

May 10, 2024

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) 2025, we respectfully request increased 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 \$85 million for the State Fire Assistance (SFA) Program and \$25 million for the Volunteer Fire Assistance (VFA) Program for FY 2025.

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. Due to these and other factors, the United States has been experiencing a crisis over the last two decades, with wildfires growing in unprecedented size, complexity and destructivity, and threatening parts of the nation not historically impacted by fire. Prior to 2003, our forests and communities experienced an average of 2.8 million acres burning annually. Since 2004, however, annual wildfires have burned over 7.2 million acres on average, with historic highs in the numbers of acres burned in 2015, 2017, and 2020. As of April 12th, we have already seen nearly 1.7 million acres burned in 2024 with the summer and fall fire season yet ahead of us.

We need to continue to fund the work of fighting fires on the ground. The VFA and SFA programs 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 VFA helps decrease total federal emergency wildland fire suppression costs and reduces 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 emergency responders who are usually first to arrive at a wildland fire incident, and the program is critical to equip them with the tools, training and resources they need to put wildland fires out efficiently and safely.

For example, in FY 2023 the SFA program provided over \$17 million in funding for hazardous fuels treatments, which directly treated 67,740 acres and allowed partners to treat an additional 233,660 acres. Another \$4.7 million in SFA assistance was provided to conduct 6,858 wildfire risk assessments and fire management planning projects in 3,197 communities. In all, SFA helped nearly 15,300 communities manage wildfire risk and trained 39,901 wildland firefighters in FY 2023 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 arrive for initial attack.

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 2025, we urge you to provide no less than \$85 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 2023, the VFA program provided aid to 10,492 communities, trained 20,571 firefighters, expanded, or organized 135 fire departments, and purchased, rehabilitated, or maintained over \$12 million in equipment. **In FY 2025, we urge you to provide no less than \$25 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 continue to bolster support for these critical programs.

Thank you for your consideration of this important request.

Sincerely,

Congressional Fire Services Institute
International Association of Fire Chiefs
International Code Council
National Association of State Fire Marshals

National Association of State Foresters
National Fire Protection Association
National Volunteer Fire Council