

March 17, 2023

The Honorable Mike Simpson, Chair
Committee on Appropriations
Subcommittee on Interior, Environment,
and Related Agencies
2007 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Chellie Pingree, Ranking Member
Committee on Appropriations
Subcommittee on Interior, Environment,
and Related Agencies
2007 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Chairman Simpson, and Ranking Member Pingree:

As you begin work on the Interior Appropriations bill for Fiscal Year (FY) 2024, 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 Assistance Program and \$22 million for the Volunteer Fire Assistance Program for FY 2024.

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 2022, roughly 69,000 wildland fires burned more than 7.5 million acres.

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

SFA 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 2022 the SFA program provided over \$15 million in funding for hazardous fuels treatments, which directly treated 84,297 acres and allowed partners to treat an additional 196,942 acres. Another \$4.4 million in SFA assistance was provided to conduct 2,723 wildfire risk assessments and fire management planning projects in 2,722 communities. In all, SFA helped nearly 11,480 communities manage wildfire risk and trained 40,477 wildland firefighters in FY 2022 alone. The localized support provided by SFA 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, SFA-supported crews and apparatus are often the first to respond.

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 many fires that impact federal lands begin, is just as urgent. **With that in mind, in FY 2024, we urge you to provide no less than \$79 million for the State Fire Assistance program.**

The VFA 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 VFA program helps bridge these resource gaps for thousands of fire departments across the country. VFA 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 2022, the VFA program provided assistance to 11,372 communities, trained 15,335 firefighters, expanded or organized 55 fire departments, and purchased, rehabilitated, or maintained over \$11.6 million in equipment. **In FY 2024, we urge you to provide no less than \$22 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

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