

March 23, 2016

The Honorable Ken Calvert
United States House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Betty McCollum
United States House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Chairman Calvert and Ranking Member McCollum:

The undersigned organizations are writing to express our strong support for maintaining effective funding levels in the fiscal year (FY) 2017 appropriations process for essential wildfire risk reduction and protection programs at the USDA Forest Service (Forest Service) and the Department of the Interior (DOI). The important work accomplished through the Hazardous Fuels programs and the State Fire Assistance and Volunteer Fire Assistance programs help decrease total federal emergency wildfire suppression costs and reduce the threat of fire to people, communities, and both public and private lands.

America's forests and forest-dependent communities are at risk from outbreaks of pests and pathogens, persistent drought, and the buildup of hazardous fuels. Urbanization and development patterns are placing more homes and communities near fire-prone landscapes, leading to more destructive and costly wildfires. In 2015, 68,151 wildland fires burned more than 10.1 million acres. Once again in FY 2015, the ten-year average allocated to the USFS was not enough to meet the suppression needs, forcing the USFS to transfer \$700 million from non-suppression accounts to make up for the shortfall. The current wildfire suppression funding model and cycle of transfers and repayments has negatively impacted the ability to implement forest management, among many other activities. Additionally, the increasing ten-year average has not met annual suppression needs since before FY 2002, which is why we thank the Committee for the full transfer repayment and increased suppression funding in FY 2016. However, we understand this is not expected to occur every year and DOI and USFS need a long-term fire funding solution that would result in stable and predictable budgets.

We appreciate the Committee's support of the bipartisan Wildfire Disaster Funding Act, which addresses federal fire funding challenges as well as other bipartisan Congressional efforts in this regard. We respectfully request a bipartisan fire funding solution be included as part of the FY 2017 Interior, Environment, and Related Agencies' appropriations bill. A fire funding solution must fund wildfires like natural disasters by 1) accessing disaster funding, 2) minimizing transfers, and 3) dealing with the continued erosion of agency budgets over time, with the goal of reinvesting in key programs that would restore forests to healthier conditions.

We appreciate this Committee's attention to this increasing and unsustainable natural resource challenge. The FY 2017 appropriations bill can provide for both necessary wildfire suppression and fire risk reduction activities that create jobs and reduce firefighting costs in the long run. We

are prepared to help and look forward to assisting Congress in developing a sustainable and long-term solution to fund emergency wildfire suppression.

The Hazardous Fuels Programs at the Forest Service and DOI are the primary source of funding used to reduce wildfire risk on federal lands. ***In FY 2017, we urge you to provide \$479 million for the Hazardous Fuels Program at the USDA Forest Service and \$178 for Hazardous Fuels and Resilient Landscapes at the Department of the Interior. We are also asking that you include report language to encourage the Federal Agencies to coordinate their fuels plans with other planning efforts such as state forestry and conservation plans in order to encourage cross-boundary efforts and increase the effectiveness of this program.***

	FY 2016 Enacted	FY 2017 President's Proposal	FY 2017 Request
USDA Forest Service Hazardous Fuels	\$375	\$384	\$479
Department of the Interior			
Hazardous Fuels Management	\$164	\$149	\$178
Resilient Landscapes	-	\$30	

State Fire Assistance (SFA) is the fundamental federal mechanism for assisting states and local fire departments in responding to wildland fires and in conducting management activities that mitigate fire risk on non-federal lands. SFA also helps train and equip local first responders who are often first to arrive at a wildland fire incident and who play a crucial role in keeping fires and their costs as small as possible. A small investment of SFA funds supports state forestry agencies in accessing and repurposing equipment from the Federal Excess Personal Property and the Firefighter Property programs. Between 2008 and 2012 these two programs have delivered more than \$150 million annually in equipment for use by state and local first responders.

In FY 2015, SFA directly funded hazardous fuel treatments on 148,020 acres (with another 126,368 acres treated with leveraged funding from partners) and provided assistance to communities around the country, supporting 2,998 risk assessment and fire management planning projects and 10,160 prevention and education programs.¹ Fires know no boundaries. In 2015, 80 percent of the total number of wildfires were where state and local fire departments had primary jurisdiction. Eighty-five percent of all local and state crews and engines dispatched outside of their geographic areas were responding to federal fires. ***In FY 2017, we urge you to provide \$87 million for the State Fire Assistance program.***

The Volunteer Fire Assistance Program provides support to rural communities and is critical to ensuring adequate capacity to respond to wildfires, reducing the risk to communities, people, homes and property, and firefighters. This capacity is critical because these state and local resources are the first responders to more than 80% of wildland fires – whether on state, federal or private lands. According to the Forest Service FY 2017 Budget Justification, the small

¹ USDA Forest Service FY 2017 Budget Justification at pg. 299..

investment in the Volunteer Fire Assistance program helped provide assistance to 9,318 communities, helped to train 22,272 firefighters, expanded or organized 20 fire departments, and purchased, rehabilitated or maintained more than \$8.1 million in equipment. ***In FY 2017, we urge you to provide no less than \$15 million for the Volunteer Fire Assistance Program.***

The Joint Fire Science Program is a relatively small budget for a program that successfully yields important results which are directly applied. These tools and technology products support the fire risk reduction community. They help track the effectiveness of Forest Service programs, such as vegetation management and hazardous fuels reduction. Their applied research supports resilient landscapes and communities, and provides key information on wildfire mitigation impacts on water quality, atmospheric emissions, and other natural resources and ecosystem services. We are concerned about the zeroing out of this program under Wildland Fire Management in exchange for funding a smaller portion from the Forest & Rangeland Research budget. ***In FY 2017, we request the Joint Fire Science Program maintain a \$7 million funding level.***

We appreciate the difficult task the Subcommittee faces in the current budget climate. However, these vital, interrelated programs safeguard human life, habitat, and property, and reduce the overall cost of wildland fire management. The short-term savings realized by cuts to any one of these programs is substantially outweighed by the ultimate increase in suppression costs and damages caused by wildland fires. Accordingly, we urge you to support funding for these critical programs. Thank you for your consideration of this important request.

Sincerely,

American Forests
Association of Fish & Wildlife Agencies
Framing Our Community Inc.
National Association of RV Parks &
Campgrounds
National Association of State Foresters
National Ski Areas Association
National Wild Turkey Federation
North American Grouse Partnership
Public Lands Foundation
Quality Deer Management Association
Ruffed Grouse Society/American Woodcock
Society

Sustainable Northwest
The Conservation Fund
The Forest Stewards Guild
The International Association of Wildland
Fire
The Mountain Pact
The National Wildlife Institute
The Nature Conservancy
The Society of American Foresters
Tread Lightly!
Whitetails Unlimited

Cc: Members of the House Interior Appropriations Subcommittee