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FACTS

About H.R. 5541: the FLAME Bill

What the Bill Proposes:

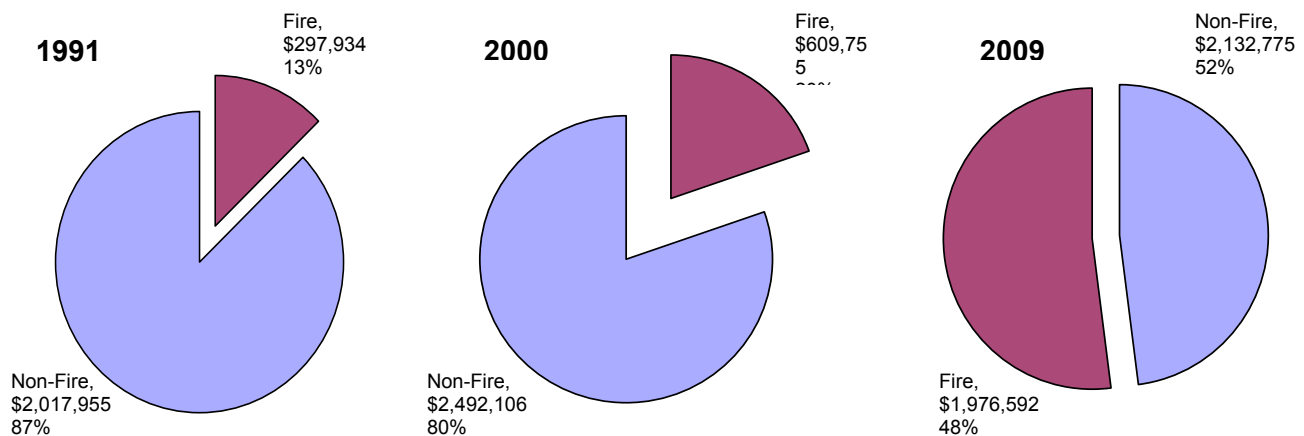
The Federal Land Assistance, Management, and Enhancement Act (FLAME Act) would establish a special federal fund to be used only for suppression of catastrophic, emergency wildland fires. Monies for the fund would be appropriated annually based on the average costs incurred by the federal land management agencies for emergency wildland suppression activities during the preceding five fiscal years. To utilize the fund, the appropriate Secretary would have to declare a wildland fire eligible for the fund, based on an evaluation of the size, severity, and threat of the individual wildland fire.

Why a Change is Necessary:

The cost of suppressing fires has grown enormously in recent years and projections indicate that this trend will only increase as a result of climate change, increased population growth in/near our fire-prone wildlands, and hazardous fuels build-up. The Forest Service has spent over \$1 billion per year in five of the last seven years to extinguish fires. Wildland fire management activities (the largest component of which is suppression) rose from 13 percent of the agency's budget in fiscal year 1991 to a staggering 48 percent projected for fiscal year 2009 (see pie charts below).

Because the Forest Service and Interior budgets have been essentially flat for the past several years, both federal agencies have had to "rob Peter to pay Paul" by borrowing funds from other agency accounts to cover these escalating costs, which has significantly reduced their ability to meet other important goals such as fire preparedness, community forestry, trail restoration, campground maintenance, managing habitat for wildlife, or road repairs to lessen sediment damage.

Effects of Wildland Fire Management on U.S. Forest Service Budget



Data Source: U.S. Forest Service

A Few Fires Drive Great Costs:

Only a small number of very large fires really drive the cost of suppression. In general, about one percent of wildfires burn 95 percent of all burned acres, consuming 85 percent of total suppression funds. The fund created by this proposed legislation will be used for these types of fires, leaving the agencies more freedom to focus on suppressing routine fires and other day-to-day fire management, like hazardous fuels treatment, restoration work, and FIREWISE education.

FIREWISE education provides homeowners and communities with tools to improve a home's fire resistance and modifies its surrounding landscape to reduce the spread and intensity of fires. Communities that are FIREWISE are key to reducing the suppression costs – and ultimately restoring functional and fire-resilient wildlands.

Emergency Fund One Part of Larger Solution:

The creative suppression funding mechanism proposed by this bill is one key component of a solution to addressing escalating suppression costs. However, two other components are also needed: (1) agency commitment to cost containment and (2) investment in 21st century fire management and forest restoration. Even with this fund in place, the agencies need to continue to be vigilant about containing fire costs to ensure they make the best use of taxpayer funds. Also key is an investment in 21st century fire management, including utilizing natural fire as a tool, where appropriate, and restoring forests' natural fire resiliency. Restoring this resiliency is vital if forests are to ever regain their natural fire balance so they are not as vulnerable to an ever-increasing number of catastrophic fires. A commitment to all three of these components is necessary to truly solve this problem.

The FLAME Act is sponsored by House Natural Resources Committee Chairman Rep. Nick Rahall II (D-W. Va.); Rep. Raul Grijalva (D-Ariz.), chairman of the National Parks, Forests and Public Lands Subcommittee of the House Natural Resources Committee; and Rep. Norm Dicks (D-Wash.), chairman of the Subcommittee on Interior, Environment and Related Agencies of the House Appropriations Committee.