

The Way Congress Funds Firefighting is a Disaster California Lawmakers Should Fix

Sacramento Bee

David Edelson, The Nature Conservancy

Tim Quinn, Association of California Water Agencies

December 14, 2017

California continues to experience the worst wildfires in its history, with tragic loss of life and devastation to communities, a disaster for our state by any definition.

Congress has an opportunity to act now to reduce the risk of future such disasters. California's representatives in Congress – especially House Majority Leader Kevin McCarthy and House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi – should make sure that it does.

Not all of this year's fires involved our federal forests, but the [fires burning in Southern California right now](#) do, and future fires will. The United States Forest Service manages fully one-fifth of California's land area and most of our forests – the source of 60 percent of California's drinking water and the foundation of rural economies in much of the state.

Unfortunately, California's forests are facing a dire threat from high-severity wildfire, an insect and disease epidemic and a changing climate. Wildfires continue to get larger, hotter and more destructive. The eight biggest wildfire seasons in the last 60 years have all taken place since 2000.

In addition to managing most of California's forests, the Forest Service plays a leading role in fighting catastrophic wildfires in California and across the West. The fire problem has become so huge that the Forest Service now spends more than half of its budget fighting wildfire emergencies, leaving little left over to restore forest ecosystems back to health. Experts expect that trend to worsen if it isn't fixed.

In addition to this dramatic erosion of its proactive forest management funding, the Forest Service is stuck with a [disastrous approach to funding firefighting](#). Under today's fire funding practices, when its fire suppression funds are exhausted for the year, the Forest Service "borrows" money from other programs.

This disrupts and delays important on-the-ground work, including projects that restore forest health and reduce the risk of future catastrophic wildfires. Some call that "chasing fire." We never catch up – catastrophic fires become more frequent and severe while forest health continues to decline.

Congress has a chance to fix this problem before the end of the year. It is working on yet another bill to fund disaster recovery, as part of a larger year-end bill to keep the government operating. A fire funding fix belongs in that bill. Catastrophic wildfires are no less disasters than are hurricanes and floods.

Both of our organizations are partners in the [California Forest Watershed Alliance](#), an urban-rural coalition representing water interests, local government, the conservation community, agriculture and the forestry sector. CAFWA underscores the breadth of support for moving forward with solutions now.

What we're doing isn't working. It's time to shift the focus to proactive management that can help protect people, forests and local economies. Congress should act now. It's just common sense.