



## THE WILDERNESS SOCIETY

### National Fire Plan - State and Local Assistance

Comprehensive fire management inherently transcends land ownership boundaries. Safe communities and healthy landscapes go hand-in-hand - research<sup>1</sup> has shown that up to 85% of the land around communities that is at the highest wildfire risk is non-federal. That means wildland fire management must occur at the landscape scale, with federal agencies partnering with states and communities, and scarce resources must be spent where they are needed most – near those communities. In 2001, the Forest Service and the Department of the Interior identified over 11,000 communities adjacent to federal lands that are at risk from wildland fire.<sup>2</sup> State Foresters conservatively estimate 45,000 communities at risk.<sup>3</sup> The scope of the problem is clearly enormous - and growing. Experts predict that almost eight million new homes will be built in the wildland-urban interface (WUI) between 2005 and 2010.<sup>4</sup> Increased population in the WUI is one of the primary reasons suppression costs have skyrocketed to over \$1 billion per year. In addition, because climate change will increase the length of the fire season, and thereby the number and size of fires that burn any given year, it is more critical than ever to help these communities prepare for these inevitable wildland fires. Communities that are “firesafe”, or well-prepared for fire, are key to reducing suppression costs – and ultimately restoring functional, and fire-resilient, wildlands.

To ensure successful wildland fire management, state and private lands must be integrated into landscape-scale problem definition and fire management planning. **State and local fire and forest assistance programs have been designed to help states and localities promote fire-adapted communities in fire-resilient landscapes, but funding for these programs has been minimal and continues to decline.** In fact, the total funding dedicated to forest and fire management activities by non-federal partners<sup>5</sup> amounts to less than 10% of the \$14 billion appropriated to the National Fire Plan in the last five years. To improve the effectiveness and efficiency of national fire management, better parity simply must exist between appropriations allocated to federal and non-federal land and fire managers. Funding for these programs will help the Forest Service meet its wildland fire management goals, including those of the National Fire Plan, the Healthy Forests Restoration Act (HFRA) and the Western Governors’ Association 10-Year Comprehensive Strategy. It will also aid the Forest Service in responding to direction from both the Administration and Congress to work across jurisdictions. Finally, funding for these programs will increase the federal government’s ability to manage wildland fire and help reduce suppression costs because local fire units are often the first to respond to fires on federal lands

One of the most important state and local fire assistance programs is State Fire Assistance. The State Fire Assistance program provides technical and financial assistance to states for

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<sup>1</sup> Aplet, G.H. and Wilmer, B.(2003). *The Wildland Fire Challenge: Focus on Reliable Data, Community Protection, and Ecological Restoration*. The Wilderness Society.

<sup>2</sup> 66 FR 43384-43435

<sup>3</sup> Southern Group of State Foresters, *Southern Wildfire Risk Assessment Final Report (2006)*, p. 75.

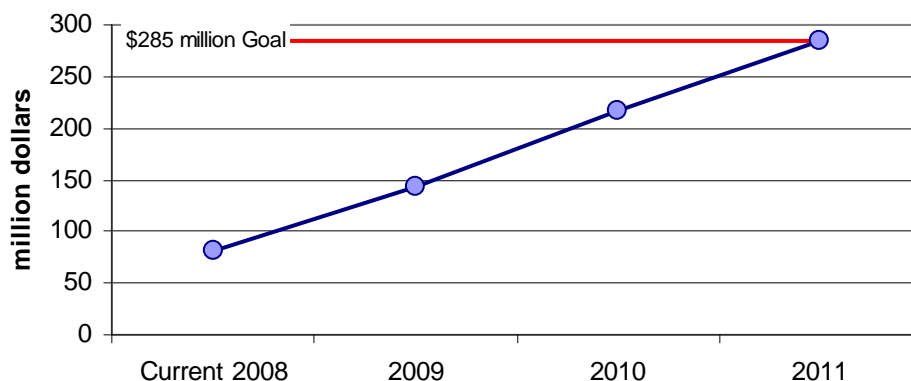
<sup>4</sup> Forest Service and Department of the Interior “Quadrennial Fire and Fuel Report” (2005).

<sup>5</sup> Specifically those line items under The National Fire Plan associated with state and local assistance including Forest Health Management (Coop Lands), State Fire Assistance and Volunteer Fire Assistance under Wildland Fire Management and Forest Health Management (Coop Lands), State Fire Assistance and Volunteer Fire Assistance under State and Private Forestry Appropriations, as well as other State and Private Forestry programs that assist communities in managing forests, including the Economic Action Program, Forest Stewardship, Urban & Community Forestry and Forest Research & Information Analysis (except Forest Legacy because lands acquired under this program are not specifically tied to fire planning or management.). Data source: USFS Budget Justifications 2005, 2006, 2007 and Budget Justification Overview for FY 2008.

grants to and agreements with communities to implement fire risk reduction activities, fire prevention campaigns, personnel training, public education, and most critically, Community Wildfire Protection Planning. Communities draft Community Wildfire Protection Plans (CWPPs) in collaboration with federal, state and local officials. They are the key mechanism for identifying areas and treatment methods for priority hazardous fuel reduction projects. Congress has directed that State Fire Assistance funds should be used preferentially to support community wildfire protection planning and plan implementation. Without this federal financial support, it's likely that many communities would not be able to engage meaningfully with public agencies in the identification and prioritization of fuels treatment or significantly reduce the threat of wildfire. The National Association of State Foresters estimates State Fire Assistance funding needs for FY 2008 at a minimum of \$145 million, but the program's FY 2009 proposed budget is only \$60 million.

To improve the effectiveness and efficiency of fire management, this has to change. **The Wilderness Society recommends that no less than 20% of the five-year average of National Fire Plan appropriations should be allocated to State and Local Assistance Programs generally, and 50% of that should be targeted specifically to the State Fire Assistance line item. This should be done through steady increase over three years. The first year should reflect an 80% increase of the approximately \$80 million historical average for State Fire Assistance, resulting in a \$144 million appropriation that would meet the State Forester's projected 2008 needs (\$288 million for State and Local Assistance generally).** In the second year, a 50 percent increase to \$216 million. In the last year, an approximately 30 percent increase would realize the \$285 million target appropriation. Protecting communities threatened by wildland fire is recognized as the highest priority of federal fire policy, but those words simply cannot be matched by action unless funding backs intention. Increased and appropriate funding for state and local fire assistance programs will help accomplish that.

**Figure 1: Recommended Appropriation Increase for State Fire Assistance over Three Years**



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