

March 13, 2008

The Honorable David Obey, Chairman  
The Honorable Jerry Lewis, Ranking Member  
United States House of Representatives Appropriations Committee  
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Norman Dicks, Chairman  
The Honorable Todd Tiahrt, Ranking Member  
Interior, Environment and Related Agencies Appropriations Committee  
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Chairman Obey, Ranking Member Lewis, Chairman Dicks and Ranking Member Tiahrt:

The respective organizations identified in this letter represent a coalition with the shared goal of improved state and community wildfire protection. This coalition was formed in early 2007 to advocate on behalf of the State Fire Assistance Program (SFA). The SFA budget is funded through the USDA Forest Service's State and Private Forestry (S&PF) and Wildland Fire Management budget areas. The program provides critical cost-share grants to state forestry agencies to facilitate wildland fire preparedness, by integrating state and private lands into landscape-scale fuel mitigation and planning.

In recent years SFA has been the subject of recurring reductions proposed by the Administration. The Administration proposed a 30 percent reduction in SFA for FY 2007, a 14 percent reduction for FY 2008 and a 25.5 percent reduction for FY 2009. We appreciate that your Committee has consistently provided stable appropriations in response to on-the-ground needs. This coalition again requests your leadership to restore and enhance SFA funding. The National Association of State Foresters has estimated SFA funding needs at \$145 million for FY 2009 to reflect current and emerging community wildland fire preparedness and protection needs. Although the diverse undersigned groups individually support varying levels of funding for SFA, all agree that the SFA program is a vital component of effective community wildland fire preparedness and mitigation.

The State Fire Assistance Program is the fundamental federal assistance program that States use to develop preparedness and response capabilities for wildland fire. Improved response efficiency provided through State Fire Assistance funding is critical to reducing suppression costs, which have continued to skyrocket, reaching over \$1 billion in five of the last seven years. In FY 2007, 12,080 communities increased their capacity through local fire department training, upgrades of equipment and formation of new departments. This training and capacity building has enhanced interagency coordination for wildland fire management on state, federal and private lands. Moreover, wildland-urban interface hazardous fuel reduction is a major component of the SFA program and funds have been used by communities to mitigate high-priority hazard fuel loads on over 470,000 acres within the Wildland Urban Interface (WUI).

Lastly, SFA is an essential funding source for the development of Community Wildfire Protection Plans (CWPPs). As of 2007, thanks to significant SFA funding, over 4,700 communities at risk have developed CWPPs, a 46% increase over 2006. This enables communities to prioritize their preparedness and mitigation efforts on both private and federal lands, as shown by the 3,814 communities that reduced risk through fuel mitigation and firewise activities.

However, current analyses such as the SFA-funded *Southern Wildfire Risk Assessment* and the NASF report on SFA and Volunteer Fire Assistance (VFA) estimate that more than 51,612 communities are still at risk. At current funding levels, that would mean each of these communities would receive only about \$1,560. In addition, Western State Fire Managers were only able to fund 47 of the 171 applications for mitigation assistance in FY 2008. These examples clearly indicate a need for enhanced SFA funding.

As you know, in 2001 the Secretaries of Agriculture and the Interior, western governors, counties, state foresters and diverse stakeholders developed a ten-year collaborative strategy for reducing wildfire risk and improving forest health nationwide. The Strategy was updated by these partners in December, 2006 and calls for increasing collaboration between all levels of government and interest groups, improving fire prevention and suppression, reducing hazardous fuels, restoring ecosystems and promoting community assistance. These important goals are only achievable through substantial and sustained levels of funding for the State Fire Assistance program.

In these fiscally constrained times, effective wildland fire management requires partnerships between agencies and communities. Funding hazardous fuels reduction on federal lands is critical, especially when these lands are in the WUI. However, an exclusive focus on federal lands is an incomplete solution and will ultimately undermine success. State and private lands must be considered through a landscape-scale approach to reduce hazardous fuels if we are to effectively meet the highest priority of federal fire policy – protecting lives and communities threatened by wildland fire.

The President's FY 2009 budget proposes cutting the USFS' budget by eight percent overall and includes a drastic 58% cut to the S&PF programs. Due to the reduced capability, effectiveness and size of the USDA Forest Service, a viable State Fire Assistance program is crucial to providing funding for necessary state and community wildfire protection. The very programs proposed for virtual elimination are the programs that can help reduce the wildland fire suppression costs straining the USFS' declining budget. Ever increasing emergency wildland fire suppression costs consume a larger portion of the USFS budget every year, and reduce investment in key S&PF programs, such as SFA. The USFS emergency wildland fire suppression budget problem needs to be solved in order to eliminate the drain on the S&PF programs, but a commitment to increased financial investment must also be part of the solution.

We appreciate your continued leadership and support for the State Fire Assistance Program and respectfully request that you consider increased funding for State Fire Assistance in FY 2009 in line with the needs outlined in the 10-Year Strategy.

Sincerely,

American Forests

California Fire Safe Council

Colorado Firecamp

Conservation Northwest

Denver Water

Environmental Protection Information Center

Framing Our Community

Idaho Conservation League

Klamath-Siskiyou Wildlands Center

National Association of Forest Service Retirees

National Association of State Foresters

New Mexico Forest Industry Association

Republicans for Environmental Protection

Siskiyou Project

Society of American Foresters

Sustainable Northwest

Swan Ecosystem Center

The Forest Guild

The Lands Council

The Nature Conservancy

The Wilderness Society

Watershed Research and Training Center

Western Governors' Association