



# Firefighters United for Safety, Ethics, and Ecology

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Wildfire suppression disaster funding will be a *fiscal disaster* for taxpayers, and set back hard-earned progress on integrating economics and ecological science in wildland fire management. Congress should not authorize wildfire suppression to be paid from emergency disaster-recovery accounts like FEMA.

From 2006 to 2016, the U.S. Forest Service (USFS) has spent an average \$1.57 billion per year fighting wildfires, routinely overspending its annual appropriation. Much of this money was spent on firefighting activities or methods that were inefficient, ineffective, or knowingly futile given the prevailing weather and fuel conditions. Despite decades of GAO reports and other studies documenting the need for cost containment and fiscal accountability in suppression spending, the USFS is simply unable to constrain itself from overspending on firefighting.

The USFS chronically overspends its appropriated suppression budget because in 1905 Congress authorized a system of deficit spending that enables the agency to transfer money from non-fire accounts to pay for firefighting costs. This would be misappropriation of funds in any other federal agency or program. The USFS calls these budget transfers "fire borrowing" and relies on Congress to provide supplemental "emergency" appropriations to pay for the transfers. Congress routinely obliges and rarely if ever demands transparency or accountability for suppression expenditures in hearings. These "fire transfers" are causing enormous disruption in federal land management as well as causing damage to public lands and raising risks to firefighters.

The USFS blames the soaring costs of suppression on its past policy of fighting all wildfires which led to fuels accumulation that now feeds large-scale wildfires. Yet the agency still attacks nearly every wildfire regardless of its location, conditions of the fire, or potential effects. These include natural lightning fires in remote wildlands burning fire-dependent ecosystems where fire plays a beneficial ecological role and reduces fuel loads essentially for free. This continued attack-all-fires policy not only damages the land, it puts firefighters at needless extra risk, and wastes billions of taxpayer dollars. Given the fact that Congress is cutting nearly every other budget or program in the USFS except fire suppression, agency heads have an implicit understanding that they have a green light and blank check to continue fighting all fires at all times at any cost.

Wildfires are not inherent disasters--they are an essential and inevitable natural process in fire-dependent ecosystems and backcountry wildlands, but the way the agency is managing wildfire across the landscape is causing *suppression disasters*. Firefighters are being stretched thin by fighting all wildfires everywhere with no strategic selectivity for where crews are dispatched. Consequently, by late summer when peak wildfire activity typically occurs in the West, firefighters and suppression budgets are increasingly near the point of exhaustion. If Congress pays for fire suppression with off-budget emergency accounts (e.g. FEMA), it will institutionalize a system of perverse incentives that rewards the USFS to keep managing wildfires disastrously--this will lead to *suppression overspending on steroids!*

As a matter of fact, wildfire activity is increasing primarily due to climate change that is creating conditions more conducive to ignition and rapid spread of wildfires. However, suppression spending is rising independently of the number of fires or acres burned. For example, in 2015 federal agencies spent \$2.13 billion to fight fires across 10 million acres. Congress provided supplemental appropriations and even supplied an extra \$600 million in the USFS FY2017 budget. In 2016, the USFS spent \$1.6 billion--almost its entire appropriation--despite only 5 million acres burning in 2016. Essentially, *the USFS spent twice as much money on half the acreage burned!* In short, in a kind of "use it or lose it" mentality, the USFS spends all of its appropriated suppression budget regardless of the amount of wildfire activity in a given season.

We need a solution to prohibit USFS fire transfers and *stop suppression overspending*.

Since 2009, a broad diversity of groups concerned with public lands management have been pressuring Congress to end fire transfers and "fix the firefighting budget." Unfortunately, the idea they have latched onto is to let the USFS go off-budget to pay for firefighting costs, and by simply by declaring wildfires as "disasters," allow the agency to pay for firefighting from disaster-recovery accounts such as FEMA. Proposals such as the "Wildfire Disaster Funding Act" previously generated support in both parties in both houses of Congress and the former Obama Administration. However, this illusory quick-fix simply lets both Congress and the Administration off the hook from doing the hard work of actual budgeting for wildfires, and lets the USFS escape its obligation for transparency and accountability in its use of taxpayer monies.

Allowing the agency to access up to \$2 billion annually in disaster funds for wildfire suppression will set back hard-earned progress in efforts to integrate the best available economics and ecological science in fire management. The science is revealing that not all fires should be aggressively suppressed, and that some fires can be safely managed to provide fuels reduction and forest restoration benefits at a fraction of the cost of full suppression. These efforts at integrating science in fire management will simply be abandoned by agency leaders if Congress *rewards the USFS for fighting wildfire disasters, not preventing them*.

The solution to suppression overspending is for Congress to demand transparency and fiscal accountability in suppression expenditures, and to *fix* the firefighting budget by setting a firm cap on the agency's budget. If agency leaders understand that they cannot do fire transfers and cannot rely on supplemental appropriations, but instead, must operate within their means of fixed annual appropriations, then this will *force the agency to be more selective and strategic in when and where they use suppression resources and dollars*. The agency will no longer be sending smokejumpers to fight fires on mountaintops in California wilderness areas in January (as they have done in the past) in order to ensure that money is available to protect towns from wildfires burning in August, when they will need firefighters.

Setting a firm cap on suppression spending will allow more money to be available for investing in activities that actually prevent disasters, such as community wildfire preparation, fuels reduction in the WUI, and above all, reintroducing fire into fire-dependent ecosystems. Congress must get more engaged in federal fire management, ask some hard questions in hearings to demand fiscal accountability, and compel the agency to change its policies and practices that date back to the early 1900s. The best science is telling us that *we need to wisely manage every wildfire, not blindly fight all wildfires*, and by integrating economics and cost containment measures into fire management we can manage wildfires in ways that reduce risks to firefighters, prevent unnecessary suppression damage to public lands, and save taxpayers billions of dollars.