

**American Forests Applauds Passage of H.R. 5541, the Federal Land Assistance,
Management and Enhancement (FLAME) Act**
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American Forests applauds the House passage of H.R. 5541, the Federal Land Assistance, Management and Enhancement (FLAME) Act. The passage of this bill is an important step towards establishing a federal emergency fund for the suppression of large and costly wildfires that often have devastating impacts on forests and communities. The fund will also allow federal land management agencies to reestablish more reliable funding for other vital land management programs.

Costs associated with fire suppression have escalated dramatically in recent years. This trend is only likely to continue to grow as a result of hazardous fuels build-up, climate change, and increasingly populated wildland-urban interface areas. Wildfire suppression costs for the US Forest Service (USFS) have exceeded 1 billion dollars in six of the last eight years. The proportion of the USFS budget devoted to wildfire management activities increased steadily from thirteen percent of the total USFS budget in 1991 to forty-eight percent projected for fiscal year 2009.

As wildfire suppression costs have escalated, other program funds have been dramatically reduced. As a result, funding has decreased for important land management activities such as forest restoration, reforestation, and community capacity building. According to American Forests' Vice President, Gerry Gray, "funding for these types of programs is essential to address our current forest health crisis and the associated threats to communities over the long term."

American Forests has been a key advocate for the creation of a supplemental fund for fighting wildfires that are referred to as "catastrophic"—generally the largest and most destructive emergency wildfires. In testimony delivered to the House Committee on Natural Resources earlier this year, Gray spoke of the need for an emergency wildfire suppression fund with funding designated as 'emergency' so as to protect the existing program budgets of federal land management agencies. He discussed the importance of establishing an off-budget fund, while maintaining robust annual wildfire suppression funding within the agency budgets to address those fires not categorized as catastrophic.

"By developing such a strategy," Gray said, "the agencies could and should then be directed to redistribute monies back into agency programs that have been severely cut by increasing suppression costs." Such programs would include recreation and wilderness, vegetation and watersheds management, roads and trails maintenance, and community capacity building activities.

The long-term solution to the increasing threats and costs of wildland fires will require adequate and reliable funding for a cohesive wildland fire management strategy that will include hazardous fuels reduction as well as wildfire suppression activities, strong collaboration among diverse stakeholders and communities, innovative approaches to forest restoration at various scales across the landscape, and increased awareness and

action by landowners and communities in reducing the fire risks to private homes and properties. The FLAME Act, by creating a mechanism for addressing the immediate crises of emergency wildfire suppression costs, is a solid first step towards the greater solution.