FAQ's on H.R. 3992, the Wildfire Disaster Funding Act of 2014

How do we funding wildfire suppression today?

Under current budget structures, wildfire suppression is funded through the Interior and Environment Appropriations bill at the 10-year average. When wildfire costs exceed the budgeted amount, the agencies are forced to borrow from other non-fire accounts to pay for fire suppression. This means that funding intended for hazardous fuels removal and other important land management activities gets diverted to fire suppression before those projects can be completed. If Congress pays back these accounts, it is usually too late to make a difference.

Because the cost of federal wildfire suppression has increased substantially over the past 20 years, fire borrowing has occurred eight out of the past 10 years. This extraordinary measure has become routine. **Robbing these accounts year after year means that important forest management projects don't get done, leaving unhealthy forests that are more susceptible to expensive catastrophic wildfires.** In addition, fire suppression eats up over 50% of the Forest Service's budget and crowds out other important programs funded through the Interior and Environment Appropriations bill.

The FY14 Omnibus Appropriations bill included $3.04 billion for wildfire fighting and prevention programs within the Forest Service and DOI. Last year fire borrowing was repaid to the tune of nearly $600 million. While we do our best to predict the coming fire season and budget accordingly, we never know how bad it will be until it is over. **The Forest Service and DOI are already predicting that the 2014 fire season will cost more than $470 million more than was included in the FY14 Omnibus bill.**

What does H.R. 3992 do?

H.R. 3992 would treat catastrophic wildfires like other natural disasters. Under the Budget Control Act, agencies responding to natural disasters like hurricanes, floods, or tornadoes have access to disaster funding through a budget cap adjustment. H.R. 3992 would make catastrophic wildfire suppression eligible for similar disaster funding.

Under the bill, routine wildland firefighting costs, which make up about 70% of the cost of wildfire suppression, would continue to be funded through the normal 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 natural disasters and funded through disaster programs.

Why 70% through the regular budget?

Today the Forest Service suppresses 98%-99% of the fires it tries to put out on initial attack. **Only one or two percent of fires escalate into out-of-control catastrophic fires, but these fires make up 30% of the costs for fire suppression.** Catastrophic fires can significantly damage the ecosystem, sometimes burning so hot that they sterilize the soil. Catastrophic fires are also extremely expensive when they threaten homes and property.

Recognizing this reality, H.R. 3992 continues to fund 70% of the 10-year average—essentially the routine wildfire suppression costs—through the regular discretionary appropriations process. The remaining costs that come from those few but very expensive emergency fires would be eligible for the disaster spending cap adjustment, just like hurricanes, floods, and similar natural disasters.

Does the bill increase spending?

H.R. 3992 does *not* increase spending. CBO has determined that it does not score. H.R. 3992 is a budget process bill, not a spending bill.

Let's be clear: we are always going to pay whatever it costs to fight catastrophic wildfires. We do this today, and we will continue to do so. **H.R. 3992 changes the way in which we pay for wildfire suppression to bring it in line with the federal response to other natural disasters, and it ends the destructive practice of fire borrowing.** It ensures that agencies comply with the will of Congress by allocating money as Congress instructed, rather than taking money from non-fire accounts to pay for wildfire suppression. It also recognizes the value and cost effectiveness of preventing wildfires versus fighting them by creating healthy forests and reducing the risk of catastrophic fires.

Would the bill take money away from FEMA?

No. The bill does *not* fund wildfire suppression through FEMA's budget, and it does *not* impact the Disaster Relief Fund. Instead, it makes the Forest Service and the DOI eligible for the disaster budget cap adjustment under the Budget Control Act.

A number of agencies, including FEMA, SBA, and others, are eligible for this account. The budget adjustment is capped by OMB, but so far agencies have never requested the full amount. For example, FEMA's annual request under the disaster cap is about $6 billion of the $12 billion total. H.R. 3992 limits wildfire suppression to $2.9 billion.