



January 17, 2018



The Honorable Paul Ryan, Speaker  
U.S. House of Representatives  
Washington, D.C. 20515



The Honorable Nancy Pelosi,  
Minority Leader  
U.S. House of Representatives  
Washington, D.C. 20515



The Honorable Mitch McConnell,  
Majority Leader  
U.S. Senate  
Washington, D.C. 20510



The Honorable Charles Schumer,  
Minority Leader  
U.S. Senate  
Washington, D.C. 20510



Dear Speaker Ryan, Minority Leader Pelosi, Majority Leader McConnell and Minority Leader Schumer:



As representatives of national motorized recreation organizations promoting responsible motorized recreation, we urge you to include common sense wildfire funding reform as a part of the budget cap adjustment that is being discussed amid ongoing FY 2018 spending negotiations.



In the wake of the worst fire season in U.S. history it's imperative that Congress addresses a broken system that funds fighting wildfires at the expense of the very programs designed to reduce wildfire risk.



The U.S. Department of Agriculture recently announced 2017 was the single most expensive fire year on record, with fire suppression activities totaling \$2.4 billion. Last year more than 50 percent of the Forest Service's annual budget was dedicated to wildfire suppression. In 1995, fire suppression costs made up only 16 percent of the Forest Service's annual appropriated budget.

Federal agencies calculate wildfire suppression budgets based on the average costs of wildfire suppression over the past 10 years, an outdated budgeting system that almost always underestimates the actual cost of fighting fires before the season has even begun. Since 2002, agency firefighting budgets have been exceeded 13 times.

Unlike other natural disasters, where agencies can draw from an emergency fund to pay for disaster response, when wildfire costs exceed budgeted amounts the Bureau of Land Management and Forest Service do not have access to disaster funds and are forced to “fire borrow,” and take money from non-fire accounts. Funding intended for fire prevention and other important land management activities, such as recreation programs, gets diverted to fire suppression. Robbing these accounts year after year takes away from important conservation work, such as restoration and management of forests and grasslands, that helps reduce the risk of fire in the first place, resulting in unhealthy forests that are even more susceptible to expensive catastrophic wildfires. The cost of this broken system is felt across the nation as conservation and recreational programs suffer when their budgeted resources are diverted to fight fires.

There has been bi-cameral, bi-partisan support within Congress to address this issue by way of the “Wildfire Disaster Funding Act” (S. 1842/H.R. 2862). This comprehensive legislation would fund catastrophic wildfires as natural disasters and protect resources for federal land management programs.

The Wildfire Disaster Funding Act would make catastrophic wildfire suppression eligible for disaster funding under the Budget Control Act which grants agencies responding to natural disasters such as hurricanes, floods, or tornadoes access to disaster funding through a budget cap adjustment. Bringing wildfire suppression in line with the federal response to other natural disasters would end the destructive practice of fire borrowing and enable the Forest Service to make responsible investments in forest health and recreation programs.

In addition to treating wildfires like the natural disasters they are, this legislation would protect agencies’ fire prevention budgets by putting a freeze on the rising budget costs of the 10-year average, and would also direct the Secretaries of Interior and Agriculture to submit a request to Congress for supplemental appropriations if they determine additional resources are necessary for a fiscal year.

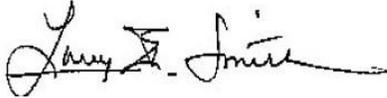
Outdoor recreation is of great importance to the national economy and to the rural communities that surround National Forests. A recent economic impact report found that the outdoor recreation industry generates \$887 billion in consumer spending annually, supports 7.6 million American jobs, and generates \$65.3 billion in federal tax revenue and \$59.2 billion in state and local tax revenue each year. The same report shows that Federal lands account for \$45 billion in economic output and about 396,000 jobs nationwide. In addition to economic prosperity, a growing body of research suggests that the significant health benefits of outdoor recreation could significantly reduce crime rates, improve educational outcomes, and lower long-term individual and public health care costs by reducing stress and obesity rates, improving physical fitness and strengthening social bonds with family and friends. Investments in recreation infrastructure and programs on public lands results in healthier economies and healthier people.

In order to realize the economic and societal impacts of outdoor recreation and ensure that recreation remains viable to meet ever growing demands for outdoor recreation on public lands, federal resources dedicated to restore and grow recreation opportunities on public lands must be protected.

The Wildfire Disaster Funding Act is a common sense solution. As Congress considers additional disaster relief aid in response to the hurricanes that recently devastated parts of the U.S. and Caribbean, we urge you to incorporate this bill language in a budget cap adjustment agreement to ensure catastrophic wildfires are fought with appropriate disaster funding and not at the expense of other essential public lands programs.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,



Larry Smith  
Executive Director  
Americans for Responsible Recreational  
Access



Christine Jourdain  
Executive Director  
American Council of Snowmobile  
Associations



Don Amador  
Western Representative  
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Kathy Van Kleeck  
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Steve Egbert  
Vice President  
United Four Wheel Drive Associations, Inc.

CC: The Honorable Michael Enzi, Chairman, Senate Committee on the Budget  
The Honorable Bernie Sanders, Ranking Member, Senate Committee on the Budget  
The Honorable Steve Womack, Chairman, House Budget Committee  
The Honorable John Yarmuth, Ranking Member, House Budget Committee  
Mr. Tony Tooke, Chief, the U.S. Forest Service  
Mr. Brian Steed, Deputy Director, Bureau of Land Management