

May 8, 2018

The Honorable Ken Calvert
Chair, Appropriations Subcommittee on
Interior, Environment and Related Agencies
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, D.C. 20515

The Honorable Betty McCollum
Ranking Member, Appropriations Subcommittee
on Interior, Environment and Related Agencies
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, D.C. 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) 2019 appropriations process for essential wildfire risk reduction and protection programs at the USDA Forest Service (USFS) and the Department of the Interior (DOI). The important work accomplished through the USFS 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, like those that burned more than 10 million acres in 2017 alone.

We thank you for your leadership in developing and securing a long-term wildland fire funding solution that will ensure the USFS has the funding needed for routine activities, local and state wildland fire preparedness and mitigation efforts, and emergency wildland fire suppression activities. A fix for wildfire funding has been a long-held goal of our organizations and would not have been realized without your Committee's leadership. Our organizations also thank you for providing additional funding to support wildfire suppression until the wildfire funding fix takes effect in FY 2020.

The FY 2019 appropriations bill can ensure that necessary wildland fire suppression and cost-saving fire risk reduction activities occur nationwide by fully supporting the State Fire Assistance and Volunteer Fire Assistance programs.

The State Fire Assistance (SFA) program 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. The program helps train state and local first responders who are often first to arrive at a wildland fire incident, as well as equip them with the tools they need to put wildfires out in efficiently and safely.

For example, in FY 2017, SFA directly funded hazardous fuel treatments on 83,845 acres (with another 92,276 acres treated with leveraged funding from partners) and provided assistance to communities around the country, supporting 4,581 risk assessment and fire management planning projects in more than 3,100 communities. Additionally, between 2008 and 2012, the

program helped deliver more than \$150 million annually in equipment for use by state and local first responders.

The localized support provided by SFA is crucial because most wildfires (80 percent during 2017) burn within state and local fire department jurisdictions. Even when it comes to wildfires on federal lands, SFA-supported crews and engines are often the first to respond.

Our organizations are grateful for the Committee's decision to increase SFA funding to \$80 million in FY 2018. However, additional modest increases in SFA funding can help expand wildland fire preparedness and mitigation efforts and support state forestry agencies in repurposing equipment through the Federal Excess Personal Property and the Firefighter Property programs. ***In FY 2019, we urge you to provide \$87 million for the State Fire Assistance program.***

The Volunteer Fire Assistance (VFA) 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 state and local resources are the first responders to more than 80% of wildland fires – whether on state, federal, or private lands. According to USFS, during FY 2017, the VFA program helped provide assistance to 8,821 communities, train 17,140 firefighters, expanded or organize 61 fire departments, and purchase, rehabilitate, or maintain nearly \$9 million in equipment.

Our organizations greatly appreciate the Committee's work to increase VFA funding to \$16 million in FY 2018. ***In FY 2019, we urge you to provide no less than \$16 million for the Volunteer Fire Assistance program.***

We appreciate the difficult task the Committee faces in the current budget climate. It is important to remember, however, that these vital programs safeguard human life, habitat, and property, and reduce the overall cost of wildland fire management. Accordingly, we urge you to support funding for these critical programs.

Thank you for your consideration of this important request.

Sincerely,

National Association of State Foresters
National Volunteer Fire Council
International Association of Fire Chiefs
Congressional Fire Services Institute
National Association of State Departments of Agriculture