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April 19, 2019

The Honorable Betty McCollum  
Chair, Appropriations Subcommittee on  
Interior, Environment and Related Agencies  
U.S. House of Representatives  
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable David Joyce  
Ranking Member, Appropriations Subcommittee on  
Interior, Environment and Related Agencies  
U.S. House of Representatives  
Washington, D.C. 20510

Dear Chairwoman McCollum and Ranking Member Joyce:

The undersigned organizations are writing to express our strong support for maintaining effective funding levels in the fiscal year (FY) 2020 appropriations process for essential wildfire risk reduction and protection programs within the USDA Forest Service's (USFS) State and Private Forestry (S&PF) program area. The important work accomplished through the State Fire Assistance (SFA) and Volunteer Fire Assistance (VFA) programs<sup>1</sup> help decrease total federal emergency wildland fire 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 wildland fires, like those that burned more than 8 million acres in 2018 alone.

We thank you for your leadership in developing and securing a long-term wildland fire funding solution which will ensure that the USFS has the funding needed for both routine activities to local and state wildland fire preparedness and mitigation efforts as well as engage in emergency wildland fire suppression activities. This long-held goal of our organizations would not have been realized without your leadership and the work of this Committee. Additionally, our organizations thank you for providing additional funding to support the USFS wildland fire suppression and prevention accounts as well as increased funding for hazardous fuels mitigation on federal lands and cross boundary areas for FY 2019 appropriations.

The FY 2020 appropriations bill can provide for both necessary wildland fire suppression and fire risk reduction activities that reduce firefighting costs in the long run. We appreciate this Committee's continued support for the SFA and VFA programs and encourage you to continue providing strong funding for these important programs.

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. 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 wildland fires out efficiently and safely.

<sup>1</sup>The President's Budget proposed renaming these programs National Fire Capacity and Rural Fire Capacity respectively

For example, in FY 2018 SFA provided over \$28 million in funding for hazardous fuels treatments, benefiting 1,065 communities in the wildland-urban interface (WUI). This funding led directly to the treatment of 49,400 acres of hazardous fuels, with another 184,808 acres treated with leveraged funding from partners. Additionally, roughly \$3.7 million in assistance was provided to conduct 3,882 risk assessments and complete fire management planning projects, supporting 2,873 communities. In FY 2018, SFA funding assisted 12,829 communities through a variety of different activities, including funding for the training of 97,210 firefighters.

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

Our organizations are grateful for the Committee's decision to increase SFA funding to \$81 million in FY 2019. However, additional modest increases in SFA funding will help expand wildland fire preparedness and mitigation capacity for state forestry agencies. Attacking fires when they are small is the key to reducing fatalities, injuries, loss of homes and cutting federal firefighting costs. The need for increased funding for fire suppression on federal lands has broad support. The need to increase fire suppression funding for state and private lands, where roughly 80 percent of wildland fires occur, and where many fires that impact federal lands begin, is just as urgent. ***In FY 2020, we urge you to provide \$87 million for the State Fire Assistance program.***

The VFA program provides support to rural communities and is critical to ensuring adequate capacity to respond to wildland fires, 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 USFS, during FY 2018, the VFA program helped provide assistance to 13,959 communities, train 21,868 firefighters, expanded or organize 48 fire departments, and purchase, rehabilitate, or maintain nearly \$11 million in equipment. Our organizations greatly appreciate the Committee's work to increase VFA funding to \$17 million in FY 2019. ***In FY 2020, we urge you to provide no less than \$18 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,

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

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