



HOUSE COMMITTEE ON
NATURAL RESOURCES
CHAIRMAN BRUCE WESTERMAN

To: House Committee on Natural Resources Republican Members
From: Federal Lands Subcommittee, Brandon Miller – Brandon.Miller@mail.house.gov, Taylor Wiseman – Taylor.Wiseman@mail.house.gov X67736
Date: Tuesday, May 16, 2023
Subject: Oversight Hearing on “*Examining the Challenges Facing Forest Management, Wildfire Suppression, and Wildland Firefighters Ahead of the 2023 Wildfire Year*”

The Subcommittee on Federal Lands will hold an oversight hearing on “*Examining the Challenges Facing Forest Management, Wildfire Suppression, and Wildland Firefighters Ahead of the 2023 Wildfire Year*” on **Tuesday, May 16, 2023, at 2:00 p.m. EDT** in room 1324 of the Longworth House Office Building.

Member offices are requested to notify Sophia Varnasidis (Sophia@mail.house.gov) by 4:30 p.m. on Monday, May 15, if their Member intends to participate in the hearing.

I. KEY MESSAGES

- Worsening wildfires fueled by overgrown and unhealthy forests continue to bring historic levels of destruction to our Western landscapes. Without urgent action, 2023 could produce yet another devastating wildfire year.
- Wildfires aren’t just statistics; they destroy lives and property, degrade air and water quality, turn abundant and diverse wildlife habitat into moonscapes, and create billions of dollars in economic damage.
- There is scientific consensus that we must increase the pace and scale of forest management. Despite billions of dollars in new funding, the cost and complexity of environmental laws and associated litigation continually handcuff federal land managers.
- Wildland firefighters face a multitude of challenges, including regional pay disparities and increasingly unwinnable on-the-ground conditions. Instead of paying lip service to these brave heroes, Congress must carefully craft long-term solutions to the range of challenges facing firefighters.
- Given the severe drought conditions and overstocked forests in the Western United States, there must be a serious discussion about the policy and practices regarding fire suppression.
- Republicans are working to advance solutions that improve fire suppression policies, increase the pace and scale of forest management, and address the real and significant issues facing our wildland firefighting workforce.

II. WITNESSES

Panel I:

- **Ms. Jaelith Hall-Rivera**, Deputy Chief, State and Private Forestry, Forest Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture, Washington, DC
- **Mr. Jeff Rupert**, Director, Office of Wildland Fire, U.S. Department of the Interior, Washington, DC

Panel II:

- **Ms. Ronatta McNair**, Board Member, National Association of Forest Service Retirees, Bend, OR
- **Mr. Matt Dias**, President, California Forestry Association, Sacramento, CA
- **The Honorable Greg Bolin**, Mayor, Paradise, CA
- **Ms. Courtney Schultz**, Associate Professor of Forest and Natural Resource Policy, Colorado State University, Fort Collins, CO [*Minority Witness*]

III. BACKGROUND

The 2023 Wildfire Year

Outlook on Fire Activity

Prolific storms delivered record amounts of rain and snow to many Western states during this past winter.¹ To some degree, this was a welcome development for the West, which has been suffering through the most extreme drought on record, with over 76 percent of lands under severe drought conditions or worse.² However, there are also concerns this increased moisture will lead to “intense growth



2023 U.S. Wildfire Forecast Map
Source: AccuWeather, 2023.

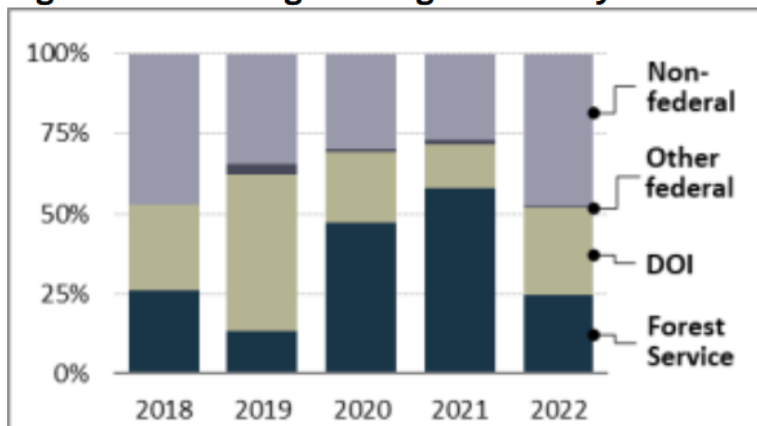
¹ New York Times, “Why the West Got Buried in Snow, While the East Got Little”, Zach Levitt and Elena Shao, April 12, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2023/04/12/us/snow-winter-2023.html>.

² Wall Street Journal, “Most of U.S. West Is in Severe Drought as Peak Wildfire Season Looms,” Camille Bressange, Jim Carlton, and Taylor Umlauf, May 27, 2022, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/most-of-u-s-west-is-in-severe-drought-as-peak-wildfire-season-looms-11653659433>.

during the spring and first part of the summer, resulting in more fuel for fires that ignite later in the summer and autumn.”³ Additional fuels, in combination with the existing levels of overgrowth, have forecasters predicting that the 2023 wildfire season will be “near to slightly above the historical averages,” with “60,000 to 75,000 wildfires that burn 6.5 million to 8.25 million acres of land.”⁴ For comparison, the 2022 wildfire year counted 66,255 wildfires that burned more than 7.3 million acres.⁵ Amazingly, the high number of fires and amount of acres burned in 2022 were actually lower than originally forecasted due to summer and fall rain and fewer wind events.⁶

Americans have tragically grown accustomed to increasingly severe wildfire seasons that are lasting longer and producing more destruction than ever before. Decades of inadequate forest management have created an unprecedented forest health crisis, and in the absence of a dramatic change, the future outlook remains bleak. Across the U.S., there are now 1 billion acres at risk of wildland fire.⁷ More than 117 million acres of federal land, of which 63 million are managed by the U.S. Forest Service (USFS) and 54 million are managed by the Department of the Interior (DOI), are at high or very high risk of wildfire, representing nearly one-fifth of the combined federal lands administered by these agencies.⁸ Over the last 20 years in the United States, an average of 7 million acres per year has been burned by wildfire – more than double the average seen during the 1990s.⁹ This is the equivalent of losing an area larger than Massachusetts every single year. The crisis has reached a level where a fire-prone state like California can lose roughly 362,000 acres in a year, and have it described as “relatively mild.”¹⁰ Federal lands continue to make-up a majority of the acreage lost to wildfire each year.

Figure 3. Percentage Acreage Burned by Ownership



Source: Congressional Research Service, 2023.

³ AccuWeather, “AccuWeather’s 2023 US wildfire forecast”, Brian Lada, April 12, 2023, <https://www.accuweather.com/en/weather-forecasts/accuweathers-2023-us-wildfire-forecast/1510132>.

⁴ *Id.*

⁵ USA Today, “Another above-average wildfire season for 2022. How climate change is making fires harder to predict and fight” Dinah Voyles Pulver, January 3, 2023, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/2022/12/24/us-wildfire-season-2022-again-above-average-amid-climate-change/10811014002/>.

⁶ *Id.* AccuWeather, “AccuWeather’s 2023 US wildfire forecast”, Brian Lada, April 12, 2023, <https://www.accuweather.com/en/weather-forecasts/accuweathers-2023-us-wildfire-forecast/1510132>.

⁷ Chris French, Testimony before the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee, 6/24/21, <https://www.energy.senate.gov/services/files/AAF7DF40-2A47-4951-ADA4-4B124AD3894F#:~:text=In%20the%20United%20States%2C%20there.high%20risk%20of%20wildland%20fire.>

⁸ Congressional Research Service, “Federal Wildfire Management: Ten-Year Funding Trends and Issues (FY2011-FY2020)”, Katie Hoover, October 28, 2020, <https://www.crs.gov/Reports/R46583?source=search&guid=8a080671120b4e7f92061e82e8a2bdf3&index=6>.

⁹ Congressional Research Service, “Wildfire Statistics”, Katie Hoover, March 1, 2023, <https://www.crs.gov/Reports/IF10244?source=search>.

¹⁰ New York Times, “Why California’s 2022 Wildfire Season Was Unexpectedly Quiet”, Elena Shao, December 20, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2022/12/20/climate/california-wildfire-season-2022.html>.

The long-term wildfire threat to communities remains extremely high. Forest Service researchers, through firehatched simulation modeling, have found 1,812 communities in the Western United States could be significantly impacted by future wildfires, which would expose an estimated 4,000 structures to wildfire on average annually.¹¹ Sobering fire models have even predicted plausible extreme fire scenarios in the near future where almost 500,000 buildings could be lost to wildfire in a single fire season.¹² Other scenarios have identified the probability of wildfires igniting on National Forest System lands and burning more than 1.5 million acres in Southern California, destroying 100,000 structures and putting thousands of lives at risk.¹³

Impacts of Catastrophic Wildfires to Communities Across the Western United States

Like many recent fire years, the 2023 fire year could have devastating impacts across the West. One of the most terrible and heart wrenching consequences of the current catastrophic wildfire crisis is the devastation to life and property. Since 2005, over 89,000 structures have been destroyed by wildfires, leading to an untold number of deaths



Home destroyed by Camp Fire in Paradise, California.

Source: Getty Images, 2018.

and enormous personal losses.¹⁴ In the last 4 years alone, 27,556 structures have been destroyed, including homes, businesses, and entire neighborhoods.¹⁵ Entire communities in the path of uncontrollable megafires have literally been leveled. In 2018, the Camp Fire in California became the deadliest and most destructive wildfire in California's history. That megafire destroyed over 18,000 structures and 85 people tragically lost their lives.¹⁶ The towns of Paradise and Concow were both essentially destroyed, losing over 95% of all structures.¹⁷ Tragically, between 2015 and 2021, there

¹¹ Alan Ager, et al. "Cross-Boundary Wildfire and Community Exposure: A Framework and Application in the Western U.S.," USDA Forest Service, May 2019.

¹² *Id.*

¹³ Eliza Barclay, "This is a worst-possible wildfire scenario for Southern California," Vox, <https://www.vox.com/2019/9/10/20804560/climate-change-california-wildfire-2019>.

¹⁴ Barrett, Kimiko. "Wildfires Destroy Thousands of Structures Each Year." *Headwaters Economics*, 4 Dec. 2020, <https://headwaterseconomics.org/natural-hazards/structures-destroyed-by-wildfire>.

¹⁵ Congressional Research Service, "Wildfire Statistics", Katie Hoover, March 1, 2023, <https://www.crs.gov/Reports/IF10244?source=search>.

¹⁶ Associated Press, "List of Missing in Camp Fire Down to 1." *FOX40*, FOX40, 2 Aug. 2019, <https://fox40.com/news/california-connection/one-still-missing-in-camp-fire/>.

¹⁷ "Paradise Lost: Inside California's Camp Fire." *CBS News*, CBS Interactive, www.cbsnews.com/news/paradise-lost-inside-california-camp-fire-60-minutes/. <https://news.sky.com/story/california-wildfires-before-and-after-images-of-the-devastation-in-malibu-and-paradise-11552392>.

were 845 civilian wildfire fatalities.¹⁸ Paradise Mayor Bolin will testify at the hearing regarding the devastation wildfires wreak on communities.

According to the Congressional Budget Office, estimates of losses due to wildfire range from \$37 billion to \$88 billion annually.¹⁹ This includes “the value of structures damaged or destroyed, the lost value of timber, forgone tax revenues, the impact on housing prices, and the costs to evacuate.” Importantly, these estimates are likely conservative as they do not account for “business interruptions, damage to infrastructure and public utilities, and disruptions to the supply of goods and services.”²⁰ To highlight this, one study estimated that the economic impact of the 2018 wildfires in California alone was \$149 billion.²¹ Another study that examined 2003 wildfires in San Diego, California, that burned more than 3,200 homes, estimated the fires had a total economic impact of \$2.5 billion.²² However, once again, these studies also fail to capture the long-term economic effects of lower home prices, higher insurance rates, and businesses and families that choose to leave the area.

Forest Management

The Importance of Forest Management

The need to increase the pace and scale of active forest management has never been more apparent. Despite the fearmongering of increasingly isolated radical environmentalists, there is a growing consensus among a broad array of stakeholders that recognizes the importance of better forest management.

Active forest management is not a radical idea, and it is indisputably supported by sound science.²³ Active forest management encourages sustained healthy growth, while removing much of the dangerous fuels buildup that lead to catastrophic wildfires that destroy lives, property and emit enormous amounts of carbon dioxide into the



A National Guard member that has been called on to serve as a wildland firefighter clearing debris in California.

Source: Bloomberg, 2021.

¹⁸ USA Facts, “Civilian deaths from fires”, <https://usafacts.org/data/topics/security-safety/fire-and-disaster/fires-and-firefighters/civilian-deaths-from-fires/>.

¹⁹ CBO, “Wildfires,” <https://www.cbo.gov/system/files?file=2022-06/57970-Wildfires.pdf>.

²⁰ *Id.*

²¹ *Id.*

²² *Id.*

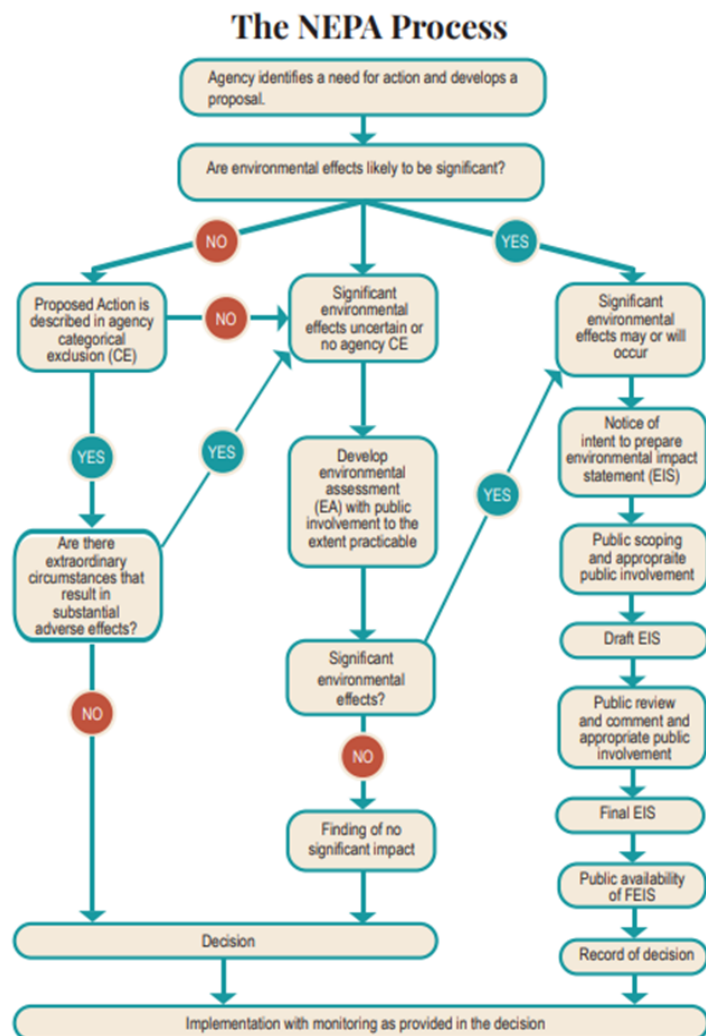
²³ American Forest Resource Council, “Solutions”, <https://amforest.org/solutions/>.

atmosphere.²⁴ Healthy forests utilizing active forest management are carbon sinks that sequester carbon while continuing to enable healthy new growth that is more resilient to natural threats.²⁵

Unfortunately, active forest management has been lacking on far too many Western forests. For decades, land management agencies have consistently fallen short of carrying out forest management activities at the pace and scale necessary to truly confront the wildfire crisis in a meaningful way. The USFS, for instance, has only been able to carry out 2 million acres of treatments annually in recent decades.²⁶ At this paltry rate, it will take the USFS more than 30 years to complete the necessary treatments to improve the health of its high-risk forests. In some instances, like the Sequoia groves in California, it would take USFS 52 years just to treat 19 high-priority groves if the agency worked at its standard pace, which amounts to only a few thousand acres of treatments.²⁷

Barriers to Forest Management

There are a multitude of complex and intertwined challenges that prevent increasing forest management activities at the pace and scale necessary to truly address the catastrophic wildfire crisis. While these challenges include agency funding and capacity, there is no greater barrier than the complexity of compliance with environmental laws and the frivolous lawsuits associated with laws like the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), the Endangered Species Act (ESA), and the National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA). According to a report from the Property and Environment Research Center (PERC), it takes the USFS an average of 3.6 years to begin mechanical treatments and 4.7 years to begin a prescribed burn under NEPA.²⁸ This timeline dramatically increases depending on the level of analysis conducted, with Environmental Impact Statements (EISs) taking 5.3 years and



Source: Healthy Forests, Healthy Communities, 2020.

²⁴ *Id.*

²⁵ *Id.*

²⁶ PERC, “Does Environmental Review Worsen the Wildfire Crisis”, Eric Edwards, Sara Sutherland, June 14, 2022, <https://perc.org/2022/06/14/does-environmental-review-worsen-the-wildfire-crisis/>.

²⁷ Information provided by USFS through technical assistance.

²⁸ PERC, “Does Environmental Review Worsen the Wildfire Crisis”, Eric Edwards, Sara Sutherland, June 14, 2022, <https://perc.org/2022/06/14/does-environmental-review-worsen-the-wildfire-crisis/>.

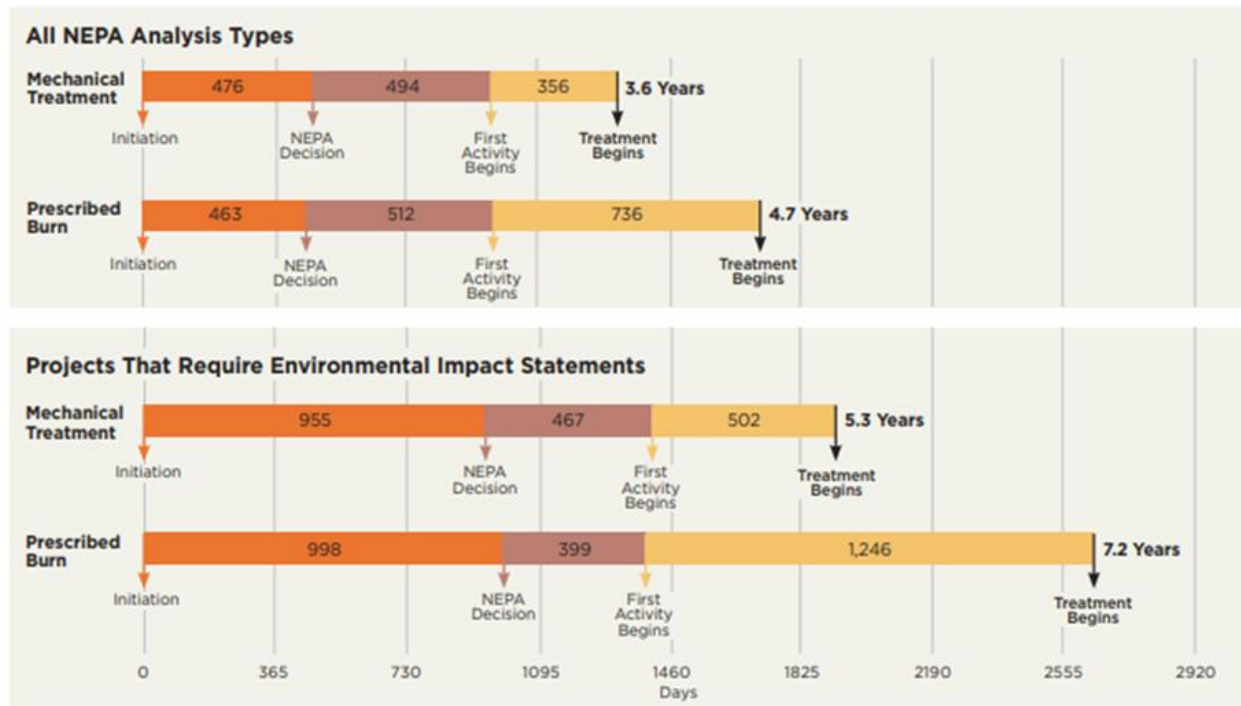
7.2 years for mechanical treatments and prescribed burns, respectively.²⁹

After analyzing more than 30,000 NEPA decisions made by USFS, PERC found that:

“The odds that a project with an [Environmental Assessment (EA)] or EIS designation will be completed quickly are low. While almost 85 percent of Forest Service [Categorical Exclusion (CE)] projects are approved within one year, this is true for only 42 percent of EAs and only about 20 percent of EISs. Because forest restoration projects are more likely, on average, to require an EA or EIS, they are also less likely to be completed quickly.”³⁰

Despite the fact that Congress legislatively enacted several forest management CEs for the agency, USFS often fails to use these streamlined authorities as they seek to “bullet proof” NEPA documents to avoid potential litigation threats. According to PERC, “between 2001 and 2008, the Forest Service was litigated more than any other federal agency under NEPA.”³¹ As a result, in 2020, USFS published more CEs in the Federal Register than all but two other agencies and had the lowest share of projects classified as CEs during the first term of the Obama-Biden administration among all agencies.³²

Average Time to Begin U.S. Forest Service Fuel Treatments



Source: PERC, 2022.

²⁹ *Id.*

³⁰ *Id.*

³¹ *Id.*

³² *Id.*

Recent Actions by the Biden Administration

On January 18, 2022, U.S. Department of Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack and USFS Chief Randy Moore announced a 10-year strategy to significantly increase fuels and forest health treatments, including 20 million acres of treatments on public lands and 30 million acres on other federal, state, tribal, and private lands.³³ The intent is to focus on areas identified as being at the highest risk of wildfire, based on community exposure firehazard maps, including the Pacific Northwest, the Sierra Nevada Range in California, the Front Range in Colorado, and in the Southwest.³⁴ On April 4, 2022, DOI released their own 5-year plan that focuses on fire prone Interior and Tribal lands, including rangelands and other ecosystems with high risk for fires.³⁵ A total of 3.4 million acres of DOI-administered lands with high to moderate wildfire hazard potential are within the high-risk firehazards identified in USDA's 10-Year Strategy.³⁶

| Fiscal Year | Acres Treated |
|-------------------------|---------------------|
| FY 2017 | 2.75 million |
| FY 2018 | 3.40 million |
| FY 2019 | 2.90 million |
| FY 2020 | 2.65 million |
| FY 2021 | 3.70 million |
| FY 2022 | 3.21 million |
| <i>FY 2023 (target)</i> | <i>3.80 million</i> |
| <i>FY 2024 (target)</i> | <i>4.20 million</i> |

Forest Service Hazardous Fuels Treatments
Source: Congressional Research Service, 2023.

Thus far, USFS has fallen short of the increased treatment goals they have set. In fiscal year (FY) 2022, USFS treated only treated 3.21 million acres, which was a 490,000 acre decrease from the acreage treated in FY 2021.³⁷ This is especially concerning considering the significant funding the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA) and the so-called Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) gave for hazardous fuels treatments. While these numbers are far from ideal, the Forest Service has at least reported these numbers to Congress, unlike DOI. The DOI has concerningly not provided updated hazardous fuels accomplishments for FY 2020 and FY 2022, which they are statutorily required to do annually.³⁸ This raises significant questions regarding DOI's transparency, and concerns that their wildfire goals are not being reached. As the recipients of billions of dollars of taxpayer funds from IIJA and IRA specifically for wildfire mitigation efforts, updated reports on their treatment numbers are a bare minimum expectation.

Wildfire Suppression

Lengthy and severe fire seasons have brought a renewed focus to federal fire suppression policies. As fire seasons have grown in both length and severity, so too have suppression costs. The 5-year average for USFS and DOI suppression costs is \$2.86 billion, and the two most expensive fire seasons on record each occurred in the last two years with \$4.38 billion spent in 2021 and \$3.4 billion spent just last year.³⁹ These costs have risen exponentially over time, as the

³³ USDA, "Secretary Vilsack Announces New 10 Year Strategy to Confront the Wildfire Crisis," January 18, 2022, <https://www.usda.gov/media/press-releases/2022/01/18/secretary-vilsack-announces-new-10-year-strategy-confront-wildfire>.

³⁴ *Id.*

³⁵ U.S. Department of the Interior, "Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act Wildfire Risk Five-Year Monitoring, Maintenance, and Treatment Plan," April 2022, https://www.doi.gov/sites/doi.gov/files/bil-5-year-wildfire-risk-mmt-plan.04.2022.owf_.final_.pdf.

³⁶ *Id.*

³⁷ Information provided to Committee Staff by the Congressional Research Service

³⁸ [43 USC 1748\(d\)](#).

³⁹ National Interagency Fire Center, "Suppression Costs", <https://www.nifc.gov/fire-information/statistics/suppression-costs>, (2022 suppression cost from FY 2024 Budget Request).

federal government only spent \$728 million on average annually fighting fires between 1985-1989.⁴⁰ This troubling trend is a sad reminder that in the absence of better forest management practices, there is no amount of suppression funding that will solve this wildfire crisis. Wildfire suppression costs are higher than they have ever been, yet wildfire seasons are more devastating than ever before.

In addition to rising costs, there have also been concerns about the agency's use of fire suppression tools. While back burns and prescribed burns are important and vital tools for land management agencies, when used inappropriately, they can have devastating consequences. For example, last year, the USFS was forced to put a nation-wide pause on prescribed fire operations in place to conduct a 90-day review of protocols, decision support tools and practices.⁴¹ This pause came after the news that the colossal 341,735-acre Hermits Peak Fire in New Mexico, which merged with the nearby Calf Canyon Fire, became the largest and most destructive fire in New Mexico's history.⁴² This fire began in the 223,333-acre Congressionally-designated Pecos Wilderness due to a poorly executed prescribed fire that escaped the project boundary.^{43 44} Concerningly, USFS greenlit the prescribed burn that sparked this fire despite ongoing severe drought conditions, several red flag warnings issued in the days leading up to the fire, and forecasts of 25 mile-per-hour winds and nine percent humidity on the day of the fire.⁴⁵ As part of the 90-day review, USFS released a report in April 2022 reviewing the Gallinas-Las Dispensas prescribed fire that ignited the Hermits Peak Fire.⁴⁶ Among the many issues highlighted in the report was the fact that USFS plans failed to recognize challenges posed by tree density and fuel loading and continuity outside the prescribed fire area.⁴⁷

Similarly, concerns have been raised about USFS's firefighting tactics compared to state agencies like CAL FIRE. After the Caldor Fire in California, the agency was criticized for "dismiss[ing] a half dozen CAL FIRE engines and crews, letting most of them go before their replacements arrived."⁴⁸ While agencies like CAL FIRE fight fires 24/7, USFS firefighters will typically not fight fires during the night, citing safety concerns. Furthermore, while CAL FIRE will aggressively suppress fires immediately, USFS officials sometimes let a fire burn in a tactic known as "wildfire with resource benefits."

⁴⁰ *Id.*

⁴¹ U.S. Department of Agriculture Forest Service, "Statement of Forest Service Chief Randy Moore Announcing Pause of Prescribed Fire Operations on National Forest System Lands," May 20, 2022, <https://www.fs.usda.gov/news/releases/statement-forest-service-chief-randy-moore-announcing-pause-prescribed-fire>.

⁴² InciWeb – Incident Information System, "Hermits Peak Fire," <https://inciweb.nwcg.gov/incident/8049/>. Information up-to-date as of July 15, 2022.

⁴³ InciWeb – Incident Information System, "Hermits Peak Fire," <https://inciweb.nwcg.gov/incident/8049/>. Accessed on July 13, 2022.

⁴⁴ The Washington Post, "New Mexico blaze is now largest wildfire in state history," Bryan Pietsch and Jason Samenow, May 17, 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2022/05/17/calf-canyon-hermits-peak-fire-new-mexico/>.

⁴⁵ Office of the Governor, Michelle Lujan Grisham, "Governor Lujan Grisham statement on cause of Calf Canyon Fire," May 27, 2022, <https://www.governor.state.nm.us/2022/05/27/governor-lujan-grisham-statement-on-cause-of-calf-canyon-fire/>. Source NM, "Forecasts showed 25 mph gusts on the day U.S. Forest Service ignited prescribed burn," Patrick Lohmann, May 10, 2022, <https://sourcennm.com/2022/05/10/forecasts-showed-25-mph-gusts-on-the-day-u-s-forest-service-ignited-prescribed-burn/>.

⁴⁶ USDA Forest Service Office of the Chief, "Gallinas-Las Dispensas Prescribed Fire Declared Wildfire Review Santa Fe National Forest, Southwestern Region," April 2022, <https://www.wildfirelessons.net/HigherLogic/System/DownloadDocumentFile.ashx?DocumentFileKey=b6bc7e71-ecca-a7b3-16fb-22b5d69855ae&forceDialog=0>.

⁴⁷ *Id.*

⁴⁸ Gabbert, Bill, "60 Minutes investigates the initial attack on Caldor Fire," Wildfire Today, October 3, 2022, <https://wildfiretoday.com/2022/10/03/60-minutes-investigates-the-initial-attack-on-caldor-fire/>.

Because restoring natural fire intervals is an important part of forest management, and centuries of fire exclusion did lead to overstocked forests, embracing fire as a resource management tool can be beneficial. However, this tool is only practical in areas that are not heavily overstocked or suffering from extreme drought conditions, where wildfires can quickly escape control and lead to devastating outcomes.

Wildland Firefighters

Increasingly severe wildfire seasons have also negatively affected the retention and recruitment of federal wildland firefighters. In addition to the mental and physical toll of fighting longer and hotter fire seasons, better employment opportunities for wildland firefighters at the state and private level have exacerbated this workforce challenge. This has compounded “chronic staffing shortages” that the USFS has experienced “for over a decade.”⁴⁹ The IIJA Act provided \$600 million to increase the base firefighter salary by \$20,000 (or 50 percent of their current salary, whichever is lesser).⁵⁰ Under the IIJA, \$480 million of this increase was for USFS wildland firefighters while \$120 million was for DOI.⁵¹ The agencies have indicated they will run out of this temporary funding by September 30, 2023.⁵²

To address this “firefighter pay cliff,” the USFS and DOI have submitted a proposal to permanently increase federal wildland firefighter pay.⁵³ Specifically, the budget creates a special base rate salary table along with a new premium pay category that will provide additional compensation for all hours a wildland firefighter is mobilized to an incident including during rest and sleeping hours (“portal-to-portal”).⁵⁴ An \$180 million increase is requested to account for the cost of this compensation proposal, as well as \$259 million for hiring an estimated 970 additional wildland firefighters and support personnel and \$69 million for cost of living increases.⁵⁵

While brave wildland firefighters deserve better pay, the budget request fails to identify any long-term funding sources for this pay increase. Further, the budget fails to pair these requested pay reforms with the forest management reforms that are necessary to protect wildland firefighter health and safety and reduce the severity of fire seasons into the future. Committee Republicans believe legislation that ensures proper pay and support for wildland firefighters must be done in a fiscally responsible manner and promote better forest management to ensure wildland firefighters are no longer sent into the unwinnable situations they’ve been asked to confront year after year.

Efforts to address firefighter retention, pay and benefits, while important, must not come at the expense of also addressing the land management decisions that have made wildfire years increasingly dangerous for our wildland firefighters. In the last decade alone, 154 wildland firefighters have tragically lost their lives in the line of duty.⁵⁶ Chris Mariano, a wildland

⁴⁹ Politico, “‘Pretty Brutal’: Hiring woes plague Biden effort to contain wildfire”, Ximena Bustillo, March 15, 2022,

⁵⁰ U.S. Department of Agriculture, U.S. Forest Service, “Update: Wildland firefighter pay, classification in infrastructure law”, <https://www.fs.usda.gov/inside-fs/delivering-mission/excel/wildland-firefighter-pay-classification-infrastructure-law>.

⁵¹ *Id.*

⁵² *Id.*

⁵³ U.S. Department of Agriculture, U.S. Forest Service, “Fiscal Year 2024 Budget Justification”, <https://www.fs.usda.gov/sites/default/files/FS-FY24-Congressional-Budget-Justification.pdf>.

⁵⁴ *Id.*

⁵⁵ *Id.*

⁵⁶ National Wildfire Coordinating Group, “Risk Management Committee Safety Grams”, <https://www.nwccg.gov/tags/rmc>.

firefighter who rose to the rank of squad boss of the elite Truckee hotshot crew, articulated the low morale felt by many of his fellow wildland firefighters in a sobering resignation letter he submitted in April 2023. In that letter, he wrote: “We are losing people at a terrifying rate at a time when wildfires burn longer, hotter, more frequent and with devastating severity.”⁵⁷ In a follow-up interview, Mr. Mariano further said that: “It almost feels as though we’re out there doing the very best we can, but it’s not enough....And that’s tough, to know that you’re giving everything you have, and communities are still being lost.”⁵⁸ Until the underlying conditions that are fueling the national wildfire crisis are addressed through significant increases in active forest management, no amount of pay or benefits will truly address the crises our heroic wildland firefighters are experiencing.



Source: Getty Images, 2020.

Republican Solutions

House Republicans are fully committed to innovative solutions that will expedite environmental analysis, reduce frivolous lawsuits, ensure wildland firefighters have the tools and support they need, improve State, Tribal and local collaboration, and promote landscape scale management to treat extremely high-risk areas and communities. To confront this crisis, committee Republicans have begun to advance some of these important solutions, including the Forest Information

⁵⁷ Chris Mariano, Forestry Technician USDA Forest Service, “Letter of Resignation” April 7, 2022, <https://ca-times.brightspotcdn.com/87/82/d7df46224d9fb207dafafe4ba33f/letter-of-resignation-002.pdf>.

⁵⁸ *Id.*

Reform (FIR) Act, Save Our Sequoias (SOS) Act, the Forest Protection and Wildland Firefighter Safety Act, and the Accurately Counting Risk Elimination Solutions (ACRES) Act.⁵⁹ The Committee will also soon be examining the FIRESHEDS Act, Proven Forest Management Act, the Treating Tribes and Counties as Good Neighbors Act, and the Direct Hire to Fight Fires Act with many more to come.⁶⁰ This historic crisis demands a serious response, and committee Republicans will be doing everything possible to offer one that provides the needed tools and policy to truly turn the tide and achieve lasting results.

⁵⁹ Forest Information Reform (FIR) Act, H.R. 200, 118th, <https://www.congress.gov/bill/118th-congress/house-bill/200?s=1&r=15>. Save Our Sequoias (SOS) Act, H.R. 2989, 118th, <https://www.congress.gov/bill/118th-congress/house-bill/2989>. Forest Protection and Wildland Firefighter Safety Act, H.R. 1586, <https://www.congress.gov/bill/118th-congress/house-bill/1586>. Accurately Counting Risk Elimination Solutions (ACRES) Act, H.R. 1567, 118th, <https://www.congress.gov/bill/118th-congress/house-bill/1567>.

⁶⁰ Forest Improvements through Research and Emergency Stewardship for Healthy Ecosystem Development and Sustainability (FIRESHEDS) Act, H.R. 4664, 117th, <https://www.congress.gov/bill/117th-congress/house-bill/4664/text?r=51&s=1>. Proven Forest Management Act of 2022, H.R. 188, 118th, <https://www.congress.gov/bill/118th-congress/house-bill/188?s=1&r=48>. Treating Tribes and Counties as Good Neighbors Act, H.R. 1450, 118th, <https://www.congress.gov/bill/118th-congress/house-bill/1450>. Direct Hire to Fight Fires Act, H.R. 1747, 117th, <https://www.congress.gov/bill/117th-congress/house-bill/1747/text?r=15&s=1>.