



THE WILDLIFE SOCIETY

Leaders in Wildlife Science, Management and Conservation

13 June 2016

The Honorable Lisa Murkowski
U.S. Senate
SH-709 Hart Senate Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Michael Enzi
U.S. Senate
SR-379A Russell Senate Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Maria Cantwell
U.S. Senate
SH-511 Hart Senate Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Patty Murray
U.S. Senate
SR-154 Russell Senate Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20510

RE: Request for Public Input on Draft Legislation Entitled “Wildfire Budgeting, Response and Forest Management Act”

Dear Chairman Murkowski, Chairman Enzi, Ranking Member Cantwell, and Ranking Member Murray:

The Wildlife Society (TWS), founded in 1937, represents nearly 10,000 professional wildlife biologists and managers dedicated to excellence in wildlife stewardship through science and education. Our mission is to inspire, empower, and enable wildlife professionals to sustain wildlife populations and habitats through science-based management and conservation.

We appreciate the opportunity to provide comments on the draft legislation entitled *Wildfire Budgeting, Response and Forest Management Act*. TWS applauds the underlying objective of this draft legislation and encourages the Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources to continue pursuing comprehensive and bipartisan solutions to addressing wildfire funding and forest management. However, TWS would like to express our concerns regarding the effect this draft legislation would have on the U.S. Forest Service’s (USFS) ability to fulfill their mission “to sustain the health, diversity, and productivity of the Nation’s forests and grasslands to meet the needs of present and future generations.”

By continuing to rely on the average cost for wildfire suppression over the previous 10-years as a model for funding USFS wildfire suppression operations, this proposed legislation threatens the long-term viability of essential non-fire programs and thus USFS’ ability to provide comprehensive and sustainable forest management practices.

As leaders in wildlife science, management, and conservation, TWS has a responsibility to address issues that affect the current and future status of wildlife in North America. In addition to the harmful impacts of catastrophic wildfire disasters on wildlife and their habitats, the unsustainable practice of fire borrowing, or transferring discretionary funds from non-fire programs to wildland fire suppression, has resulted in the reduced availability of funds for other important agency projects—including but not limited to, invasive species control; forest management and restoration; fish and wildlife research; and habitat assessment for threatened, endangered, or at-risk species.

Currently, wildland fire suppression activities are funded entirely within the annual discretionary budget of USFS, using a 10-year rolling average of total fire suppression costs. When the average was stable, the agency was able to effectively use this model to budget consistently for the annual costs associated with wildland fire suppression. However, changing climatic conditions, combined with greater fuel loads, have led to longer fire seasons with an increase in the frequency, size, and severity of wildland fires. As a result, the traditional ten-year rolling average, has failed to meet USFS wildland fire suppression needs since before Fiscal Year 2002.

The growing disparity between appropriated funds and actual funds required to suppress wildland fires is further exacerbated by agency budget caps set in place by the Budget Control Act of 2011 (BCA). With a budget cap for USFS in place, the growth in fire suppression costs has steadily consumed an ever-increasing portion of the agency's appropriated budget. In fact, USFS predicts that by 2025, the cost of wildland fire suppression could increase to nearly \$1.8 billion, or more than 67% of the agency's budget under the present cap. This would result in an additional \$700 million decrease in non-fire USFS program funding as compared to today's already reduced level.

The Wildfire Budgeting, Response and Forest Management Act would solve the issue of annual fire borrowing, but would not solve the long-term issue of the increasing 10-year average. Under the draft legislation, any "additional new budget authority provided in an appropriation Act for wildfire suppression" shall be included in calculations of the new 10-year average. **With the total USFS budget remaining flat under the budget cap enacted by BCA and the 10-year average continuing to grow, funds would still be shifted from non-fire programs to fire programs, therefore not providing a comprehensive and sustainable forest management solution for USFS.**

In order to support adequate funding for USFS wildfire suppression, while avoiding the continued erosion of non-fire programs, TWS recommends a fire funding fix that stabilizes the level of funding for suppression within the agency's annual budget; provides access to disaster funding for extraordinarily costly fires, including those that may be calculated as part of the ten-year average, and; significantly reduces the need to transfer from non-fire accounts and programs. USFS has already reduced their non-fire staff by 39-percent, and now dedicates over 50-percent of their annual budget to wildfire suppression. **Continuing to rely on the 10-year average as an accurate fire funding model for the agency is unsustainable and threatens the viability of all other services that support the mission of USFS in managing our Nation's forests.**

Thank you for considering the recommendations of wildlife professionals. Please contact Keith Norris, AWB®, Director of Government Affairs & Partnerships at keith.norris@wildlife.org or (301) 897-9770 x309 if you require further information or have any additional questions.

Sincerely,



Gary Potts, CWB®
President