



## National Forests on the Brink

By Marshall Matz and Bill Imbergamo

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It's another hot, dry summer, and another several million acres of public forests are going up in flames. As the end of August approaches, over 7 million acres have burned – including almost a million acres of National Forests, and those losses should concern all Americans. You can see a map of the current large fires [at this link](#).

The Forest Service and other Federal and State firefighting agencies are making heroic efforts to combat these blazes, and so far at least 4 wild-land firefighters have given their lives in defense of life, property, and precious natural resources. Their valiant efforts have done a lot to reduce the damage, but it's an uphill fight.

The 153 National Forests – covering 191 million acres in 40 states – were originally set aside to secure water flows, provide forage for livestock, and provide needed timber for our forest products industry. That mission – since added to and modified – has evolved, but not fundamentally changed. With heavy fuel loads, a warming and drying climate, and a dysfunctional system for funding fire suppression, however, it's not clear the National Forests will be able to provide these public benefits for much longer.

The Obama administration rightly points out that the current system for funding wildfire suppression is broken –and just announced plans to begin another round of “fire borrowing” – where funds Congress appropriates for land management are redirected to pay for the firefighters, air tankers, and other materiel needed to try to stop the megafires burning in California, Oregon, Idaho, and Washington, among other states. The fires are having a devastating economic impact on local communities and Indian tribes.

Secretary Tom Vilsack has sounded the alarm, saying that in just another decade, fire suppression will consume two-thirds of the Forest Service's discretionary budget. As recently as a decade ago, that figure was just 16 percent.

All fires require three things: fuel, air, and an ignition source---the “fire triangle.” As the Administration recognizes, up to 82 million acres of National Forests have too much fuel; too many trees competing for scarce resources on too many acres. This is the result of harvesting just a small percentage of the annual forest growth over many years. These overgrown, fire prone forests, have plenty of oxygen, of course, so any ignition source, such as a dry lightning storm, creates the threat of a mega-fire.

Congress does need to step up and start treating fire suppression costs like the emergencies they are – and fast. But Congress also has some creative ideas on the “fuels” side of the fire triangle as well.

In July the House passed a bi-partisan bill, under the leadership of Rep. Bruce Westerman (R-AR) and Rep. Ann Kirkpatrick (D-AZ), which would speed up needed forest management on the National Forests. That bill, HR 2647, provides streamlined NEPA compliance mechanisms for projects designed by collaboration between key stakeholders. It also encourages creation of needed wildlife habitat, and provides alternative funding mechanisms for management projects – many of which focus on reducing the threat of catastrophic fires.

Just before the bill came to the floor, a provision was added that would give the Forest Service access to emergency funds after the 10-year average in suppression costs had been expended. A similar provision was included in the Senate Interior bill, which cleared committee but has yet to come to the floor. Just before the Senate left for August recess, a critical group of 11 Senators expressed commitment to addressing the fire funding problem.

Also, this spring, Senator Debbie Stabenow and six of her Democratic colleagues wrote to Secretary Vilsack urging action on forest management.

As the Administration and the Senate discuss how to build a better fire suppression system, they need to examine HR 2647 and other proposals (like Sen. John Barrasso’s S. 1691) and incorporate provisions that can help address the fuel side of the fire triangle.

The Administration is to be commended for promoting collaborative efforts to design forest management projects. Timber industry officials are active participants and leaders in those efforts. However, at present even collaboratively designed projects intended to protect communities and save watersheds from destruction must go through exhaustive analysis, and then run a gauntlet of administrative objections and litigation from radical groups and individuals who oppose all forest management.

Finally, current law doesn’t allow the Forest Service to use receipts generated from the removal of timber and biomass to pay for needed analysis on future projects.

In short, any legislation to address the fire funding crisis also has to address the forest management crisis. There is a hard core of activists who will use every weapon at hand to delay and disrupt needed management, and Congress needs to send an unmistakable message: management of our forests can’t wait. National Forests are not National Parks. They have different statutory purposes and the Congress should not allow the statutes to be amended through litigation.

The Administration and the Forest Service are to be commended for their efforts to reduce hazardous fuels. But as long as they try to move projects through the current procedural maze and then convince the courts that the management is OK, the fuels will continue to build, and fires will continue to rage.

There is a brief window for Congress to address both of these pressing issues when they return in September. Current signs seem to indicate we'll have large fires well into October. Hopefully these will remind our policy makers not just to foot the suppression bill, but to aggressively manage the fuel loads as well.

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