THE SITUATION
Amidst longer and more severe wildfire seasons, largely driven by climate change, Congress is grappling with how to fund wildfire suppression. Current budget guidelines set by Congress often force the U.S. Forest Service to transfer funds from fire prevention, fuels management, and non-fire related programs to pay for emergency operations and the suppression of fires. Proposals to prevent this practice, commonly known as “fire borrowing,” and ensure the availability of adequate resources for both suppression and prevention have been hobbled by Republican indifference.

WHAT’S THE PROBLEM?
Outdated budget rules often force the U.S. Forest Service to fight fires by diverting funds from other parts of its budget – including fire prevention programs. Approximately 30% of wildfire spending goes toward stopping the largest 1-2% of wildfires, but Congressional appropriations don’t always cover the cost of these so-called “megafires” and outdated budget rules often force USDA and DOI to divert funds from other parts of their budgets- including fire prevention programs.

HOW ARE PUBLIC LANDS IMPACTED?
In 2015, more than 68,000 wildfires burned approximately 10.1 million acres, 7.4 million of which were federal lands. This figure was the largest acreage burned on record and is larger than the total acreage burned in the previous two years combined - 4.3 million acres in 2013 and 3.6 million acres in 2014 (NICC).

WHY SHOULD AMERICANS CARE?
Wildfires can have a devastating impact on communities adjacent to or within wildfire activity.

THE FACTS
~50% of U.S. Forest Service’s annual budget is used to fight wildfires (USDA)
In 1996, fire made up 16% of the Forest Service budget. Now it’s over 50%. (USDA)

WHAT’S CONGRESS DOING?
Republicans have offered legislation to increase the pace of logging, without public input or environmental review, and ignored the real problem of Congress’ method of funding fire suppression.

Democrats believe Congress needs to permanently end “fire borrowing” so that our federal land management agencies no longer have to steal funding from other programs.

House Republicans are trying to fast-track more logging projects with fewer environmental reviews and less public input in the name of fire prevention. This will undermine public trust in forest management.

HOW DO WE MOVE FORWARD?
Congress needs to end the disruptive and unsustainable practice of “fire borrowing.” Congress should enact legislation that treats catastrophic wildfires the same way it treats other natural disasters. Such a measure would ensure the availability of adequate funding to address large, costly wildfires and restore funding for programs designed to prevent wildfire and promote forest health.