



# Firefighters United for Safety, Ethics, and Ecology

2852 Willamette St. #125, Eugene, OR 97405 | 541.338.7671 | info@fusee.org | www.fusee.org

The Honorable Lisa Murkowski  
Chair, Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee  
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Maria Cantwell  
Ranking Member, Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee  
Washington, D.C. 20510

December 16, 2015

Dear Senator Murkowski and Senator Cantwell,

On behalf of Firefighters United for Safety, Ethics, and Ecology (FUSEE) I want to thank you for helping avert a disaster in the FY16 Omnibus spending bill that would have allowed the U.S. Forest Service and other federal agencies access to disaster funds to pay for firefighting expenditures. In the face of widespread bipartisan political support for disaster funding, this took considerable courage on your part to stand against this budgetary scheme for suppression overspending. I commend you for your wise decision to try again in another bill to fix the Forest Service firefighting budget.

As you are well aware, suppression spending has been soaring in recent years--rising well above the rate of inflation, consuming a majority of the Forest Service's budget, and causing the agency to do "fire borrowing" when it overspends its appropriated budget. These budget transfers cause enormous disruption to Forest Service operations and impact research, restoration, and recreation projects during the height of the field season. FUSEE has been part of the Partner Caucus on Suppression Spending Solutions since its inception in 2009, and we share our partners' desire to see an end to fire transfers, but the way to do this is to address the root causes of suppression overspending, not simply change the budgetary source of those transfers.

We have long passed the point of diminishing returns whereby increased spending on emergency wildfire suppression operations yields any benefit in terms of increased firefighter safety or effectiveness. Even during years when wildfire activity is relatively low, suppression spending keeps going up. Congress has traditionally given a "blank check" to federal agencies when they overspend their appropriated budgets on suppression. This "blank check" for suppression spending has led to institutionalized perverse incentives for agencies to choose high-cost suppression strategies or tactics--which may look good to the media--while neglecting other more cost-efficient and effective fire management actions. With a funding system that lets the agency access disaster accounts after they've spent 70% of their appropriated budget, this would actually reward the agency for sending crews to fight all fires in all places, times, and conditions at any cost. The sooner they spend their 70%, the sooner they get to access disaster funds allowing the agency to spend freely on firefighting operations with minimal scrutiny, transparency, or accountability in how they spend that money. Indeed, giving federal agencies access to billions of more taxpayer dollars from disaster accounts would have led to suppression spending on steroids!

I am very grateful that you two have stood out among your Senate colleagues in asking the Forest Service some hard questions during committee hearings about the cost-efficiency and effectiveness of wildfire suppression activities. For example, airtanker contracts and fire retardant chemicals cost taxpayers hundreds of millions of dollars each year, but the Forest Service has yet to demonstrate that they are actually effective in containing wildfires or are worth their exorbitant costs. Giving the agency access to near-unlimited amounts of money from disaster accounts to spend on airtanker slurry drops would have resulted in literally flushing even more taxpayer money down the drain. It is time for the rest of Congress to ask the right questions to get the right answers—the key goal of legislation should be to help limit suppression costs and reduce firefighting expenditures, not throw more good money after bad.

This is especially true given the fact that firefighting can negatively impact the land, damaging natural resources and degrading fire-adapted ecosystems, as well as putting firefighter lives at greater risk each time they are dispatched to aggressively suppress wildfires. Giving the Forest Service the ability to declare wildfires as “disasters” (based mainly on their size or costs, not their ecological effects) would have further led to a system of perverse incentives to *promote* wildfire disasters, not prevent them! Worse, it would have undermined efforts that have been long in the making to shift agencies toward alternative *proactive* strategies in fire preparedness and planning, fuels reduction and forest restoration. Money spent on these kind of activities help improve firefighter safety and effectiveness, and represent investments that yield positive economic and ecological benefits, unlike reactive suppression actions that are pure costs.

Giving the Forest Service access to billions of dollars from disaster accounts would some day come back to haunt us. Some day Alaska and the Pacific Northwest will desperately need disaster funds for earthquake recovery efforts, and to recover from climate change influenced weather disasters (e.g. floods and landslides). Wildfires are simply not the same kind of natural disasters as hurricanes, earthquakes, and floods. What is disastrous is the amount of money that taxpayers are spending on reactive wildfire suppression operations that is taking money away from investments in proactive fire planning, community preparedness, and ecosystem restoration projects that would prevent disasters in the first place. I thank you and commend you for wisely and courageously opposing wildfire disaster funding in the FY16 Omnibus bill, and look forward to working with you to craft new and better legislation that addresses the real problem of suppression overspending with effective solutions.

Sincerely,

Timothy Ingalsbee, Ph.D.  
Executive Director  
Firefighters United for Safety, Ethics, and Ecology (FUSEE)