

PARTNER CAUCUS on FIRE SUPPRESSION FUNDING SOLUTIONS

WILDFIRE DISASTER FUNDING ACT (WDFFA) SUMMARY

JANUARY, 2014

The Wildfire Disaster Funding Act (WDFFA) language:

- Applies to the USDA Forest Service (USFS) and the Department of the Interior (DOI).
- Defines wildfire suppression expenditures in excess of 70 percent of the 10-year rolling average as “natural disaster” qualified expenditures. This definition requires paying for such costs (above 70%) from funds made available outside of the USFS and the DOI’s discretionary budget limits through a cap adjustment, similar to how FEMA pays for the costs of natural disasters such as hurricanes, floods, or other events declared by the President as disasters.
 - Sets a maximum amount of “disaster relief” funding from this source specifically for wildfire suppression at \$2.689 billion annually (although that total amount may not be accessed in a fiscal year).
 - In years when the costs are projected to exceed this amount, the respective Secretary must request supplemental funding.
- Authorizes reimbursement for prior “fire borrowing” from the natural disaster funding source.
- Provides that the 10-year average includes the total cost of wildfire suppression: The 70 percent of funding provided in the Interior, Environment, and Related Agencies appropriations process AND funds provided from the “disaster relief” cap adjustment source.

Scoring:

WDFFA does not expect total funding for disasters to increase above currently estimated levels, because the bill allocates funding for wildfire suppression from within the existing disaster funding cap adjustment.

- The existing cap adjustment already more than covers known disaster needs based on expected costs of prior declared disasters and typical average expenditures in programs like FEMA’s Disaster Relief Fund.
- Appropriations for catastrophic events, like Superstorm Sandy, are always expected to be funded as true emergencies.

Further, language providing the framework for the wildfire suppression cap adjustment would not score if included in an annual appropriations bill. Since this is a budget process bill, no cost is assigned to WDFFA by the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) for enforcement of either the discretionary spending limits or PAYGO.

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- Rather, the cost of any cap adjustment for a fiscal year would score only when the actual funding for wildfire suppression was provided in the annual appropriations bill (under WDFA, this would be the 70 percent of wildfire suppression).

WDFA's overarching policy goal is responsible and stable budgeting. Wildfire suppression will continue to be fully funded by the government. However, the current ad hoc process of funding wildfire is inefficient and ineffective. Current wildfire budgeting does not allow for appropriate planning and ultimately does not provide for an effective allocation of funds to fight wildfires. The repeated cycle of fire transfers has strained agency budgets and negatively impacted the agencies' ability to deliver non-fire programs, including those that reduce the threat of future wildfires, when they become subject to fire transfers.

For information regarding this summary or the Fire Suppression Funding Solutions Partner Caucus, please contact Cecilia Clavet, The Nature Conservancy, cclavet@tnc.org, 202-760-1490.