, and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. These treatments are essential for reducing risks of catastrophic fires, for increasing the resiliency of lands to recover from fire, and protecting communities and infrastructure.

The Forest Service and Interior agencies set their firefighting budget based on their average costs of fighting fires over the last 10 years. Due to longer fire seasons resulting from climate change, increased fuel loads in our forests and on our rangelands, and the expense associated with protecting lives and homes along an expanding wildland urban interface, the 10-year average keeps rising and will continue to rise. As a result, unless Congress changes its budgeting strategy for fire suppression in the Forest Service and Interior, firefighting suppression as a proportion of the agencies' budgets will continue to increase.

In addition to this long-term shift of resources towards wildfire operations, in difficult fire years each agency has to transfer additional funds from non-fire programs to fund firefighting, as mentioned above, further exacerbating the problem. With respect to the Department of the Interior, this occurred in six of the last 14 years. For the Forest Service, such funding transfers happened in seven of the last 14 years. Since August the Forest Service has transferred \$700 million.

To solve the fire budget problem in the long term, Congress should take two actions. First, Congress must allow the firefighting spending to be scored as an adjustment to discretionary spending caps in bad fire seasons, in keeping with the treatment of other Federal disaster response activities, instead of transferring resources from non-fire programs, including timber sale and forest restoration projects, research and monitoring efforts, recreation and wildlife activities, and trail and visitor facility maintenance. Second, Congress must do this in a way that does not harm the agencies' ability to invest in fuels management and forest and rangeland restoration to make these lands less vulnerable and more resilient to catastrophic wildfire. Both of these actions are consistent with how the Nation treats other natural disasters.

President Barack Obama's FY 2015 and FY 2016 budget requests addressed both problems. Under the Administration's proposal, if the Forest Service and Interior are appropriated 70 percent of the 10-year average, they would be authorized to access a discretionary disaster cap adjustment. This approach allows the agencies to invest additional resources in forest and rangeland restoration and management. In the case of the Forest Service, it would increase acres treated by 1 million acres annually and increase timber outputs by 300 million board feet annually. At Interior, it would increase the number of acres treated annually by 500,000 acres and help protect public lands such as the sage steppe ecosystem.

The President's approach includes the bipartisan Wildfire Disaster Funding Act (WDFFA), H.R. 167 (which was introduced by Representatives Mike Simpson and Kurt Schrader), and S. 235 (which was introduced by Senators Ron Wyden and Mike Crapo) has broad and diverse stakeholder support. This legislation provides for an adjustment to discretionary spending caps and addresses the long-term shift of resources to firefighting from other critical programs that support forest and rangeland management. Unfortunately, the fire budget provisions passed by the Senate Interior Appropriations Subcommittee only address fire transfers. Without taking a holistic approach to response and recovery, as done with other disasters to improve resiliency, suppression costs will continue to increase.

Further, we do not believe that Congress should modify the Robert T. Stafford Disaster Relief and Emergency Assistance Act as a means to address the escalating costs of wildfire. The House-passed Resilient Federal Forests Act of 2015, H.R. 2647, would create resource uncertainty for disaster response efforts by reallocating funds from the Federal Emergency Management Agency's Disaster Relief Fund to Federal firefighting activities. In doing so, the bill would undermine the Federal Government's ability to adequately budget for, and fund responses to, other natural or man-made disasters such as the damage caused by Hurricane Sandy in 2012. Additionally, H.R. 2647 would undermine financing for State and Tribal public infrastructure disaster recovery projects.

The President's budget request and WDFR both take advantage of the fact that Congress has already budgeted effectively for natural disaster response. With the dramatic growth in wildland fire over the last three decades and an expected doubling again by mid-century, it only makes sense that Congress begin treating catastrophic wildfire as the natural disaster that it is.

Sincerely,

Sally Jewell
Secretary of the Interior

Thomas J. Vilsack
Secretary of Agriculture

Shaun Donovan
Director of the Office of
Management and Budget