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Broad forest coalition asks Congress to address persistent firefighting deficit

Groups request money transferred from other forest programs be restored

August 26, 2013 (Washington, DC) — A broad coalition of more than 90 conservation, timber, recreation, sportsmen and employer groups delivered signed letters today to the U.S. House of Representatives and the Senate requesting Congress provide immediate funding to support firefighters, ensure adequate funding in the fiscal year 2014 budget for wildfire suppression, and implement a solution to continuing fire suppression shortfalls. Letters were addressed to [House Appropriations Subcommittee on Interior, Environment, and Related Agencies](#) Chairman **Michael Simpson (R-ID)** and Ranking Member **James Moran (D-VA)**, and [Senate Appropriations Subcommittee on Interior, Environment and Related Agencies](#) Chairman **Jack Reed (D-RI)** and Ranking Member **Lisa Murkowski (R-AK)**.

The USDA Forest Service (USFS) announced last week it has run out of fiscal year 2013 money to fight fires. As a result the USFS has begun to transfer \$600 million out of non-firefighting programs to cover on-going emergency firefighting expenses. This is the second straight year and 7th time since 2002 that the Forest Service has exceeded its allocation for fire fighting and been forced to look to other programs to make up the deficit. In the same ten-year period beginning in 2002, the Agency transferred \$2.8 billion from non-suppression accounts within USFS. This process has become an unacceptable pattern that is destined to continue unless significant changes are made to the way suppression is funded.

These transfers result in less forest restoration, active forest management, forest landowner assistance, recreational services, road maintenance, and lost jobs. In addition to all of these consequences, the sad reality is these transfers will also lead to a long-term increase in fire risk and costs.

“With suppression inadequately funded, it’s not a surprise that we’re in a transfer situation once again, but these transfers add insult to injury,” said **National Association of State Foresters President and West Virginia State Forester Randy Dye**. “States are still dealing with the impacts from last year’s transfers and now another round will further disrupt state forestry work and harm those important partnerships cultivated when developing forest projects.”

Many factors contribute to the increase in wildfire frequency and severity, including changes in climate, build-up of hazardous fuels, and increasing populations in the wildland urban interface. This past summer reflects a decade-long trend of severe fire activity in the United States. This decade fires have burned 57% more land than in the previous four decades; the fire season has expanded by two months; and the average size of fires has increased by a factor of five since the 1970s. The frequency and severity of these wildfires need to be matched by significant levels of funding to protect people, forests, water and wildlife.

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“This emergency fire borrowing both depletes vitally needed non-fire funds but also has a chilling effect throughout land managing agencies as they are told to stop normal business and conserve operations, grants and contract funds for possible future fire emergency needs,” said **Christopher Topik of The Nature Conservancy**. “This is a double-whammy against America’s public lands and communities.”

“Both Congress and the Administration, have not followed the intent of previous legislation that would have prevented this fire borrowing,” said **Hank Kashdan, Legislative Director for the National Association of Forest Service Retirees**. “This clearly demonstrates the need to establish a long-term solution for fire suppression funding that will finally end the senseless series of fire transfers and guarantee firefighters adequate resources to protect our communities and lands.”

“Congress and the Administration need to find a better way of budgeting and paying for emergency fire suppression,” said **Bill Imbergamo, Executive Director, Federal Forest Resource Coalition**. “The current model is designed to fail, and it leaves the Forest Service less able to manage forests to reduce fire threats over the long-term.”

“As supporters of many of the U.S. Forest Service’s conservation programs, we are deeply troubled by a yet another year of transferring funds from non-fire suppression budgets to fight wildfires,” said **Rebecca Turner of American Forests**. “Providing resources to fight fires is essential, but doing so at the expense of other important forest management and conservation work is unacceptable. Congress needs to address this issue by developing more sensible funding methods that look toward future needs, as well as present ones.”

“Responsible management of our National Forests means caring for both present and future needs,” said **Sustainable Northwest's Executive Director John J. Audley**, “Protecting communities and forests now is critical -- but so is avoiding future severe wildfires through appropriate and active forest management. Transferring non-fire funds to fight fires now is a stop gap measure that does nothing to reduce the long-term damage caused by poor forest management.”

“The wildfires of 2013 have been extremely costly—in terms of dollars, natural resources, property, and unfortunately, lives. The Forest Service is now borrowing money to fight fire from accounts designed to reduce future risks. Congress must fund the costs of this wildfire season so that firefighters have the resources to minimize impacts and protect lives, and we need to commit to land management that reduces the risk of future fires and puts an end to this cycle,” said **Michael Goergen, Executive Vice President and CEO of the Society of American Foresters**. “Continuing to jeopardize the lives of firefighters and the sustainability of our forests is a debt we can never repay.”

The above organizations are representative members of the Partner Caucus on Fire Suppression Funding Solutions, established in February 2009.

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