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STATE FORESTERS

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Obama signs bill to help agencies manage skyrocketing wildfire suppression costs

Washington DC, November 2, 2009 – Washington, DC.: President Obama this weekend signed legislation that will bring a degree of relief to the nation's forests by helping federal agencies solve several of the top problems caused by the skyrocketing costs of wildfire suppression. The measure establishes a new approach to budgeting for costly wildfires, which continually drain the budgets of the Forest Service and Department of the Interior and lead to the transfer of hundreds of millions of dollars from other agency forest and land management priorities.

Incorporating the concept of the Federal Land Assistance, Management and Enhancement (FLAME Act) that the House passed and Senate adopted into its Interior appropriations bill earlier this year, the legislation passed the House and Senate on October 29 as part of the annual funding bill for the Department of the Interior and the Forest Service. The bill sets up a pair of "FLAME" funds that will act as reserve accounts for the Forest Service and the Department of the Interior to cover the costs of large or complex wildfires when the annual budgets for suppression are exhausted, reducing the need for the agencies to transfer funds from vital programs and services to pay for wildfire suppression.

"President Obama and Congress have demonstrated that the status quo was no longer working and a new budget scenario was needed," said Steven W. Koehn, Maryland State Forester and president of the National Association of State Foresters (NASF). "This legislation says loud and clear that funding for emergency fire events should not come at the expense of all other Forest Service and Interior activities."

The legislation also gives the agencies another powerful tool that will help them prepare for fire costs each year: rather than using the 10-year average of fire suppression costs to calculate yearly suppression costs – the mandate agencies had previously followed – the agencies are now directed to develop new methods for estimating future suppression funding needs by using data on actual prior-year fire suppression expenditures, predictive modeling and other criteria.

"We have been especially concerned over the past decade about the Forest Service's apparent transition from a land management agency to a fire service agency," said Deborah Gangloff, executive director of American Forests. "The FLAME Act will help the Forest Service and Department of Interior respond to the increasing number of wildland fires without compromising other critical programs."

The action was backed by the Partner Caucus on Fire Suppression Solutions -- a coalition of environmental, industry, outdoor recreation, and forestry organizations led by NASF, The Wilderness Society and American Forests. The group worked with congressional and federal agency leaders in Washington, D.C., over the past year to find a solution to the burdens caused by the rapidly escalating costs of fighting emergency wildfires, which account for more than 95 percent of all acres burned and consume 85 percent of all suppression costs.

"The FLAME Funds bring common sense budgeting to wildfire suppression," said William H. Meadows, president of The Wilderness Society. "No American family would make its budget for the next year based on what its expenses were a decade ago. Congress shouldn't do that, either."

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