

ADDITIONAL VIEWS

We welcome efforts to address the growing problem of finding funds to pay for the suppression of wildfires on public lands. H.R. 5541 establishes a fund (Federal Land Assistance, Management, and Enhancement Fund or FLAME) for use when certain criteria are met and the cumulative suppression costs for the season exceed the annual appropriations. However, the enormous cost of suppressing wildfires is a symptom, not the cause of the problem and we strongly urge the expansion of H.R. 5541 to apply the lessons of history and the insights provided by science to improve the management of our forest and rangelands to ensure that they are healthy, biologically diverse, productive and present a reduced threat to the safety of forest communities. By limiting this debate to changes in accounts and funding mechanisms for wildfire suppression we are missing a crucial opportunity. We should couple this with meaningful reform in our forest management practices. The one thing repeated by every witness on the panels at the hearing on this bill, from both Republicans and Democrats, was the critical need to reduce hazardous fuels on our public lands. That is ultimately the only way we can truly ease the budgetary burdens of wildfires. Anything short of that just shifts the wildfire funding problem to future Congresses.

In addressing the magnitude of the fires we are facing and the ongoing increase in fire suppression costs, more must be done than just adjusting funding sources. History has shown, as the witnesses testified last week that we will continue to have larger and larger fires, until we reduce fuel-loading. This means communities in the western United States will see homes burned, watersheds damaged and even lives lost unless we do what we can to protect them and pre-empt devastating fires—the kind of pre-emption pointed to by Governor Napolitano that protected so many people and homes in the 2006 Woody Fire near Flagstaff.

During the hearing on H.R. 5541, Governor Napolitano highlighted the close relationship between pre-fire management and the costs of fire-fighting itself. As the Governor testified, the 2006 Woody Fire near Flagstaff, Arizona, was halted before it reached 100 acres because of the hazardous fuels treatments that had been done in that area. According to Governor Napolitano, those treatments dramatically minimized the fire's devastation.

Similarly, our colleague Norm Dicks testified last week about the large fuel loads that continue to accumulate. He pointed out that today we are seeing much longer fire seasons because of climate change. Congressman Dicks further commented that larger fires have resulted from the increasing tree density and fuel loads. These large fires then release enormous amounts of carbon into the atmosphere, further compounding the influence of climate change to the overall problem.

We must provide a broad range of tools, including those that allow hazardous fuels to be reduced thereby protecting communities, homes, and potentially the lives of homeowners near and in federally-managed lands.

Across the west, many communities have put the time and energy into developing Community Wildlife Protection Plans, but implementation of many of these plans has been significantly delayed, in large part, because of the NEPA process. These CWPPs, as my colleagues know, are cooperative plans, requiring community collaboration and input in the formation of the plan. By delaying treatment for the safety of communities, we permit those communities to be threatened by large fires. With this bill we should be not only providing an additional funding mechanism for wildfire suppression, but we should also be providing the tools necessary for timely treatments to protect these communities from the large and devastating fires and preserve our pristine national forests.

During the Poe Cabin fire in Idaho, in one area the fire moved some three miles in a mere 20 minutes, burning as hot as 1500 degrees Fahrenheit. In that area, several homes that had defensible space around them due to fuel reductions on private land survived the fire. One homeowner was able to get his wife out while he himself stayed just a bit longer to finish loading his truck. However, because of the fast moving and intense fire, combined with the heavy fuel-loading on federal ground, he became trapped by the fire and was unable to leave. While this could have quickly become a tragic story, this man lived and his house survived, thanks to fuel-reduction that had been done on private land around his home.

In today's climate, we cannot address funding for suppressing these large wildfires without addressing a primary cause as well—the increasing and unchecked fuel loads in our national forests that surround or are adjacent to homes and communities. H.R. 5541 only addresses one aspect of the problem—the suppression funding side—without providing real relief and dealing with the underlying problem to help prevent wildfires, or at least prevent the spread of the large and devastating fires.

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