

Open Letter to Congress from Scientists Concerned about Proposals to “Fix” Funding for Wildland Fire Management

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As professional scientists with backgrounds in ecological sciences and natural resources management, we are greatly concerned about current legislative packages proposing to remedy the practice of “fire borrowing.” Fire borrowing is when federal wildland fire suppression programs borrow funds from other programs when funds run out in fire season. Current proposed fire borrowing “fixes” would severely undermine existing environmental laws, result in destructive increases in logging on federal lands, including roadless areas and old-growth forests on the Tongass National Forest in Alaska, and would take the nation in the wrong direction on wildland fire management. The vehicle for these legislative proposals, known as the “Wildfire Disaster Funding Act” (W DFA), seems on its face to be a reasonable attempt to address a common-sense budgetary problem. It is not. And, while many policy analysts, forestry, fire suppression, industry, and agency officials have been consulted during development of this legislation, there has been virtually no input from the scientific community. We believe there are serious problems with existing legislative proposals.

Because so many have assumed that some version of the W DFA is an essential, must-pass measure, logging interests have exploited this context to leverage the inclusion of numerous provisions in W DFA legislative packages. Current versions of the W DFA from both Republicans and Democrats contain numerous environmentally damaging provisions that would weaken environmental laws to increase logging roads on federal lands, transfer more authority from federal agencies to states for logging projects on federal lands, constrain environmental analysis for large clearcutting projects under the deceptive guise of creating habitat for mule deer, and undermine the requirements to consult with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service under the Endangered Species Act. The immediate threat is that these misguided provisions would be attached as “riders” to upcoming Omnibus appropriations bills without public hearings or disclosure of exact legislative language. This is widely recognized as the worst way to legislate, and we urge you to stand firm and oppose policy riders on appropriations bills.

Another troubling provision of the W DFA packages is the elimination of meaningful environmental analysis and public notice and participation for commercial logging projects of up to 3,000 acres in ponderosa pine forests on National Forests across the western U.S. This provision would expand and make long-term a similar but temporary measure passed in 2014 as part of the Farm Bill reauthorization, which was promoted at that time as a light-touch measure to facilitate reduction of undergrowth and small trees. However, in practice these environmental “sideboards” have proven meaningless. The Republican version of this provision would allow logging projects of up to 6,000 acres without meaningful analysis or public disclosure and participation.

W DFA proposals dramatically increase annual fire suppression funding. Because they contain no clear direction on prioritization of management actions, this will inevitably mean more misguided backcountry fire suppression. Weather-driven wildland fires (the main factor in large fires) cannot be stopped until the weather changes, yet they incur excessive ineffective fire suppression. That funding would be better spent helping communities prepare for fire via defensible space.¹

Importantly, all of the various W DFA proposals would categorize all wildland fires as “disasters,” thus ignoring the past three decades of science which find that fires, including large ones, are an ecologically essential part of forest ecosystems and create highly biodiverse wildlife habitat.²

We urge you to consider the current science, and fundamentally re-think the W DFA proposals.

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¹ <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/B978012802749300013X>

² DellaSala and Hanson (2015), The Ecological Importance of Mixed-Severity Fires: Nature’s Phoenix. Elsevier, Boston.

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