TAXPAYERS for COMMON SENSE

TAXPAYER TOOLS

Recalibrate Mitigation vs Suppression Funding

Federal wildfire policy requires comprehensive, holistic reform. New funding to address the wildfire crisis must be paired with reforms to the internal systems that manage federal dollars and the accompanying federal policies that implement activities on-the-ground. There is no one-size-fits all policy solution, but this series of Taxpayer Tools to Tackle Wildfire highlight priorities that can help ensure taxpayer dollars are invested in solutions that protect people and property while also saving money.

Background

Over the past three decades, wildfires have scorched an increasing number of acres. From 2013 to 2022, there was an average of 61,410 wildfires annually. As the frequency and intensity of wildfires have increased, so have the costs of wildfire suppression. As suppression costs ballooned, funding for other non-fire programs that could prevent or lessen the impacts and costs of future wildfires has fallen short. It's crucial to recalibrate mitigation and suppression funding to ensure that mitigation efforts are an investment towards decreasing suppression costs in the future.

The U.S. Forest Service (USFS) analysis of its own budget observed that as wildfire costs increased as a percentage of the agency's budget due to longer and more costly fires over the last few decades, funding for non-fire programs has failed to keep pace with the increased cost of fire suppression.[1] The growth in fire suppression costs has consumed an ever-increasing portion of the agency's appropriations. Non-fire program appropriations were often reduced by the amount that the suppression budget increased, forcing the agency to forego opportunities to complete vital restoration work that could improve forest health and resilience and mitigate future fire potential.

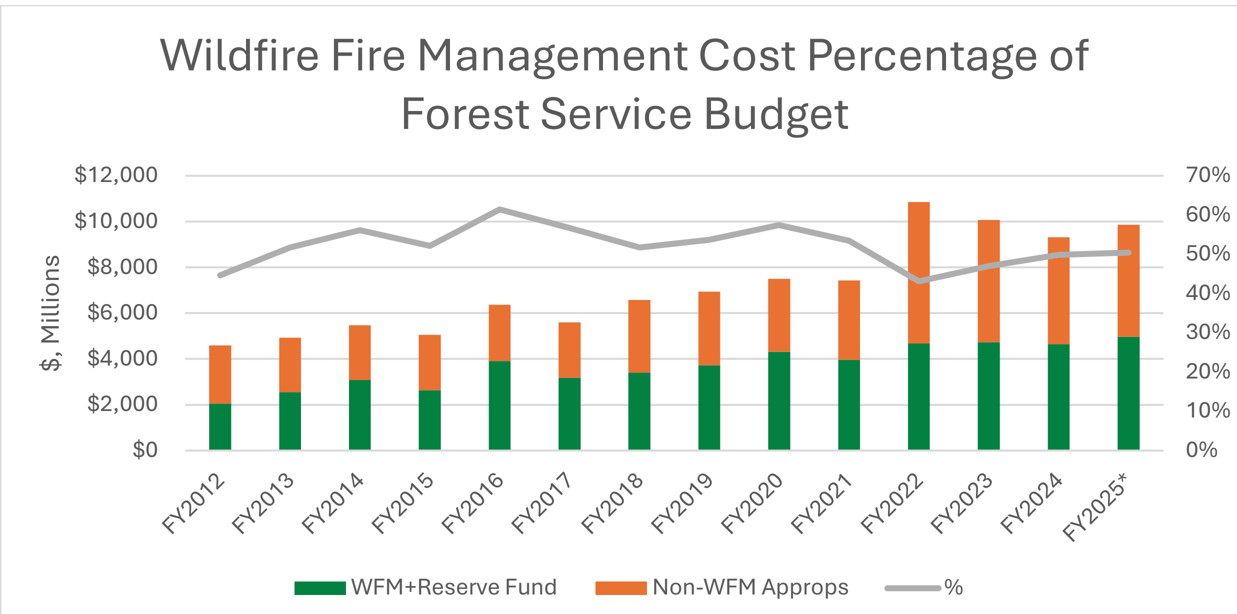
From 1995 to 2015, the USFS found that its Wildland Fire Management (WFM) and Reserve Fund accounts more than tripled as a percentage of the agency budget, increasing from 16% to 52%, while National Forest System funding fell by nearly one-third. The USFS projected that the continued growth of WFM through 2025 would climb to nearly $1.8 billion, or roughly two-thirds of the entire USFS budget, accompanied by a nearly $700 million decrease in non-fire program funding in the next 10 years.

Mitigation Funding as a Down Payment for the Future

[1] U.S. Forest Service, "Rising Cost of Wildfire Operations," Augst 2015. https://www.fs.usda.gov/sites/default/files/2015-Rising-Cost-Wildfire-Operations.pdf

Dedicating increasing amounts of funds to fire suppression and its WFM account has decreased the USFS's ability to sustain vital non-fire program areas that could prevent or lessen the impact of future fires, including forest restoration, recreation, research, watershed protection, land conservation, and other activities. This lack of non-fire program funding perpetuates a vicious cycle in wildfire suppression, diverting resources meant for prevention and risk mitigation, leading to potentially steeper future suppression costs.

Recent funding from the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA) and the Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) has provided significant resources for non-suppression wildfire programs and may help boost previously underfunded projects, the effect of which still needs to be closely examined. Specifically, the IIJA provided $20 billion towards various agencies for wildfire risk mitigation, ecosystem restoration, and other wildlife-related climate resilience programs; $5.5 billion of the $20 billion was directed towards the USFS and DOI for forest management, risk mitigation, and restoration activities. The IRA directed $5 billion to the USFS and another $5 billion to other agencies for non-suppression wildfire-related programs.[2]



*FY2025 calculations are based on the President's FY2025 Budget Request, not actual appropriations.

As a result, USFS WFM and Reserve Fund appropriations as a percentage of the total USFS budget have remained steady around 50%, instead of creeping up to 67% as the USFS previously predicted. However, year-to-year appropriations need to continue emphasizing vital non-fire programs. The significant investment made in the first year of the IIJA brought down the WFM percentage of the USFS budget, but annual appropriations following that have not kept pace. The FY25 budget request appears to continue the trend of allocating the bulk of wildfire discretionary

[2] Taxpayers for Common Sense, April 2023, "Clearing the Smoke: A Closer Look at Federal Spending and Programs on Wildfire." https://www.taxpayer.net/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/TCS-Clearing-the-Smoke-Report-FINAL.pdf

spending to suppression. Sustaining funding levels for vital non-fire program areas will be important in the near term to mitigate fire risks and reduce longer-term suppression liability.

Conclusion

Throughout the past century, risk mitigation activities have repeatedly been recognized as an important tool for federal agencies to reduce the costs of wildfires. Yet, except for the appropriations from the IIJA and IRA, annual appropriations for wildfire management have followed the same formula that disproportionately values suppression at the expense of mitigation. As wildfires continue to burn more frequently and intensely due to drier conditions caused by climate change, wildfire suppression will inevitably continue to be a significant expense. Policymakers need to recognize the need for more balanced spending between suppression and mitigation in annual appropriations and ensure that we continue to invest in mitigation to protect ourselves from increasing wildfire costs in the future.