



Firefighters United for Safety, Ethics, and Ecology

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Firefighters United for Safety, Ethics, and Ecology (FUSEE)

Firefighters' Group Releases "A Taxpayer's Guide to Wildfire Suppression Costs" Explaining Factors Behind Billion-Dollar Firefighting Seasons

Managerial Choices, Not Just Environmental Conditions, Account for Rising Costs

EUGENE, OR— Firefighters United for Safety, Ethics, and Ecology (FUSEE) released their new report that explains the many factors that are fueling the rising cost of wildfire suppression. FUSEE's report, entitled **Getting Burned: A Taxpayer's Guide to Wildfire Suppression Costs**, explains the various socioenvironmental, institutional, and operational factors that drive firefighting actions and make suppression spending increase even when the number of fires or burned acres temporarily decreases.

"The endless and escalating 'war' on wildfire makes no distinctions between rural communities and remote wildlands," said Dr. Timothy Ingalsbee, author of the report. "While homes are getting burned from lack of suppression resources in the frontcountry, taxpayers are getting burned from firefighting boondoggles in the backcountry. We must become more strategic and selective in our use of expensive suppression resources, making community protection our highest priority, and stop wasting taxpayer dollars on backcountry firefighting actions that serve no socially or environmentally useful purpose other than to look good on the nightly news."

Wildfire suppression costs have soared to over one billion dollars per year for the last decade, causing a fiscal crisis in the U.S. Forest Service, the nation's chief wildland firefighting agency. The Forest Service now spends nearly half of its entire annual budget on firefighting efforts. Congress is currently considering a proposed budget of \$3.3 billion for next year's federal fire management programs, with the bulk of that money slated for suppression operations.

The FUSEE report analyzes a dozen different factors that are fueling the increase in suppression spending, beginning with the most commonly-discussed socioenvironmental cost factors: high fuel loads resulting from past fire suppression, expanding housing development in wildfire-prone environments, and climate change due to global warming. These factors are creating longer wildfire seasons, and more frequent large-scale, long-duration wildfires, and these will affect suppression costs for the far foreseeable future.

FUSEE's report also analyzes institutional cost factors such as the system of "perverse incentives" Congress has created by authorizing deficit spending in the Forest Service for firefighting. This has nurtured an "open checkbook" attitude among fire managers who order up costly suppression actions knowing that firefighting has almost no fiscal constraints or limits, unlike all other land management programs or activities that are facing budget cuts.

Other institutional factors driving up suppression costs include the growing use of private contractors who charge government agencies high rates for leasing their firefighting crews, aircraft, vehicles, and other equipment. FUSEE's report documents that over half the costs of large wildfire suppression incidents are payments to private contractors. Cost-share agreements between the federal and state governments also force federal agencies to pay the bulk of firefighting costs on multi-jurisdictional wildfires even if the main purpose of suppressing a given wildfire was to protect private or State lands.

FUSEE's report also analyzes the "operational" cost factors—the factors influencing the strategies and tactics that fire managers use to respond to wildfires—that have largely escaped the attention of critics. The lack of managerial incentives or accountability for reducing suppression costs, and the perceived risks of bad publicity from managing wildfires for ecological benefits, all lead fire managers to select more-costly suppression actions rather than less-costly alternatives.

FUSEE's report reveals that, unlike the socioenvironmental or institutional factors which have longstanding historical foundations and demand complex political, cultural, and economic changes, the operational cost factors of

managers' choices of strategies and tactics have the most potential to immediately reduce firefighting expenses, and turn suppression costs into fire management investments in community protection, ecological restoration, and land stewardship.

“In the face of a growing federal budget deficit, we simply cannot afford to continue consuming tax dollars on a firefighting industrial complex that is economically irrational and ecologically unsustainable,” said Timothy Ingalsbee of FUSEE. “It is time we manage wildfires with less dollars but more sense.”

FUSEE's report, “**Getting Burned: A Taxpayer's Guide to Wildfire Suppression Costs**” can be viewed at:

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