



## THE WILDERNESS SOCIETY

### Wildfire Suppression Funding

Federal fire suppression costs have increased significantly in recent years, exceeding \$1 billion in five of the last seven years. The increasing cost of suppression is a result of a number of factors, including prolonged drought, past suppression policy (resulting in the build-up of hazardous fuels) and the explosive growth of communities into wildlands. As suppression activities continue to increase, so does the suppression budget since it is based on a 10-year rolling average. Because the agencies' budgets are essentially flat year to year, to

off-set these increases funding for critical programs has been significantly reduced and more and more of the land management agencies' budgets are being used for wildland fire management (the largest component of which is suppression). For example, the Forest Service's fire funding has gone from 13% of their budget in FY91 to a staggering 48% projected for FY09. This has severely compromised the agencies' ability to carry out their other mission duties.

*Solving this problem requires a three-prong approach: (1) agency commitment to cost containment; (2) investment in 21<sup>st</sup> century fire management and forest restoration; and (3) fixing the suppression funding structure.*

While appropriated suppression funds are significant, they have still fallen far short in recent years. To make up the difference, the agencies have depended on Congress to provide them additional emergency funding through supplemental appropriations and they have had to borrow money from other programs, often those very programs – hazardous fuels reduction and community assistance – that help bring down the costs associated with wildland fire. Recognizing that past borrowing caused project cancellations, strained relationships with partners, and disruptions in management, Congress has provided funding for a suppression reserve account for both the Forest Service and the Department of the Interior. While this account has helped stave off large transfers from other agency programs, a long-term solution to dealing with this problem is urgently needed.

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### Cost Containment

While some of the factors that have contributed to increasing suppression costs will be largely unaffected by cost containment strategies, the federal agencies still can, and should, take measures to bring suppression costs down. The agencies have begun pursuing numerous cost containment strategies, the most important of which is a new way of managing fires, called "risk-based suppression" or "Appropriate Management Response (AMR)" - an approach to firefighting that treats each fire individually, accounting for threats to lives and property first, but also weighing factors like ecology and landscape and then applying the appropriate response. This shift to an AMR focus on fire management has already resulted in cost savings. For example, Mark Rey recently testified<sup>1</sup> that "despite more fires than in 2006, and a 49 percent increase in Forest Service acres burned, the cost of suppressing Forest Service fires was \$127 million lower in 2007 due to aggressive implementation of AMR and other cost containment measures." It is important to recognize, however, that, while important, cost control measures alone will not be enough to solve this problem. Still, **TWS recommends the specific and measurable cost containment**

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<sup>1</sup> Statement of Under Secretary Mark Rey, United States Department of Agriculture Before the Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources concerning the Forest Service FY2009 Budget; February 14, 2008.

**strategies be identified and implemented as a part of any comprehensive approach to fire funding reform.**

### **Investing in 21<sup>st</sup> Century Fire Management**

It's critical that the agencies not only strive to contain costs where they can, but also fully invest in 21<sup>st</sup> century fire management. That means maintaining their commitment to AMR, fully implementing the 1995 Federal Fire Policy and its 2001 Update, maximizing opportunities to use Wildland Fire Use as a management tactic, and provide, as nearly as possible, for fire to function in its natural ecological role. That also means pursuing all of the goals of the 10-Year Comprehensive Strategy, including community fire assistance and restoration of fire-adapted ecosystems. These changes will lead to healthier landscapes and less costly fire seasons in the future. To accomplish these goals, Congress and the agencies must invest in a 21<sup>st</sup> Century fire management force – an investment on par with the one made in hazardous fuels reduction. A key aspect of this investment must be funding designated specifically for training and staffing in Wildland Fire Use. **TWS recommends designating at least \$10 million specifically for increasing staffing for and training in Wildland Fire Use.**

### **Fixing Suppression Funding**

Unfortunately, the negative impacts of skyrocketing suppression costs will not be completely alleviated by effective cost containment strategies and increased investment in 21<sup>st</sup> century fire management. A new long term funding strategy is also needed. A new suppression funding structure that creates a separate *flexible suppression spending account* (usually referred to as “partitioning”) for unanticipated large fire events from the already constrained federal wildland fire budgets is required to free up funds to be invested in other key agency mission areas. The partition should be based on the true cost driver of suppression expenditures, extremely large fires. In general, a small percentage of wildfires burn most of the acres and consume a majority of total suppression funds. These fires are truly above and beyond normal budgeting processes, truly “emergencies” and should be paid for differently. Two key complements to this separate account are necessary: first, the agencies’ normal suppression budgets must remain robust, reflecting current suppression needs for the remainder of fires and the fact that increased suppression costs are here to stay; and second, funds must be redistributed back into those programs that have been reduced because of increasing suppression costs (programs like land acquisition, recreation and wilderness management , wildlife and fisheries, and inventory and monitoring).

**TWS recommends this “partitioned” suppression budget should also be closely tied to appropriate sideboards, cost containment controls, and line officer incentives to ensure that the agencies continue momentum to streamline costs and maintain their commitment to 21<sup>st</sup> century fire management.** This means there must be requirements the agencies must meet before they can access the account. These requirements should include, for example, that the fires for which this account is used meet certain minimum criteria - like size, severity, and values at risk. In addition, the agencies must be able to demonstrate that they remain committed to cost containment, that they are continuing to pursue an AMR fire management strategy, and that they are expanding their WFU programs before they can access this account. In addition, incentives should be put in place to limit the use of this account and to reward the agencies for not drawing down the account. Lastly, to ensure accountability, the agencies should report to Congress on how they spend the funds in this separate account at the end of each fiscal year.

While it is important to alleviate the extreme budgetary pressures that have been placed on the agencies in the last few years due to escalating suppression costs, it is just as important that the agencies continue to demonstrate cost containment and accountability and movement towards a robust fire management strategy that includes incorporating fire back into its natural place on the landscape, as is required by the Federal Fire Policy.

*For more information:*

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