

Federal Fire Policy and Management Position Paper: State Fire Assistance

✓ **Overview**

The Wilderness Society and its more than 310,000 members are dedicated to restoring and protecting America's unparalleled wildland heritage through public education, scientific analysis, and advocacy. To that end, our Wildland Fire Program works to change our nation's approach to fire management to focus on protecting communities, restoring ecosystems, and sustaining fire's role in fire-dependent landscapes, where safe to do so. Our vision is of a landscape composed of fire-safe communities existing within a larger, healthy forest ecosystem.

This paper is one in a series that addresses critical components of federal fire management. It is distilled from materials developed by The Wilderness Society's Wildland Fire Program and substantiated by scientific reports, budget analyses, landscape studies, policy papers and other materials.ⁱ This paper focuses on the Forest Service's State Fire Assistance (SFA) program, which provides financial assistance to states and communities for fire management activities including training, planning, hazardous fuels treatment and purchase of equipment.ⁱⁱ

✓ **The Wilderness Society's Role**

We work collaboratively with partner groups, land managers, and place-based communities to support fire management strategies that have social and ecological benefits. By building partnerships based on the link between social and economic well-being of communities and long-term forest health, The Wilderness Society hopes to bring about enduring change in fire and forest management. Our coalition work brings groups from across the spectrum of interested stakeholders together, including those that do not traditionally work with one another. We partner with other conservation groups, professional foresters, federal agencies, rural communities, county commissioners, hunters and anglers, and others.

We are engaged in numerous efforts specific to State Fire Assistance, most important of which is a State Fire Assistance Coalition – a group of eight diverse core stakeholders that work together to increase the visibility of and funding for this program. Our effortsⁱⁱⁱ this year included letters, signed by over 40 diverse groups, to the House and Senate asking for increased SFA funding; press releases that called attention to SFA funding needs; and testimonies at Congressional hearings that highlighted the importance of SFA and underscored the need to increase its funding.

✓ **The Issue**

While fire management is often perceived as a federal issue, fires do not respect jurisdictional lines. In 2001, the Forest Service and the Department of the Interior identified over 11,000 communities adjacent to federal lands that are at risk from wildland fire.^{iv} State Foresters conservatively estimate 45,000 communities at risk.^v The scope of the problem is clearly enormous - and growing. Experts predict that almost 8 million new homes will be built in the wildland-urban interface (WUI) between 2005 and 2010.^{vi} Increased population in the WUI has contributed to skyrocketing suppression costs that have totaled over \$1 billion in four of the last seven years.^{vii}

Communities that are “firesafe”, or well-prepared for the inevitable wildland fire, are key to reducing these suppression costs – and ultimately restoring functional, and fire-resilient, wildlands. State Fire Assistance is the primary federal program that can help communities achieve these goals. It provides funding to help states and communities prepare for and respond to wildland fires, including funding for firefighter training, Community Wildfire Protection Planning and hazardous fuels reduction (reducing dense vegetation build-up) near communities.^{viii} SFA has recently been subject to recurring proposed cuts. The Administration proposed a 30% reduction for FY 2007 and a 14% reduction for FY 2008.^{ix} State foresters estimate that funding for SFA needs to increase by nearly 85% - to \$145 million - to meet current and emerging needs.^x

✓ The Wilderness Society's Position

Safe communities and healthy landscapes go hand-in-hand - TWS research has shown that up to 85% of the land around communities that is at the highest wildfire risk is state or private.^{xi} That means wildland fire management must occur at the landscape scale, with federal agencies partnering with states and communities, and scarce resources must be spent where they are needed most – near those communities. To get there, Congress must increase funding for SFA. Investment in SFA will reduce federal suppression costs. SFA helps increase local initial attack capability, thus the need for federal suppression response is lower. Also, SFA funds hazardous fuel mitigation around communities and fire planning through the CWPP process, both of which help make communities more fire-resilient. That means fewer federal suppression resources will be needed to protect communities during the inevitable wildland fire. In addition, wildland fire disproportionately affects lower-capacity communities.^{xii} Without the support provided by SFA, it's unlikely that many communities would be able to meaningfully engage with agencies in prioritizing the fuels treatments so key to their protection.

Despite a focus on community protection in the 10-Year Comprehensive Strategy and the Healthy Forests Restoration Act^{xiii}, this aspect of fire management is overlooked and underfunded. For example, in 2004, Western State Fire Managers were only able to fund 86 of the 204 applications they received.^{xiv} Clearly, funding is insufficient to get the job done. If funding for key community protection programs, like SFA, is not increased, the highest priority of federal fire policy, protecting communities threatened by wildland fire,^{xv} will never be reached.

✓ The Wilderness Society's Recommendations

- **State Fire Assistance funding should be increased.** No less than 20% of the 5-year average of National Fire Plan appropriations should be allocated to State and Local Assistance Programs, and 50% of that should be targeted specifically to State Fire Assistance. This should be done through steady increases over three years. The first year should reflect an 80% increase of the approximately \$80 million historical average for State Fire Assistance, resulting in a \$144 million appropriation that would meet the State Forester's projected 2008 needs. In the second year, a 50 percent increase to \$216 million. In the last year, an approximately 30 percent increase would realize the \$285 million target appropriation.

ⁱ These can be found on our website, see below.

ⁱⁱ Forest Service FY08 Budget Justification, p. 8-14. This program is funded under both State and Private Forestry and Wildland Fire.

ⁱⁱⁱ See <http://www.wilderness.org/Library/Documents/FY08WildfireAppropriations.cfm> for examples of SFA Coalition efforts.

^{iv} 66 FR 43384-43435

^v Southern Group of State Foresters, *Southern Wildfire Risk Assessment Final Report (2006)*, p. 75.

^{vi} Forest Service and Department of the Interior "Quadrennial Fire and Fuel Report" (2005).

^{vii} Forest Service, FY08 Budget Justification, p. 3.

^{viii} Forest Service FY08 Budget Justification, p. 8-14 to 8-15 and 11-39 to 11-40; Forest Service FY07 Budget Justification, p. 9-42.

^{ix} Forest Service FY07 Budget Justification, p. 4-11 - total SFA funding for FY06 compared to proposed FY07 is a 30% reduction. Forest Service FY08 Budget Justification, p. 8-1 and 11-1 – total SFA funding for FY07 compared to proposed FY08 funding is a 14% reduction.

^x Council of Western State Foresters Statement, U.S. House Subcte. on Interior, Environment, and Related Agencies, *FY08 Appropriations Recommendation for State Fire Assistance Program* (April 19, 2007), http://www.wflccenter.org/news_pdf/231_pdf.pdf.

^{xi} Aplet, G.H. and Wilmer, B.(2003). *The Wildland Fire Challenge: Focus on Reliable Data, Community Protection, and Ecological Restoration*. The Wilderness Society.

^{xii} Gerlitz, Wendy and Lynn, Kathy (2005). *Mapping the Relationship Between Wildfire and Poverty*.

^{xiii} Goal IV of *A Collaborative Approach for Reducing Wildland Fire Risks to Communities and the Environment*, <http://forestsandrangelands.gov/plan/documents/7-19-en.pdf>; & Healthy Forests Restoration Act, (P.L. 108-148 or 16 U.S.C. 6501 eq. seq).

^{xiv} Personal communication with staff of Council of Western State Foresters.

^{xv} The 1995 Federal Wildland Fire Management Policy and its 2001 Update both recognize "...public safety is the first priority in every fire management activity" and the 2000 Report to the President states "As a first priority, the Departments will continue to provide all necessary resources to ensure that firefighting efforts protect life and property."