

Written Public Testimony of
Gerald J. Gray, Acting Executive Director
American Forests
to the
Subcommittee on Interior, Environment, and Related Agencies
House Committee on Appropriations
on
Wildfire Funding in the Forest Service and DOI

March 19, 2009

Dear Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee:

American Forests is submitting this written testimony to address issues related to federal wildfire funding and the FLAME accounts. We urge the Subcommittee to provide strong support for the FLAME accounts in the USDA Forest Service (Forest Service) and Department of the Interior (DOI) budgets and to ensure that these accounts are able to both cover the cost of emergency wildfires and eliminate the need to transfer funds from non-fire programs. Additionally we urge the Subcommittee to provide direction to the agencies to use the most current and best informed means of estimating annual suppression costs rather than using the traditional 10-year average.

Founded in 1875, American Forests is the oldest national citizens conservation group in the U.S. Our work focuses on the protection and restoration of trees and forests for the many ecosystem services they provide to our nation. While our testimony in past years has covered an array of state and private forestry issues, this year we are focusing on our efforts as a member of the Partner Caucus on Fire Suppression Spending Solutions (Partner Caucus) – a unique and diverse group of organizations dedicated to finding a new, improved mechanism for funding emergency wildfire suppression activities for the Forest Service and DOI land management agencies. Assembled in early 2009, the Partner Caucus includes leading industry, environmental, outdoor recreation, and forestry organizations that all recognize the urgency of this problem. The Partner Caucus was created to call attention to the critical and broadly held need to release the stranglehold that emergency wildfire suppression costs are having on the agencies' budgets and programs, and the resulting negative economic and environmental impacts.

Our Partner Caucus agrees that the following set of recommendations is necessary to resolve the fire funding problem:

- 1) Congress needs to pass legislation that creates a partitioned wildfire suppression account to fund emergency/large wildfire suppression;
- 2) The funding sources for that partitioned account should not impact the non-emergency budgets for the Forest Service and DOI;

- 3) All fire suppression funding must be based on a more accurate predictive model instead of the traditional 10-year average formula, and
- 4) Congress and the Administration should direct the Forest Service and DOI to continue developing and implementing rigorous cost-containment measures while also investing in the broad range of programs vital to the agencies' core missions.

In 2009 the Federal Land Assistance, Management and Enhancement Act (FLAME Act), established two funds, one for the Forest Service and another for DOI. Congress included specific instructions that FLAME should be funded with improved estimates and not at the expense of other agency programs. In FY2010, the Forest Service received \$413 million and DOI received \$75 million for their respective FLAME funds.

We are encouraged to see the Administration's attention to this important issue and a commitment to find a solution. However, the current budget proposal creates an obstacle to the progress thus far. The President's budget proposal for FY2011 includes not only the FLAME funds for each of the agencies but also a Wildland Fire Contingency Reserve for each agency. These Reserves are accessible after the 'regular' suppression dollars and the FLAME funds have been exhausted and require a Presidential declaration to be accessed. These Contingency Reserves are duplicative of the FLAME funds and take away from the potential of what the FLAME funds were intended to do. The FLAME Act already lays out the partitioning of the wildland fire suppression account and how the account should be funded and managed.

We request that instead of creating four accounts for 'emergency' wildland fire suppression activities, the Subcommittee reaffirm its support for the FLAME Act by funding only the FLAME accounts and by providing appropriate levels of funding. Additionally, we urge the Subcommittee to continue providing direction to the agencies to develop FLAME and 'regular' suppression funding estimates that are based on an accurate, predictive model, and not on the outdated, traditional rolling 10-year average.

We are grateful for the commitment of this Subcommittee, and this Congress, to address the increasing costs of emergency wildfire suppression and the adverse effects that those costs have had on important non-fire programs.

Sincerely,

Gerald J. Gray
Acting Executive Director
American Forests