

United States Senate

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Senators Press For Additional Firefighting Funds for West Urge Senate to Supply Emergency Funds and Revamp Broken Fire Prevention, Management System

Amidst a record-setting fire season, a dozen Senators today sent a letter to Senate leaders calling for swift passage of President Obama's emergency supplemental funding request, which would allocate \$615 million – accessible immediately – to fight wildfires. The Senators also called for a vote on the Wildfire Disaster Funding Act, a bill that would fix the broken system of stealing funds from prevention to fight fires that are already burning.

Led by Oregon's Senator Jeff Merkley, the letter was also signed by Senators Ron Wyden (D-OR), Tom Udall (D-NM), Tammy Baldwin (D-WI), Maria Cantwell (D-WA), Diane Feinstein (D-CA), Mark Udall (D-CO), Jon Tester (D-MT), John Walsh (D-MT), Patty Murray (D-WA), Barbara Boxer (D-CA), and Michael Bennet (D-CO). It was sent to the Senate Majority and Minority Leaders, Senators Harry Reid and Mitch McConnell, and the Chair and Ranking Member of the Appropriations Committee, Senators Barbara Mikulski and Richard Shelby.

With persistent droughts, dry forest conditions, and new fires starting daily, the West has experienced a particularly harsh fire season. At this rate, it is expected to require more fire suppression funding than the amount appropriated this fiscal year.

"We cannot afford to wait another year to fix this urgent problem," the Senators wrote. "We urge you to take up the President's emergency funding request to deal with wildfire funding once and for all."

The emergency supplemental funding request would grant \$615 million, which would be immediately accessible for firefighting efforts in western states through the end of the year.

The cost of fighting wildfires has regularly exceeded the amount appropriated by Congress in past years. To cover this need for additional funds, money must be redirected from mitigation and prevention efforts. The Senators also pointed out that key prevention programs, such as the hazardous fuel removal program, have lost funding in the past two years.

To ensure that fires are treated like other natural disasters and ensure that both firefighting and prevention efforts are adequately funded, the Senators urged passage of the bipartisan Wildlife Disaster Funding Act.

“In the last two years, the U.S. Forest Service and the Department of Interior have been forced to take money from other important programs to cover the cost of fighting wildfires,” the Senators wrote in the letter. “[...] We must act immediately to pass emergency supplemental appropriations to ensure we do not continue this vicious cycle of fire funding, and include legislation to permanently fix the fire funding problem, such as the Wildfire Disaster Funding Act of 2013.”

Currently there are active fires burning in Oregon, Washington, Idaho, Utah, Arizona, and California. Both Oregon and Washington have declared states of emergency.

The full text of the letter follows below.

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Dear Majority Leader Reid, Minority Leader McConnell, Chairman Mikulski, and Ranking Member Shelby:

We write to urge you to bring to the floor emergency supplemental appropriations legislation for \$615 million to assist in fighting wildfires this year, as well as legislation that would fix our broken system of wildfire suppression funding going forward.

In the past several years, we have seen the cost of fighting wildfires far exceed the funding appropriated by Congress. In the last two years, the U.S. Forest Service and the Department of Interior have been forced to take money from other important programs to cover the cost of fighting wildfires. Many of the programs that have lost money in the past two years are the very same programs that help fund fire prevention efforts, such as hazardous fuel removal programs. This is no way to responsibly fund wildfire management in this country.

This fire season is on track to surpass the fire suppression funding appropriated for FY14. The west is experiencing a harsh fire season with dry forest conditions and pervasive droughts. There are large active fires in many western states, and new fires starting daily. Both Oregon and Washington have declared states of emergency, acknowledging that the scope, breadth, and severity of the wildfires have overwhelmed local capabilities and pose a threat to life, safety, and property. We must act immediately to pass emergency supplemental appropriations to ensure we do not continue this vicious cycle of fire funding, and include legislation to permanently fix the fire funding problem, such as the Wildfire Disaster Funding Act of 2013.

We cannot afford to wait another year to fix this urgent problem. We urge you to bring emergency supplemental appropriations legislation, as well as a fire funding legislative fix to the floor so that we can deal with wildfire funding once and for all. We look forward to working with you to pass this legislation expeditiously.

Thank you for your consideration and expedited action.