

Don't Let Wildfires Burn up Our Budget

Dear Colleague:

We invite you once again to cosponsor the Wildfire Disaster Funding Act of 2015. In the 113th Congress, this significant legislation received national attention and strong bipartisan support, with nearly 150 cosponsors from both sides of the aisle and a coalition of over 300 organizations lending it support. Passing this legislation will have a significant and long-term impact on both our public lands and on our budget.

H.R. 167 aims to end the destructive cycle of fire borrowing to fund wildfire suppression activities and ensure that the way we budget for fires makes sense, treating catastrophic wildfires like other natural disasters. Today agencies like the Forest Service must borrow from non-fire accounts when fire suppression costs exceed what we have budgeted for the year (which is based on the 10-year fire average). “Fire borrowing” was intended to be an extraordinary measure, but as fire seasons have grown more destructive it has become common practice. Fire borrowing has created a devastating cycle that prevents agencies from doing needed hazardous fuels removal or timber harvests, leading to worse fires.

It makes more sense to prevent wildfires before they start than to fight them once they are out of control. Unfortunately, the way we currently budget for fire is costing taxpayers and destroying our forests. Federal fire suppression spending has increased substantially over the past 20 years—in the mid 1980’s, 70% of the Forest Service’s budget was dedicated to actually managing the national forests. Today, that number is a dismal 30%.

The Wildfire Disaster Funding Act aims to end the destructive cycle of fire borrowing by treating catastrophic wildfires like similar major natural disasters such as floods and hurricanes. Under the bill, routine wildland firefighting costs, which make up about 70% of the cost of wildfire suppression, would be funded through the normal budgeting and appropriations process. The true emergency fire events, which represent about 1% of wildland fires but make up 30% of costs, would be treated like similar major natural disasters and funded under disaster programs.

We need to make a change to the way we budget for fires. This bill will allow us to continue to fight fires without crippling our ability to prevent future ones from burning out of control.

Sincerely,

Mike Simpson
Member of Congress

Kurt Schrader
Member of Congress