



Sustaining the Legacy

## NAFSR ISSUE PAPER

# Funding Wildland Firefighting

Throughout the fire season in recent years, the evening TV news regularly features stories of wildland fires. The stories tell of threatened homes and communities, evacuations, and feature pictures of homes and blackened forests that have been destroyed. It is not surprising then to learn that wildland firefighting costs are rising. What people do not recognize is that these rising costs are eroding other Forest Service programs – such as maintenance and operation of public campgrounds, keeping hiking and ski trails open, improving habitat for fish and wildlife, completing high priority community forest health projects, completing high priority research, and providing urgently needed assistance to States. It is vital that the Administration and the Congress address the issue of fire funding to avoid jeopardizing these essential Forest Service activities.



### Some history

For most of the post WWII period, the Congress authorized the Forest Service to borrow from any available funds to cover the cost of fighting wildfires. The money borrowed would be reimbursed through supplemental appropriations. The Forest Service had substantial funds deposited by timber purchasers to cover the cost of reforestation, timber stand improvement, and slash disposal on cutover areas. These funds were large enough to permit the borrowing for fire suppression without disrupting on-going activities. When the timber sale program was significantly reduced in the 1990's, the deposited funds became inadequate to cover rising costs of fire fighting. The agency was forced to borrow program funds from current year's appropriations resulting in serious disruption of on-going activities.

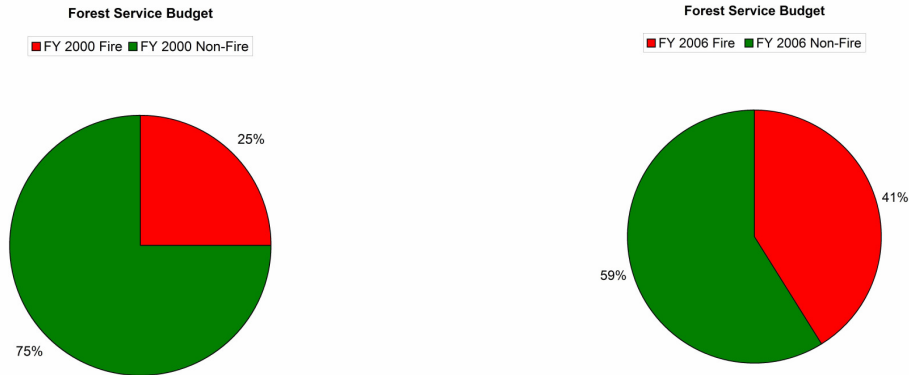
In order to minimize the disruption of current programs and the need for supplemental appropriations, the Congress began adding funds for fire suppression to the Forest Service budget. The amount budgeted for suppression each year is equal to the rolling 10-year average cost of fire suppression. (See chart at right.)

F.S. Suppression		
Year	Obligations \$000	10-yr. avg.
1997	180,183	301,475
1998	245,964	327,036
1999	411,546	369,206
2000	1,097,862	478,993
2001	689,550	526,184
2002	1,267,429	607,787
2003	1,023,000	680,493
2004	726,000	649,956
2005	660,987	683,878
2006	1,300,000	768,595
2007		836,874
2008		907,157
FY2006 obligations are estimated..		

### The problem!

This budget decision has had serious consequences for the Forest Service budget. In FY 2000 total funds appropriated for fire amounted to 25 percent of the agency budget. In FY 2006 total funding for fire has increased to 41 percent of the budget. It is projected to take

44 percent of the budget in 2008. An overall budget increase in 2001, following the high cost of fire suppression in 2000, did minimize the impact of rising fire costs on other programs. Since then however constrained budget levels have resulted in an erosion of agency programs as the 10-year average cost of fire suppression has continued to rise.



From FY2001 (the first year of the National Fire Plan) to 2006, funding for non-fire Forest Service programs has declined by nine percent, when adjusted for inflation. As noted in the table above, the projected 10-year average fire suppression costs are raising more than \$50 million per year. The costs will increase even faster as the easy fire seasons of the late 90's are dropped and the recent high cost years are added to the calculation of the 10-year average. Assuming continued constraints on discretionary domestic spending, the current method of funding fire fighting costs will cannibalize all other Forest Service programs essential to the well-being of our Nation's forests.

### **Fire fighting costs must be off-budget**

It is essential that the Administration and the Congress take the costs of fire suppression out of the Forest Service's constrained budget for Research, State and Private Forestry, and the stewardship of our National Forests and Grasslands.

National Association of Forest Service Retirees  
P.O. Box 793  
Lincoln, CA 95648  
Email: [DKenops@msn.com](mailto:DKenops@msn.com)



P.O. Box 793  
Lincoln, CA 95648

## Board of Directors

*George Leonard, Chair*

*Robert Averill*

*James Brewer*

*James Freeman*

*Stan Krugman*

*Jack Lavin*

*Douglas Leisz*

*John Marker*

*Ralph Mumme*

*R. Max Peterson*

*F. Dale Robertson*

*John Sandor*

*Robert Spivey*

*Ronald Stewart*

*Richard Pfilf*

*Darrel Kenops*  
*(Executive Director)*

*John Combes*  
*(Sec'y./Treas.)*

[www.fsx.org.nafsreports.html](http://www.fsx.org.nafsreports.html)

January 25, 2007

Honorable Jeff Bingaman  
Chairman  
Committee on Energy and Natural Resources  
United States Senate  
364 Dirkson Office Building  
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Mr. Chairman:

Re: Hearing on Costs of Wildfire Suppression, January 30, 2007

The National Association of Forest Service Retirees is an organization of people who devoted their careers to protecting and caring for the Nation's forest resources, particularly the resources of the National Forest System. We continue our interest and support for the statutory missions of the Forest Service. This letter is to let you know of our concern about the impact that the present system of funding wildfire suppression is having on other Forest Service programs.

Background on the funding of wildfire suppression on the National Forests is set forth in the enclosed issue paper entitled, *Funding Wildland Firefighting*. As noted in this issue paper, the budget for wildland fire suppression increased from 25 percent of the agency's budget in FY2000 to 44 percent of the budget in FY2006. As the ten-year average of fire suppression costs continues to rise the proportion of the Forest Service budget devoted to fire suppression will continue to increase. This shift of the available Forest Service budget to fire suppression is coming at the expense of other Forest Service programs, not only for management of the National Forest System, but also for Research and State and Private Forestry as well. The costs of suppressing major fires must be taken out of the Forest Service budget if other programs essential to the protection and care of our Nation's forest resources are to remain viable. Perhaps, funding for catastrophic wildfires should be through disaster funds such as those administered by FEMA.

Please include the issue paper in the hearing record. We ask that your committee take action to revise the method of funding wildland fire suppression on the National Forests so that responsible management of the natural resources of these precious lands can be maintained. We would be pleased to answer any questions or to provide any further information the committee may desire.

Sincerely:

Chair  
Board of Directors  
National Association of Forest Service Retirees