

March 25, 2015

The Honorable Ken Calvert  
United States House of Representatives  
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Betty McCollum  
United States House of Representatives  
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Chairman Calvert and Ranking Member McCollum:

The undersigned organizations are writing to express our strong support for maintaining effective funding levels in the fiscal year (FY) 2016 appropriations process for essential wildfire risk reduction and protection programs at the USDA Forest Service (Forest Service) and the Department of the Interior (DOI). The important work accomplished through the Hazardous Fuels programs and the State Fire Assistance and Volunteer Fire Assistance programs help decrease total federal emergency wildfire 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 wildfires. In 2014, 63,612 wildland fires burned more than 3.6 million acres. While a relatively light FY 2014 fire season in several geographic areas spared the federal land management agencies from having to transfer funds from non-fire programs to pay for fire suppression, the Forest Service was still forced to prepare for transfers. This meant stopping the land management work in the field and halting new contracts that are critical to the prevention and mitigation of future wildfire.

We appreciate the Committee's support of the bipartisan Wildfire Disaster Funding Act (WDFAs - H.R. 167 and S. 235) and respectfully request the language be included in the FY 2016 Interior, Environment, and Related Agencies appropriations bill. The current wildfire suppression funding model and cycle of transfers and repayments has negatively impacted the ability to implement forest management activities. The WDFAs proposal provides the structure to fund a portion of the Forest Service and DOI wildfire suppression costs through a budget cap adjustment under the Balanced Budget and Emergency Deficit Control Act of 1985, as amended. This would provide the Forest Service and DOI with a funding framework similar to that used by other agencies who respond to natural disaster emergencies.

We appreciate the Committee's attention to this increasing and unsustainable natural resource challenge. By addressing wildfire suppression through WDFAs, the Committee would have the additional flexibility to reinvest in important forest management programs in the FY 2016 appropriations bill, providing for both necessary wildfire suppression and also fire risk reduction activities. These activities create jobs and reduce firefighting costs in the long run. We are

prepared to help and look forward to assisting Congress in developing a sustainable and long-term solution to fund emergency wildfire suppression.

The Hazardous Fuels Programs at the Forest Service and DOI are the primary source of funding used to reduce wildfire risk on federal lands. Our request includes support for the new Resilient Landscapes program, which the DOI has proposed in an effort to strengthen the Department-wide Wildland Fire Management program’s contribution to restoring and maintaining fire-resilient landscapes. ***In FY 2016, we urge you to provide \$479 million for the Hazardous Fuels program at the USDA Forest Service, and \$178 million for the Fuels Management program and \$30 million for the Resilient Landscapes program at the Department of the Interior.***

	<b>FY 15 Enacted</b>	<b>FY 16 President's Proposal</b>	<b>Request*</b>
<i>in millions</i>			
<b>USDA Forest Service Hazardous Fuels</b>	\$362	\$479 **	\$479
<b>DOI Fuels Management</b>	\$164	\$148	\$178
<b>DOI Resilient Landscapes (new program)</b>	-	\$30	\$30

\* Levels based on enactment of the Wildfire Disaster Funding Act.

\*\* The President's FY16 Hazardous Fuels program level had to be calculated because the non-WUI portion is consolidated into the proposal for the Integrated Resources Restoration (IRR) program. The calculation is based on the budget's estimate that non-WUI Hazardous Fuels is 25% of total Hazardous Fuels - USFS FY16 Budget Justification Page 127.

State Fire Assistance (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. SFA also helps train and equip local first responders who are often first to arrive at a wildland fire incident and who play a crucial role in keeping fires and their costs as small as possible. A small investment of SFA funds supports state forestry agencies in accessing and repurposing equipment from the Federal Excess Personal Property and the Firefighter Property programs. Between 2008 and 2012 these two programs have delivered more than \$150 million annually in equipment for use by state and local first responders.

In FY 2014, SFA directly funded hazardous fuel treatments on 111,002 acres (with another 120,241 acres treated with leveraged funding) and provided assistance to communities around the country, supporting 3,117 risk assessment and fire management planning projects and 9,972 prevention and education programs.<sup>1</sup> ***In FY 2016, we urge you to provide \$86 million for the State Fire Assistance program.***

The Volunteer Fire Assistance Program provides support to rural communities and is critical to ensuring adequate capacity to respond to wildfires, 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 FY 2016 Budget Justification, the small

<sup>1</sup> USDA Forest Service FY 2016 Budget Justification at pg. 270.

investment in the Volunteer Fire Assistance program helped provide assistance to 11,018 communities, helped to train 16,371 firefighters, expanded or organized 182 fire departments, and purchased, rehabilitated or maintained more than \$6 million in equipment. ***In FY 2016, we urge you to provide no less than \$13 million for the Volunteer Fire Assistance Program.***

We understand and appreciate the difficult task the Subcommittee faces in the current budget climate. However, these vital, interrelated programs safeguard human life, habitat, and property, and reduce the overall cost of wildland fire management. The short-term savings realized by cuts to any one of these programs is substantially outweighed by the ultimate increase in suppression costs and damages caused by wildland fires. Accordingly, we urge you to support funding for these critical programs. Thank you for your consideration of this important request.

Sincerely,

American Forest Foundation  
American Forests  
American Hiking Society  
Choose Outdoors  
Congressional Sportsmen's Foundation  
Forest Business Network LLC  
International Association of Wildland Fire  
National Alliance of Forest Owners  
National Association of Conservation Districts  
National Association of RV Parks and Campgrounds  
National Association of State Foresters  
National Ski Areas Association  
National Wild Turkey Federation  
National Woodland Owners Association  
North American Grouse Partnership  
Public Lands Foundation  
Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation  
Ruffed Grouse Society  
Society of American Foresters  
Sustainable Northwest  
The Conservation Fund  
The Forest Guild  
The National Institute for the Elimination of Catastrophic Wildfire  
The Nature Conservancy  
The Pinchot Institute  
Watershed Research & Training Center

Cc: Members of the House Interior Appropriations Subcommittee