

SOCIETY OF AMERICAN FORESTERS

WILDLAND FIRE SUPPRESSION FUNDING

The cost of wildland fire suppression has risen in recent years and will continue to increase in the future. Last year alone, the USDA Forest Service (USFS) set aside almost \$1 billion – more than 45% of the agency's budget – for fire suppression costs due to the impact of funding extraordinary emergency wildfires within a constrained budget.

Yet every year, the President's budget proposal for USFS fire suppression proves insufficient to cover the actual cost of fire fighting, leading the agency to transfer hundreds of millions of dollars from other critical accounts to battle forest fires. Programs that help to reduce suppression costs in the long run, or that provide other critical public services, have been gutted to pay for these rising costs. The Forest Service is destined to become the "Fire Service" if an immediate change is not made.

SAF advocates a new federal funding mechanism (e.g., a partitioned account in the US Treasury) for extraordinary, emergency wildfire suppression that recognizes the overwhelming influence of relatively few large fires on overall suppression expenditures, as well as the inability of many public agencies to perform urgent hazardous fuel reduction projects, protect communities, and accomplish other needed resource management projects because budgeted funds have been diverted to wildfire suppression. The amount of the fund should be based on the five-year rolling average of emergency suppression costs and require that the monies appropriated for the fund are designated as emergency. This means they will not count against the agencies constrained budget caps. This would treat wildland fire suppression funding similar to how all other major natural disasters are funded.

Requirements on use of a new funding mechanism may include:

- Secretarial declaration, which must be met in order to access the fund for emergency events.
- Notification of Congress when the fund, or the normal agency wildland fire suppression appropriations, are nearly obligated.
- A reporting and accounting system that is compatible with the National Fire Plan. The agencies must report to the House and Senate jurisdictional committees on the Fund's use and any recommendations to improve control and oversight of the fund. These reports will be available to the public.
- Limitation of 'borrowing' funds from non-fire programs for suppression activities until all monies in the Fund and within the agencies budgets are obligated.

In addition, SAF supports full implementation and funding of the National Fire Plan and the revised 10-year Comprehensive Strategy Implementation Plan as a means toward more effective wildfire risk management and suppression cost containment. Today's increasingly complex set of fire-related problems calls for improvements using new science-based knowledge and tools resulting from research.

Action must be taken to ensure that wildfires can be effectively and efficiently managed, while at the same time ensuring other no less valuable agency programs are protected from annual depletions during the wildfire season. We encourage the administration to work with Congress and address this issue promptly, before another fire season dramatically impacts ongoing programs of federal land management agencies.