



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 Paul Ryan
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, D.C. 20515

The Honorable Mitch McConnell
U.S. Senate
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Nancy Pelosi
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, D.C. 20515

The Honorable Harry Reid
U.S. Senate
Washington, D.C. 20510

December 14, 2015

Dear Speaker Ryan, Minority Leader Pelosi, Majority Leader McConnell, and Minority Leader Reid,

We are a nonprofit organization of current, former, and retired wildland firefighters, fire managers, researchers and educators who wish to raise our objections to the current draft of the FY2016 Omnibus bill that includes “disaster” funding for wildfire suppression, and ties this increased suppression funding to several forest management “riders” that are not only irrelevant, but are often counterproductive to preventing wildfire disasters.

As you are well aware, suppression spending has been soaring in recent years--rising well above the rate of inflation and consuming a majority of the Forest Service’s budget. Even during years when wildfire activity was relatively low, suppression spending kept going up. We have long passed the point of diminishing returns whereby increased spending on suppression yields any benefit in terms of increased firefighting safety or effectiveness. Giving federal bureaucracies access to up to \$1.6 billion more taxpayer dollars for wildfire suppression is not only fiscally irresponsible, it is environmentally irresponsible and will raise safety risks for firefighters for generations to come.

There is a serious problem with federal agencies overspending their appropriated budgets on firefighting operations, and then transferring funds from other non-fire programs to pay for firefighting costs. We share the wide concern of many to cease “fire transfers” and have the Forest Service budget become more stable, predictable, and above all accountable. There are better ways to stop fire transfers than simply changing the budgetary source of those transfers. Indeed, the proposed system in the FY2016 Omnibus looks remarkably similar to the old FLAME funding system which did not work. The process will either be mired in bureaucracy as individual wildfires will have to be declared disasters to access funds. Or worse, the system will be undermined by lack of accountability as agencies work to spend the 70% portion of their appropriated budget as soon as possible—sending crews out aggressively fighting fires in all places at all times and at all costs so they can gain disaster funding. This system is a ticket to *promoting* wildfire disasters, not preventing them!

Unfortunately, Congress has traditionally given a “blank check” to federal agencies when they overspend their appropriated budgets on suppression, rarely asking them hard questions about how they spent that money, what impacts that spending had on fire or the land, and what taxpayers actually get in return. This 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. Giving federal agencies access to billions of more taxpayer dollars from disaster accounts will lead to suppression spending on steroids!

Worse, allowing agencies to declare wildfires as disasters simply to access near-unlimited funding for suppression will undermine 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. Why bother with those activities that might actually prevent disasters, but must be paid for by appropriated budgets, when an agency can simply continue fighting all fires and get fully funded with no questions asked? And the definition of a wildfire disaster ultimately has nothing to do with the effects of a given wildfire, only the amount of money spent fighting it! Again, this will simply incentivize disastrous management choices to spend more taxpayer dollars for no real benefit in reducing future fire risks, restoring fire-adapted ecosystems, or improving firefighter safety.

We regret that many, perhaps most other members of Congress fail to understand the nature of the “firefighter’s dilemma,” a term from business management that refers to the inability of businesses to invest in long-term cost-saving operations because they are so caught up in avoiding short-term losses. In the case of federal agencies spending ever more taxpayer dollars on reactive suppression actions while neglecting proactive research, planning, and fire management projects, the firefighter’s dilemma is a literal, not metaphorical term. Allowing the agencies to access disaster accounts will become a bigger dilemma to the point of fiscal disaster.

Finally, we see absolutely no merit in several of the forest management “riders” that have nothing to do with addressing suppression spending or solving the wildfire crisis, and in the case of authorizing 250 acre clearcuts through categorical exclusions, this will be entirely counterproductive. These riders will promote projects that will generate strong public opposition and get agencies mired in conflict and controversy at the very time we need collaboration and consensus to develop real solutions to wildfire management.

We strongly urge you to strip the forest management riders from the FY2016 Omnibus, and table the wildfire disaster funding act portion of the bill in order to come up with a more effective solution to suppression overspending. The real task Congress needs to do is to contain federal suppression costs, not simply find a novel way to pay for escalating expenditures. The FY2016 Omnibus does not fix the problem of fire transfers or suppression cost containment at all, and will only increase federal spending immensely.

Sincerely,

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