INTRODUCTION AND SUMMARY

This summer’s wildfire season is shaping up to be one of the worst on record. Already in 2015, eight million acres have burned—almost entirely in the American West—and experts are predicting that some fires will not be put out until the first snow falls months from now.¹

As firefighters with the U.S. Forest Service battle blazes from Alaska to Texas, the agency is again struggling with what has become an annual dilemma: how to pay for the growing costs of fighting wildfire without poaching funds from its other critical programs, including those to restore forests, improve watershed health, and enhance recreation opportunities.

The answer to this quandary comes in the form of a piece of legislation currently stalled in Congress, the Wildfire Disaster Funding Act (H.R. 167).² What distinguishes this bill in today’s hyper-partisan environment is that it enjoys overwhelming bipartisan support. In fact, the Center for Western Priorities’ new analysis shows that the WDFA has more broad, bipartisan support than all other natural resources legislation currently in front of the U.S. House of Representatives.

To come to this conclusion, we analyzed each of the 339 natural resources bills currently in front of the House Natural Resources Committee, and determined that WDFA has more cosponsors and more bipartisan support than any other piece of legislation.

Despite this unequivocal bipartisanship, and in spite of the desperate calls from the Forest Service for the fix, this critical piece of legislation remains stalled in Congress.³

As Congress dithers, the Forest Service is forced to do more with less and Western communities are suffering the consequences. There is no reason why a bill with such sweeping, bipartisan support should not come up for a vote.
BACKGROUND ON WILDFIRE AND THE FUNDING PROBLEM

The cost of fighting wildfire has risen over the last decade, with fires in the West growing bigger, burning hotter, and lasting longer. This is the result of a combination of factors, including a warming climate, a century of mandated fire suppression, and more people moving into forested areas.

Currently, one percent of wildfires—the largest mega-fires—comprise 30 percent of wildfire fighting costs. In other words, a tiny fraction of the biggest and most expensive fires consume a significant proportion of Forest Service’s firefighting budget. As a consequence, wildfires are consuming more and more of the agency’s annual budget (see chart).

In a recent report, the U.S. Forest Service further detailed the effects this has on other key programs:

“As more and more of the agency’s resources are spent each year to provide the firefighters, aircraft, and other assets necessary to protect lives, property, and natural resources from catastrophic wildfires, fewer and fewer funds and resources are available to support other agency work—including the very programs and restoration projects that reduce the fire threat.”

These budget challenges are complicated further because unlike with other natural disasters like hurricanes and tornadoes, the law currently requires the U.S. Forest Service to pay for all costs out of its own budget rather than giving the agency access to separate disaster funds for the worst and most expensive fires.

Currently, when the costs of fighting wildfire exceed what the Forest Service has budgeted, the agency is forced to transfer funds from other critical programs to pay the costs. This has happened seven times since 2002, and again in 2015 the agency will have to poach money from itself to fight wildfire. According to a memo from Forest Service chief Tom Tidwell, this year the agency will have to transfer $450 million away from restoration projects, hazardous fuels mitigation, capital improvements, and other program areas to protect communities from wildfire.

By robbing Peter to pay Paul, the federal government is draining critical money earmarked to reduce wildfire risks just to keep up with the growing costs of wildfire.

The Wildfire Disaster Funding Act (H.R. 167 in the U.S. House and S. 235 in the U.S. Senate) would provide a fix to this ongoing problem, which hamstrings the Forest Service nearly every year and is expected to worsen in the coming decade. The simple fix provided by WDFA would treat the largest and most expensive fires as natural disasters and give the Forest Service—along with the Department of the Interior—access to emergency disaster funding.

The fix offered by WDFA is not only common sense, but as we demonstrate below, it is also the most widely supported and bipartisan natural resources legislation in front of Congress today.
ANALYSIS: THE SWEEPING BIPARTISANSHIP OF THE WILDFIRE DISASTER FUNDING ACT

To assess the bipartisanship of the Wildfire Disaster Funding Act relative to other pieces of legislation, we analyzed all 339 bills introduced and referred to the House Natural Resources Committee so far in the 114th Congress.

We measured broad, bipartisan support using two measures: the ratio of Republican to Democratic support and the number of cosponsors on the legislation.

In total, 125 members of Congress have cosponsored the Wildfire Disaster Funding Act, 56 percent of which are Democrats and 44 percent Republican. By our measure, there is only one more bipartisan bill—the “National Forest System Trail Stewardship Act” (H.R. 845)—but it has less than half as many cosponsors. And while two bills, including the “Korean War Veterans Memorial Wall of Remembrance Act” (H.R. 1475), have more cosponsors, they do not have nearly as much bipartisan support.

The Wildfire Disaster Funding Act is also in front of the U.S. Senate. The bill has 18 cosponsors—14 Democrats and 4 Republicans. While it is technically a natural resources bill, it was referred to the Senate Committee on the Budget rather than the Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources. As a result, we are unable to accurately measure its bipartisanship compared with other bills in front the Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources.

In summary, the WDFA is a unique example of a piece of legislation that has both significant support and bipartisan backing.
CONCLUSION

By allowing the Forest Service to access emergency funds for the largest, most destructive fires—as currently is the case for other agencies that deal with natural disasters like hurricanes and tornadoes—our government can operate more efficiently and effectively.

The Wildfire Disaster Funding Act, a commonsense fix to the way that our government funds wildfire, does not increase government spending\(^\text{10}\) and has been endorsed by more than 200 groups, from state foresters to the Outdoor Industry Association.\(^\text{11}\)

And, as our new analysis shows, the Wildfire Disaster Funding Act is the most supported and bipartisan piece of natural resources legislation in front of the House of Representatives today. Congress must act now to provide the Forest Service with the tools to protect Western communities from wildfire and to ensure our forests remain resilient now and into the future.

REFERENCES


