



California Forest Watershed Alliance (CAFWA)

An alliance of urban and rural organizations dedicated to the restoration and improvement of California's watersheds and forests.

June 17, 2015

RE: Wildfire Funding Fix

Dear Members of Congress:

On behalf of the California Forest Watershed Alliance (CAFWA), we are writing to continue the important momentum regarding adjusting the way that wildfire disasters are funded. Resolution of this issue, whether through the Wildfire Disaster Funding Act, the Budget and Appropriations process, or an alternative methodology, it is critical to the constituencies we represent. CAFWA is a unique alliance of disparate organizations/groups representing water, environment, local government, timber, and agricultural interests who are all dedicated to finding a solution to California's ever-growing forest health and fire risk problems.

The members of CAFWA are working together to seek new ways to promote proactive, science-based, and ecologically sound forest management practices that will reduce the risk of destructive megafires. Our goal is to protect our forests, natural resources, and local economies by accelerating the pace and scale of forest health and fuels reduction projects and post-fire restoration.

The structure of wildfire funding desperately needs to be changed to prevent so-called "fire borrowing" - or the shift of funds from other accounts - at the U.S. Department of Interior and the U.S. Department of Agriculture, to fund wildfire suppression activities. Hundreds of millions of dollars are "borrowed" in bad fire years to fund fire suppression efforts on federal forest and wild lands. ***This is not a practical way to fund a predictable expense. Nor is it consistent with the funding process for other natural disasters.***

CAFWA and its individual members are in full support of this type of funding change - protecting funding for fire prevention activities by shifting funding for the largest fire suppression efforts into a separate account. Last year, the U.S. Department of Agriculture released information showing how fire borrowing has negatively affected funding for wildfire preparedness, forest restoration, and other activities in nearly every state across the country because wildfire suppression budgets did not fully cover firefighting costs. In California, hazardous fuels reduction projects, the awarding of local stewardship contracts, and timber projects, as well as long-term restoration activities, were all deferred or eliminated.

The current funding system leaves fire prevention and other forest management activities shortchanged. In California, the Rim and King Fires are devastating examples of how insufficient forest management and fire prevention activities can create wildfires beyond suppression. With the

ongoing drought disaster, it's not difficult to see why California's 2014 wildfire season burned over 500,000 acres, including more than 200 homes in Weed, California. Without a change to the funding structure, megafires will become more and more prevalent as the amount of funding allocated to prevention projects will become a smaller and smaller percentage of federal land management agencies' budgets. Since 2000, these agencies have exhausted their funds to fight emergency fires eight times - having to borrow from baseline land management funds.

Other natural disasters are already funded in a way in which prevention funding and post-disaster mitigation funding are not detrimentally affected by the cost of actual disaster response. A new funding mechanism that allows dollars to be set aside ahead in time to pay for the largest and most costly wildfire disasters would minimize budget uncertainty, and would incentivize land management agencies in slating and performing prevention and forest health projects.

The sooner a change to the fiscal structure of preventing and fighting wildfires is made, the sooner the work to improve the health of our forests can truly begin. As you know, our nation's forests are vital to the health of watersheds, air quality, wildlife habitat, and as an economic driver in some of our poorest and most rural areas through tourism, recreation, and sustainable forestry.

We look forward to working with you and all of Congress, to ensure healthy forests and adequate funding for firefighting and fire prevention needs.

Sincerely,



Tim Quinn, Executive Director
Association of California Water Agencies



Patricia Megason, Executive Vice President
Rural County Representatives of California



Erin Huston, Federal Policy Consultant
California Farm Bureau Federation



Steve Brink, Public Resources Vice President
California Forestry Association



David Edelson, Sierra Nevada Project Director
The Nature Conservancy, California Chapter