



The House is on Fire!

The U.S. House of Representatives took action on two major pieces of fire-related legislation this week.

On Wednesday, March 25th, its first order of business was to pass the **Omnibus Public Lands Management Act** (H.R. 146). We reported on this Bill (originally marked up as S.22) in an earlier issue of *Spotfire!* after it had passed the Senate and was widely expected to pass the House, but in a major surprise, it failed in the House by a mere two votes! The Bill was then repackaged as H.R. 146, passed the Senate again on March 19th, and then passed the House by a large majority yesterday. It now moves on to President Obama's desk for his signature into law.



The **Public Lands Management Act** will designate millions of acres of new Wilderness and other protections, but **we're most excited that the Act also includes the Wildland Firefighter Safety Act**. As we reported earlier, the Wildland Firefighter Safety Act requires the Secretaries of both USDA and USDI to give an annual report to Congress about their agencies' wildland firefighter safety programs and practices, and requires that private contract firefighters maintain the same safety training certifications and qualifications as federal firefighters. The Act thus provides an incentive for each agency to continually improve their safety practices.

FUSEE helped write portions of the Bill, convincing Senator Maria Cantwell, the Bill's chief sponsor, to include prescribed burning and wildland fire use along with wildfire suppression in firefighter safety training programs. **FUSEE also solicited House and Senate co-sponsors of the Bill**, including former Senator Ken Salazar who is now Secretary of Interior and is expected to implement the Act with gusto!

The second order of business the House accomplished on Wednesday March 25th was to pass the **Federal Land Assistance, Management, and Enhancement (FLAME) Act** by a whopping 412-3 vote! The FLAME Act was passed by the House last year, but failed to be raised in the Senate during last year's election fervor. The House did a repeat performance, passing both the Wildland Firefighter Safety Act and the FLAME Act on the same day!

The FLAME Act (H.R. 1404 and S. 561) addresses the problem of funding emergency wildfire suppression and the Forest Service's practice of "robbing Peter to pay Paul" when suppression expenditures exhaust their appropriated budget. Specifically, in order to pay for the skyrocketing costs for fire suppression - which now accounts for almost half of the Forest Service's annual budget - the agency takes money away from vital resource management programs including the Hazardous Fuels Reduction fund! The FLAME Act would establish a separate account specifically for "catastrophic emergency wildfire suppression" that would insulate other non-fire programs from being "raided" to pay for firefighting costs. The Bill would also require the agencies to provide Congress with a Cohesive Strategy for managing wildfires, science-based budget predictions, and annual reports on the use of the FLAME Fund.

FUSEE endorses the concept of the FLAME Act as a valuable first step in developing honest, reality-based budgets for fire suppression, and ensuring that resource management programs are not sacrificed to pay for firefighting. We joined a diverse coalition of 78 other organizations ranging from the American Forest and Paper Association to the WildWest Institute that sent letters to both the House and Senate urging passage of the FLAME Act.

Although FUSEE supports passage of the FLAME Act, we also have a number of criticisms we hope will be addressed when the Senate takes up the Bill. For one thing, as currently written a wildfire needs to be only 300 acres in size or greater to be eligible for the special fund-this threshold is set too low. The intent of the Act is to pay for the largest, most costly wildfires that are the real budget busters, and the agencies need to be strategic and selective in their use of the Fund for that purpose.

Additionally, the Act does not provide any incentives for cost containment - just the opposite, it provides perverse incentives for managers to allow wildfires to grow larger in order to access the FLAME Fund. While we want to see wildfires managed intelligently to burn more acres and achieve ecologically appropriate effects, we do not want to see wildfires managed recklessly, letting wildfires spread with uncharacteristic high severity merely to gain access to the FLAME Fund.

Finally, there were a number of "nuisance" amendments attached to the House Bill, including a bizarre one that redefines the concept of suppression to include insect invasions! **FUSEE will be working to strip the Bill of those provisions that could siphon off funds for non-fire management activities, thereby negating its purpose.**

Despite some of its current flaws, FUSEE endorses the intent of the FLAME Act. Along with the President's proposed budget, it is as an important step in establishing honest budgeting and fiscal accountability for emergency wildfire suppression, and we'll be working to help the Senate improve and pass the Bill.

FUSEE offers fire management workers from federal agencies a safe, legal, confidential means of educating policymakers in Congress and the Administration through our collective voice. **Join FUSEE today and lend your voice to the cause of progressive fire policy and legislation.**

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Your [membership](#) dues and financial [donations](#) support FUSEE's public education and policy advocacy work to improve the environmental and working conditions of fire management workers and the citizens they serve.

FUSEE supports a growing network of progressive fire professionals who envision a new fire management paradigm that interconnects firefighter safety with professional ethics and ecological restoration.



We strive to provide a safe forum and a collective voice for public and private sector fire management professionals to educate the public, policymakers, and the press about the challenges facing fire management today.

If you would like more information about FUSEE, don't hesitate to [contact us](#) or visit our [website](#). We look forward to hearing from you.

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