

March 10, 2022

The Honorable Chellie Pingree, Chair
Committee on Appropriations
Subcommittee on Interior, Environment,
and Related Agencies
2162 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable David Joyce, Ranking Member
Committee on Appropriations
Subcommittee on Interior, Environment,
and Related Agencies
1016 Longworth House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Chairwoman Pingree, and Ranking Member Joyce:

As you begin work on the Interior Appropriations bill for Fiscal Year (FY) 2023, we respectfully request increasing funding to help state and local agencies fight wildfires across the nation.

To fully and adequately fight fires and keep our homes and communities safe, we request a total of \$79 million for the State Fire Capacity Program (SFC, formerly State Fire Assistance) and \$21 million for the Volunteer Fire Capacity Program (VFC, formerly Volunteer Fire Assistance).

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. In 2021, roughly 59,000 wildland fires burned more than 7.1 million acres.

We need to continue to fund the work of fighting fires on the ground. The VFC and the SFC are essential wildfire risk reduction and protection programs within the USDA Forest Service's (Forest Service) State and Private Forestry (S&PF) program area. The important work accomplished through SFC and the VFC programs helps decrease total federal emergency wildland fire suppression costs and reduce the threat of fire to communities on public and private lands.

SFC is an important federal mechanism for assisting states and local fire departments in responding to wildland fires and in conducting land 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.

For example, in FY 2021 the SFC program provided over \$18 million in funding for hazardous fuels treatments, benefiting 1,482 communities in the wildland-urban interface (WUI). This funding led directly to the treatment of 93,606 acres of hazardous fuels, with another 219,770 acres treated with leveraged funding from partners. Additionally, over \$6 million in assistance was provided to conduct 2,053 risk assessments and fire management planning projects in 2,853 communities. In FY 2021, SFA funding assisted nearly 12,000 communities through a variety of different activities, including funding training for 74,300 firefighters.

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

Increases in SFC 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 many fires that impact federal lands begin, is just as urgent. **With that in mind, in FY 2023, we urge you to provide no less than \$79 million for the State Fire Capacity program.**

The VFC program provides support to volunteer fire departments protecting communities with populations of 10,000 or fewer residents. National needs assessment survey data shows that fire departments protecting smaller communities tend to lack adequate resources and rely more on volunteer staffing compared to departments protecting communities with larger populations. Fire departments that regularly respond to wildland fires face particularly acute resource challenges as the equipment, training, and apparatus used to fight wildland fire is almost entirely different from that used to fight structure fires. The VFC program helps bridge these resource gaps for thousands of fire departments across the country. VFC ensures 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 Forest Service, during FY 2021, the VFC program provided assistance to 10,135 communities, trained 20,220 firefighters, expanded or organized 103 fire departments, and purchased, rehabilitated, or maintained over \$12 million in equipment. **In FY 2023, we urge you to provide no less than \$21 million for the Volunteer Fire Capacity 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

National Association of State Foresters

International Association of Fire Chiefs

National Fire Protection Association

International Code Council

National Volunteer Fire Council

National Association of State Fire Marshals