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Wildfire Policy & Spending in the Farm Bill Forestry Title



Prescribed Burn | U.S. Forest Service

Wildfires are increasing in frequency, size, and severity. From 2013 to 2022, there were an average of 61,410 wildfires impacting an average of 7.2 million acres each year.¹ The farm bill is one vehicle through which Congress can establish, modify, and repeal programs and policies related to wildfire mitigation, suppression, and recovery.

Background

The farm bill is a five-year, multi-billion-dollar piece of legislation that governs a vast array of agricultural and food programs, from crop insurance and biomass subsidies to nutrition and rural broadband. The most recent farm bill, the Agricultural Improvement Act of 2018 (P.L. 115-334), included 12 titles: Commodities, Conservation, Trade, Nutrition, Credit, Rural Development, Research, Forestry, Energy, Horticulture, Crop Insurance, and Miscellaneous.

The Forestry Title of the farm bill supports forestry management programs run by the U.S. Forest Service (USFS) within the Department of Agriculture (USDA), including research, federal forest management authorities and policies, and financial assistance to States, Tribes, and other nonfederal landowners. The Forestry Title is one of the smallest titles in the bill; in the 2018 farm bill, it was estimated to cost \$10 million at the time of enactment, just 0.001% of the total cost of the bill.² As is the case in much of the farm bill, programs in the Forestry Title are often authorized or reauthorized for five-year periods.

¹ Congressional Research Service, “Wildfire Statistics,” June 2023.

<https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/IF/IF10244>

² Congressional Research Service, “Farm Bill Primer: What Is the Farm Bill?” February 2024.

<https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/IF/IF12047>

Wildfire Policies and Authorities

Through the farm bill, Congress can establish new authorities or modify existing ones related to wildfire management. Recent farm bills have authorized appropriations for hazardous fuels reduction on federal and nonfederal land through amendments to the Healthy Forests Restoration Act of 2003 (P.L. 108-148).³ The farm bill also includes various other authorities related to forest health, which affect wildfires, such as the authority to combat insects and diseases on federal land.⁴

The farm bill can also modify or expand the ways in which the USFS conducts activities, including those related to wildfire, on federal land. For example, the 2014 farm bill permanently established the Good Neighbor Authority, which allows the USFS and certain agencies within the Department of the Interior (DOI) to authorize states to conduct certain land management projects on federal land, including hazardous fuels reduction and ecosystem restoration.⁵ In exchange, states are allowed full retention of timber sale revenues from conducting these projects. This authority was expanded and modified in the 2018 farm bill and will likely continue to be reauthorized and modified in future farm bills.

Congress may also shape the policies and procedures required for certain forest management activities through the farm bill, including categorical exclusions (CEs) from environmental reviews required under the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) and the Endangered Species Act.⁶ Current regulations allow for CEs for hazardous fuels reduction projects, including prescribed burning, on up to 3,000 acres of National Forest System lands.⁷

Additionally, Congress can direct wildfire-related federal research through farm bills, including by modifying existing federal programs —such as the USFS Forest Inventory and Analysis program⁸— or requiring the USFS and DOI to report to Congress on wildfire prevention progress.⁹

Wildfire Grant Programs

Congress has also used farm bills to establish, reauthorize, or modify several programs aimed at mitigating or recovering from wildfire events. Examples include:

³ Section 8401 of the 2018 farm bill authorized \$20 million to be appropriated annually for hazardous fuel reduction grants to nonfederal landowners and Section 8402 authorized \$760 million to be appropriated annually for hazardous fuel reduction activities under Title I of the Healthy Forests Restoration Act of 2003.

⁴ The 2014 farm bill authorized the USDA to carry out priority projects on Federal land related to insect or disease infestation under requirements previously established for hazardous fuels reduction projects in the Healthy Forests Restoration Act of 2003. The 2018 farm bill extended these authorities.

⁵ Congressional Research Service, “The Good Neighbor Authority on Federal Lands,” January 2023. <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/IF/IF11658>

⁶ For example, the 2018 farm bill created a new categorical exclusion for activities on public land that protect, restore, or improve greater sage grouse or mule deer habitat in a sagebrush steppe ecosystem.

⁷ 16 U.S.C. §6591d

⁸ The 2014 farm bill and 2018 farm bill both revised the strategic plan for the Forest Inventory and Analysis program.

⁹ For example, the 2018 farm bill required the USFS and DOI to report on wildfire, insect infestation, and disease prevention activities.

Landscape-Scale Restoration Program

This program was originally established in the 2008 farm bill to support cross-boundary regional and national forest restoration projects.¹⁰ In the 2018 farm bill, the program was renamed and modified to encourage science-based projects that restore priority landscapes or address issues/landscapes identified in State Forest Action Plans. Funding is implemented through 50% cost-share competitive grants awarded through the State for projects on state or private land. Projects must include plans “to reduce the risk of uncharacteristic wildfires,” among other objectives.¹¹

Collaborative Forest Restoration Program

Established in the 2000 farm bill (P.L. 106-393), the Collaborative Forest Restoration Program (CFRP) provides federal cost-share grants of up to 80% for forest restoration projects that, among other goals, aim to reduce the threat of wildfires on federal, state, or tribal lands in New Mexico. The federal portion of the grant cannot exceed \$360,000 for a single project.

Collaborative Forest Landscape Restoration Program

Established in 2009¹² and reauthorized in the 2018 farm bill, this program provides 50% cost-share grants to regional USFS offices for the implementation and monitoring of ecological restoration projects on priority forest landscapes. Eligible projects must cover at least 50,000 acres and be composed primarily of National Forest System land. By law, the project must include plans to “reduce the risk of uncharacteristic wildfire, including through the use of fire for ecological restoration and maintenance and reestablishing natural fire regimes, where appropriate.”¹³

Biomass and Bioenergy Grant Programs

Congress has established and modified several biomass and bioenergy grant programs intersecting with federal wildfire spending, including the Wood Innovation Grant Program¹⁴—which provides cost-share grants to projects related to expanding wood product markets and wood energy markets—and the Community Wood Energy and Wood Innovation Grant Program¹⁵—which provides cost-share grants for installing community wood energy systems or building innovative wood product facilities—in past farm bills.

Conclusion

The Forestry Title of the farm bill plays a critical role in dictating federal wildfire policy and spending. As Congress works to write the next farm bill there exist many opportunities to adopt taxpayer-friendly reforms that protect lives, make communities more resilient, and foster a healthier forest and wildland ecosystem.

¹⁰ Originally called “Competitive Allocation of Funds to State Foresters or Equivalent State Officials.”

¹¹ 16 U.S.C. §2109a

¹² Omnibus Public Land Management Act of 2009, P.L. 111-11

¹³ 16 U.S.C. §7303

¹⁴ The Wood Innovations Grants Program was launched in 2015 and codified in the 2018 farm bill.

¹⁵ Established in the 2008 farm bill, P.L. 110-234