



2015 Wildland Fire Season and Long Term Trends

Statement of
Fire Chief Erik Litzenberg, EFO
Santa Fe, New Mexico

presented to the

U.S. House Committee on Agriculture
Subcommittee on Conservation and Forestry

October 8, 2015

INTERNATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF FIRE CHIEFS
4025 FAIR RIDGE DRIVE • FAIRFAX, VA 22033-2868

Good morning, Chairman Thompson, Ranking Member Lujan Grisham, and members of the subcommittee. I am Erik Litzenberg, Fire Chief for the Santa Fe, New Mexico, Fire Department. Today, I am testifying on behalf of the International Association of Fire Chiefs where I serve as chair of their Wildland Fire Policy Committee. Thank you for the opportunity to discuss the 2015 wildland fire season and the needs of America's fire departments.

In 2014, wildland fires impacted every state in the nation. There were more than 63,000 wildland fires in the United States. They burned roughly 3.6 million acres. These fires cost the federal government over \$3.9 billion to extinguish in Fiscal Year (FY) 2014.

Local fire departments respond to all wildland fire incidents. For fires on federal lands, they cooperate with the U.S. Department of the Interior (DOI) and the U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) U.S. Forest Service (USFS). Local fire departments provide the initial attack for nearly 80% of all wildland fires. The USFS estimates that local fire departments provide more than \$36 billion per year in wildland fire suppression assistance. On non-federal property, local fire departments are the first to respond and the last to leave the scene.

The IAFC has been a strong supporter of the National Cohesive Wildland Fire Management Strategy since it was first initiated several years ago. The Cohesive Strategy brings together all relevant local, state, tribal, federal, and nongovernment entities. These partners have worked together to release recommendations on addressing the wildland fire problem through three areas of focus: supporting fire suppression, developing fire-adapted communities, and establishing effective land management policies.

Today I would like to discuss these focus areas from the perspective of a local fire department:

- 1) **Federal Fire Suppression Funding:** The growing cost of wildland fire suppression is an important issue which Congress and the Administration must address. As you are likely well aware, almost every year, the cost of wildland fire suppression exceeds the appropriated amounts in the USDA's and DOI's wildland fire management accounts. In 1995, fire suppression made up 16% of the USFS' budget. In 2015 however, fire suppression has made up more than 50% of the USFS' budget. The USFS estimates that if no action is taken, fire suppression will make up more than 67% of its budget in 2025.¹

As a result, the USDA and DOI are forced to undertake a practice known as "fire borrowing," where funds are transferred from non-suppression accounts to fire suppression accounts. The IAFC is greatly concerned that this is a dangerous practice. Fire borrowing is a short-term solution with severe long-term consequences. Mitigation projects such as hazardous fuels removal could help

¹ US Forest Service. *The Rising Cost of Wildfire Operations*. 2015.
<http://www.fs.fed.us/sites/default/files/2015-Fire-Budget-Report.pdf>

address the wildland fire problem; however, these are often the first to be cut when funds need to be transferred.

The IAFC encourages Congress to develop a bipartisan funding reform proposal which will prohibit fire borrowing and fund the USDA's and DOI's wildland fire suppression accounts at 100% of the ten-year average cost of wildland fire suppression. Any suppression activities above the ten-year average should be funded from an adjustment to the disaster relief cap. Additionally, Congress must ensure that any savings generated by this reform are directly re-invested into wildland fire prevention and community preparedness programs. We believe that these principles will ensure that there is adequate funding for increases in fire suppression operations in the future while not cannibalizing funding from hazardous fuels removal and other programs that will mitigate the risk of wildland fires.

- 2) Declining Federal Support for Local Wildland Fire Operations:** While local fire departments play a major role in responding to wildland fires, they must address the challenge of responding to this growing threat with reduced resources. For example, the National Fire Protection Association released their most recent needs assessment of the United States' fire service in 2011. This study found that 68% of fire departments that are responsible for wildland firefighting have not formally trained all their personnel involved in wildland firefighting.

Currently, the federal government operates just one grant program to maintain training and equipment for all local fire departments which respond to wildland fires. The VFA program is administered by the USFS and provides funds through the individual state foresters to organize, train, and equip fire departments in rural communities with a population of 10,000 or less. Fire departments receiving a grant must pay for at least 50 percent of the project being funded. The VFA also increases the opportunity for rural fire departments to acquire equipment through the Federal Excess Personal Property (FEPP) program. The VFA grants are usually limited to a few thousand dollars per recipient in order to assist the maximum number of fire departments.

Congress has reduced funding for the VFA grant program by nearly 20% from a high of \$16 million in FY 2010 to \$13 million in FY 2015. In July, the House unanimously adopted an amendment to the FY 2016 Department of the Interior, Environment, and Related Agencies Appropriations Act (H.R. 2822) to increase VFA funding to \$14 million. While the IAFC urges Congress to ultimately return VFA to its FY 2010 funding level of \$16 million, the IAFC encourages Congress to include this amendment into any Interior or omnibus appropriations bills for FY 2016.

Previously, the DOI operated another grant program known as the Rural Fire Assistance (RFA) program. These grants provided volunteer fire departments with grants of up to \$20,000 for training, equipment purchase, and prevention

activities. Fire departments receiving RFA grants would have had to serve a community of less than 10,000 people near federal land; pay for at least 10 percent of the project being funded; and have had a mutual aid agreement with the local DOI agency or with the state. The RFA grants generally were funded at approximately \$10 million per year, until Congress eliminated the RFA grants in FY 2010. The elimination of these grants placed a significant burden on fire departments around the nation, because it eliminated a major source of funding.

- 3) Excess Equipment for Fire Departments:** The U.S. Departments of Defense (DOD), in cooperation with the USDA, operates two programs which allow local fire departments to obtain and utilize vehicles and equipment which the DOD deems to be in excess. The FEPP program allows fire departments to purchase a wide range of excess vehicles and equipment from the DOD. Similarly, the Firefighter Property (FFP) program allows fire departments to borrow a wide range of vehicles and equipment to supplement their own resources. These successful programs were suspended in 2014 due to concern that the DOD exemption from vehicle emission standards did not cover vehicles in the FEPP and FFP programs. These programs were resumed several months later when it was clarified that the vehicles maintain their exemption when utilized under the FEPP and FFP programs. The IAFC urges Congress to support the Firefighter Equipment Protection Act (H.R. 177) which codifies the determination that FEPP and FFP vehicles continue to be exempt from vehicle emissions regulations.

The IAFC also encourages Congress to protect the FEPP and FFP programs while reviewing the various DOD programs which place excess property with localities across the United States. Vehicles and equipment sourced through the FEPP and FFP programs can be found in fire departments in every state.

- 4) Supporting Fire-Adapted Communities:** As more communities grow and develop into the wildland urban interface (WUI), it becomes all the more important that these communities are knowledgeable and prepared for wildland fires. Since 2011, the IAFC has developed and expanded the Ready, Set, Go (RSG) program to teach communities how to be “ready” for wildland fires, “set” if the need to evacuate arises, and to know how to “go” when it is time to evacuate. RSG has been implemented in more than 1,500 fire departments across the United States and provides a strong platform for fire departments to engage with their communities on the topic of wildland fire preparedness.

While RSG has been particularly effective, it is important to note that other organizations also are involved in community preparedness and education programs of their own. Congress must continue to support these efforts to create fire-adapted communities across the United States. Preparing and educating communities will continue to be an important aspect when addressing the larger wildland fire problem.

- 5) Developing Efficient Land Management Policies:** Healthy lands are much less susceptible to burning than overgrown lands with hazardous fuels. If we do not develop and implement effective solutions today, then the problem will become even larger in the future. Forest health and dry land conditions are two of the strongest contributing factors to the growth of wildland fires. Congress must continue supporting hazardous fuels removal and other forest health projects. The continued drought and extreme heat throughout the western and southwestern states further compounds this problem and primes lands for wildland fires. The extremely dry conditions underscore the importance of taking pre-emptive actions where possible to ensure properly maintained lands.

Special attention also must be given to address the importance of implementing efficient land management policies in watershed areas. Many watershed areas are at risk of wildland fires which could present significant negative impacts to the drinking water for surrounding communities as well as placing those communities at risk of flooding and other serious post-wildland fire emergencies.

Congress also can strengthen communities by developing policies to protect them from the dangers of post-wildland fire emergencies. Following a wildland fire, the remaining soil is left highly-susceptible to erosion, landslides, flooding, and other natural hazards. The federal government currently provides little funding to support community efforts to protect against these hazards. The Federal Emergency Management Agency's Fire Management Assistance Grant (FMAG) program allows funding to support wildland fire response. However, these funds are only available for controlling and extinguishing fires.

The IAFC supports modifying the FMAG program to support post-wildland fire mitigation efforts such as re-planting trees and vegetation, installing flood barriers, and other projects to mitigate dangerous post-wildland-fire land conditions. To accomplish these reforms, Congress should pass the Wildfire Prevention Act of 2015 (H.R. 1009) which would permit FMAG recipients to receive up to 15% of the FMAG amount for post-wildland fire mitigation projects. This language also was included in the FEMA Disaster Assistance Reform Act of 2015 (H.R. 1471).

Thank you again for the opportunity to attend this hearing and for your continued attention to this important issue. It is important to recognize that we have a national cohesive strategy for addressing the wildland fire problem, due to Congressional leadership. As part of that strategy, local fire departments continue to play an important role in our nation's response to wildland fire incidents. However, we need Congress to continue defending important programs that help fire departments obtain the funding and equipment to protect their communities. Congressional support for expanding community preparedness programs such as RSG and establishing land management policies also are important components to addressing the wildland fire problem. The IAFC looks forward to continuing to work with this subcommittee on this critical issue.

