

CRS Report for Congress

Received through the CRS Web

Wildfire Protection Funding

Ross W. Gorte
Specialist in Natural Resources Policy
Resources, Science, and Industry Division

Summary

The severe 2000 fire season prompted a significant rise in funding for wildfire protection that has been sustained; wildfire appropriations in FY2003 were nearly \$3.2 billion. Most of the funds (\$3.0 billion in FY2003) are to protect federal lands, with funds for reducing fuel loads, for equipment and training, for fighting fires, and for restoring burned sites. Federal funding (\$120 million in FY2003) also supports state efforts to protect nonfederal lands. Some wildfire funding (\$68 million in FY2003) is used for fire research, fire facilities, and programs to improve forest health. Congress is debating wildfire funding levels, with a growing focus on the apparently rising costs of fire suppression. This report will be updated periodically to reflect changes in wildfire appropriations.

Introduction

The 2000 and 2002 fire seasons were, by most standards, among the worst in the past 50 years, prompting substantial debate and proposals related to fire protection programs and funding. The severe 2000 fires led President Clinton to propose a new National Fire Plan, to increase funding for fire protection on federal, state, and private lands. Congress largely enacted this request, and has maintained higher wildfire funding. (See **Table 1**.)

The severe 2002 fire season led the Bush Administration to propose a Healthy Forests Initiative to expedite many of the existing procedures for reducing the fuel levels on federal lands. Following extensive congressional discussions, Congress enacted the Healthy Forests Restoration Act of 2003 (P.L. 108-148) to expedite fuel reduction on federal lands and to authorize other forest protection programs. (For more on wildfire legislation, see CRS Issue Brief IB10124, *Wildfire Protection in the 108th Congress*.)

This report briefly describes the three categories of federal programs for wildfire protection. One category is to protect the federal lands managed by the USDA Forest Service (FS) and the U.S. Department of the Interior (with wildfire programs coordinated by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM)). A second category assists state and local governments and communities in protecting state and private lands; these programs are used to reduce wildland fuels, to otherwise prepare for fire control, to contain and control

wildfires, and to respond after severe wildfires have burned. A third category of federal programs supports fire research, fire facilities, and improvements in forest health.

Table 1. Total Appropriations to Wildfire Accounts, FY1999-FY2005
(in millions of dollars)

	FY1999	FY2000	FY2001	FY2002	FY2003	FY2004 Enacted	FY2005 Request
Forest Service	722.4	1,008.0	1,882.8	1,560.3	2,290.0	1,947.0	^a 1,695.1
BLM	336.9	591.0	977.1	678.4	875.2	783.6	743.1
Total Wildfire	1,059.3	1,598.9	2,859.9	2,238.8	3,165.1	2,730.6	2,438.2

Note: the totals in this table are the sum of totals in the other tables, excluding the wildfire assistance programs funded through FS State & Private Forestry.

a. Includes \$266.2 million for fuel reduction proposed for the National Forest System instead of for Wildland Fire Management.

The tables in this report present data on funding for the three categories of federal fire programs. The FS and BLM use three fire appropriation accounts — preparedness, suppression operations, and other operations — to fund most federal fire programs. However, the agencies include different activities in the accounts (e.g., the BLM includes fire research and fire facility funding in the preparedness account, while the FS includes these in other operations) and the accounts change over time (e.g., the agencies split operations funding into suppression and other operations in 2001). Thus, the data, taken from the agency budget justifications for the National Fire Plan have been rearranged for the tables in this report to present consistent data and trends on the three categories of federal wildfire programs over a 6-year period.

Federal Lands

One category of wildfire management funding is for protecting federal lands. **Table 2** shows wildfire management appropriations for FY1999–FY2004 and the FY2005 budget request for protecting federal lands from wildfires. (Current information on fire management appropriations is contained in the annual CRS report on Interior and Related Agencies Appropriations.) The table includes the FY2005 request for fuel treatment funds, which the FS has proposed to fund under the National Forest System, rather than under Wildfire Management. The data in this table exclude funding for the other two categories of federal wildfire funding — for assistance to state and local governments, communities, and private landowners and for research, fire facility maintenance, and forest health improvement. The BLM includes funds for fire research and fire facilities under its Preparedness budget line item, and the FS has proposed to do likewise for FY2005; these funds have been excluded from the table. **Table 2** shows appropriations by fiscal year, with emergency funding identified for the year in which it was provided, rather than in the year it was spent. The agencies are authorized to borrow from other accounts for fire suppression, and emergency funds generally repay these borrowings.

**Table 2. Wildfire Management Funding for Federal Land Protection
FY1999-FY2005**
(\$ in millions)

	FY1999	FY2000	FY2001	FY2002	FY2003	FY2004 Enacted	FY2005 Request
Forest Service	722.4	1,008.0	1,702.4	1,415.6	2,162.7	1,833.2	1,612.9
<i>Fuel Reduction</i>	65.0	70.0	205.2	209.0	^a 236.6	^a 258.3	^b 266.2
<i>Preparedness</i> ^c	374.8	408.8	611.1	622.6	612.0	671.6	658.2
<i>Suppression</i>	180.6	139.2	319.3	255.3	418.0	597.1	685.4
<i>Emergency Funds</i>	102.0	390.0	425.1	266.0	^d 889.0	^d 299.2	0.0
<i>Site Rehabilitation</i>	^e 0.0	^e 0.0	141.7	62.7	7.1	6.9	3.0
BLM	327.9	577.7	929.1	640.6	845.0	753.6	717.7
<i>Fuel Reduction</i>	^f 33.8	47.0	195.0	186.2	185.6	183.9	209.3
<i>Preparedness</i> ^c	147.9	152.6	276.7	253.0	255.2	254.2	262.6
<i>Suppression</i>	96.2	158.1	153.1	127.4	159.3	192.9	221.5
<i>Emergency Funds</i>	50.0	200.0	199.6	54.0	225.0	98.4	0.0
<i>Site Rehabilitation</i>	^g 0.0	20.0	104.8	20.0	19.9	24.2	24.3
Total	1,050.3	1,585.6	2,631.5	2,056.3	3,007.6	2,586.8	2,330.6
<i>Fuel Reduction</i>	98.8	117.0	400.1	395.2	422.3	442.2	475.5
<i>Preparedness</i>	522.7	561.3	887.9	875.7	867.2	925.8	920.9
<i>Suppression</i>	276.8	297.3	472.4	382.7	577.3	790.0	906.9
<i>Emergency Funds</i>	152.0	590.0	624.6	320.0	1,114.0	397.6	0.0
<i>Site Rehabilitation</i>	0.0	20.0	246.6	82.7	26.9	31.1	27.3

Note: this table differs from the similar table in the CRS report on Interior Appropriations because of adjustments for the other two (non-federal land) categories of federal wildfire funding.

- a. Includes emergency appropriations — \$10.0 million in FY2003 and \$24.9 million in FY2004.
- b. Proposed to be funded from the National Forest System, instead of from Wildfire Management.
- c. Excludes joint fire science research and facilities construction and maintenance funding enacted within the BLM preparedness account and proposed for the FS preparedness account.
- d. Excludes emergency appropriations for fuels reduction and state assistance — \$30.0 million in FY2003 and \$49.7 million in FY2004.
- e. Unidentifiable amount funded from other budget line items, such as watershed improvement.
- f. Calculated at 26% of wildfire operations, as identified on page IV-36 of the FY2001 BLM budget justification.
- g. Unidentified amount included in suppression funding.

Table 2 shows that federal land fire management appropriations rose substantially in FY2001, have remained high, and have fluctuated, generally depending on the severity of the preceding fire season. In particular, the severe wildfire seasons in 2000 and 2002 led to higher appropriations in FY2001 and FY2003. Total fuel reduction funding — to reduce the fuel loads on federal lands — more than tripled in FY2001, and has since risen slowly for the FS while declining slightly for the BLM. Total funding for preparedness — equipment, training, baseline personnel, prevention, detection, etc. — also rose in FY2001, then was stable for the FS before rising again in FY2004, while declining and then stabilizing for the BLM. Total site rehabilitation and restoration funds under fire

management peaked in FY2001 to restore lands burned during the severe 2000 fire season. However, funds in other budget line items, such as watershed improvement, are also used to restore burned areas.

Total funding for fire suppression — fighting fires — rose substantially for the BLM in FY2000 and for the FS in FY2001 and for both agencies in FY2004. It is proposed to increase further in FY2005. Emergency fire funding, as contingency appropriations or emergency supplemental appropriations, has fluctuated widely for both agencies since FY1999, but with an overall increase. For FY2005, the Bush Administration has again proposed no contingency funding, but has requested more fire suppression funding in an attempt to make emergency funding unnecessary. Whether this funding will be sufficient depends on the severity of the 2004 fire season.

Some Members of Congress and interest groups have expressed concern about whether the initial appropriations for fire fighting are adequate, as the emergency funding exceeded \$1 billion in FY2003. The concern includes the effects of borrowing to pay fire fighting on the other activities from which funds were borrowed. In FY2003, the FS borrowed from many accounts, including a large portion from several, such as 75% of land acquisition funds, 66% of funding for forest health activities on federal lands, and 45% of restoration and rehabilitation funds.¹ More than 90% of the borrowings were repaid to most accounts, but only 41% of the \$125 million borrowed from National Forest System accounts (including restoration and rehabilitation funds) was repaid. In addition, the FS borrowed funds from several of its trust funds and special accounts — more than the expected program level for FY2003 for several accounts (which can occur because some accounts have balances that fund several years of activity). More than 99% of these borrowings were repaid, *except* for funds borrowed from the Forest Land Enhancement Program (FLEP, to assist private landowners conduct forestry activities to enhance their lands); the FS borrowed \$50 million from FLEP, and less than \$10 million was repaid. Proponents of the various FS (and BLM) programs are concerned that the borrowings significantly delay planned activities and that less than full repayment alters the budget priorities originally established by the Appropriations Committees. Others, however, argue that borrowing is necessary because of the emergency nature and high priority of fire fighting and the Appropriations Committees determine which accounts are repaid.

Assistance for Nonfederal Lands

The federal government, primarily through the FS, has a second group of programs to provide assistance to states, local governments, and communities to protect nonfederal (both government and private) lands.² Except for lands protected under cooperative agreement, states are responsible for fire protection of nonfederal lands.

Most FS fire protection assistance programs are funded under the agency's State and Private Forestry (S&PF) branch. State fire assistance provides financial and technical help for fire prevention, fire control, and prescribed fire use by state foresters, and through

¹ These data are from *USDA Forest Service FY2005 Budget Justification*, pp. 15-33–15-35. Comparable data for the BLM were not included in its budget justification.

² For more details on these programs, see CRS Report RL31065, *Forestry Assistance Programs*, by Ross W. Gorte.

them, to other agencies and organizations. In cooperation with the Administrator of General Services (GSA), the FS is encouraged to transfer “excess personal property” (equipment) from federal agencies to state and local firefighting forces. The FS also provides assistance directly to volunteer fire departments. Since FY2001, some funding for fire assistance programs has come through wildfire appropriations (rather than S&PF). Finally, the 2002 Farm Bill (P.L. 107-171) created a new community fire protection program to authorize the FS to act on nonfederal lands (with the consent of landowners) to assist in protecting structures and communities from wildfires.

Wildfire funds have also been provided for economic assistance. Since FY2001, FS wildfire funds have been added to the S&PF Economic Action Program (EAP) that provides training for individuals and loans to existing or new ventures for diversifying local economies. The EAP has received some funding through wildfire appropriations since FY2001. In addition, in FY2001, the FS received wildfire funds to aid communities recovering from the severe fires in 2000. The BLM has received continued funding to assist rural areas affected by wildfires since FY2001.

Funding for these assistance programs is shown in **Table 3**. Funds in the wildfire account are shown first, with funds for the FS S&PF cooperative fire programs — state and volunteer assistance — shown in the bottom portion of the table. Total funds for assistance in protecting nonfederal lands from wildfire were increased substantially in FY2001, from \$27.2 million (all FS S&PF funds) to \$148.5 million. Funding dropped about 20% in FY2002 (to \$117.5 million) and has fluctuated since. Wildfire funds for these programs were enacted for the first time in FY2001, and have been maintained for FS state and volunteer assistance programs and BLM rural assistance. However, FS community assistance to aid communities affected by fires in the summer of 2000 was a one-time appropriation, and FS EAP funds have declined, possibly in response to the President’s proposals in FY2003, FY2004, and FY2005 to terminate the program.

Table 3. Federal Wildfire Management Funding to Assist in Protecting Nonfederal Lands, FY1999-FY2005
(\$ in millions)

	FY1999	FY2000	FY2001	FY2002	FY2003	FY2004 Enacted	FY2005 Request
FS, Wildfire Mgmt.	0.0	0.0	108.5	77.1	79.4	59.2	42.2
<i>State Fire Assistance</i>	0.0	0.0	52.9	56.4	^a 66.3	51.1	34.2
<i>Volunteer Fire Asst.</i>	0.0	0.0	8.3	8.3	8.2	8.1	8.0
<i>Economic Action</i>	0.0	0.0	12.5	12.5	5.0	0.0	0.0
<i>Community Assistance</i>	0.0	0.0	34.9	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
BLM	0.0	0.0	10.0	10.0	9.9	9.9	5.0
<i>Rural Assistance</i>	0.0	0.0	10.0	10.0	9.9	9.9	5.0
Total Wildfire Funds	0.0	0.0	118.5	87.1	89.3	69.1	47.2
Forest Service, S&PF	22.9	27.2	29.9	30.4	30.5	63.3	30.1
<i>State Fire Assistance</i>	20.9	23.9	24.9	25.3	25.5	^a 58.2	25.1
<i>Volunteer Fire Asst.</i>	2.0	3.2	5.0	5.1	5.0	5.0	5.0
Total Assistance	22.9	27.2	148.5	117.5	119.8	132.4	77.3

a. Includes emergency appropriations — \$20.0 million in FY2003 and \$24.9 million in FY2004.

Other Fire Funding

A third category of wildfire appropriations includes money for: fire research, fire facility construction and maintenance, and forest health management. Wildfire funds for fire research have been enacted for both the BLM and the FS for the Joint Fire Science program. BLM's appropriations, in the wildfire preparedness budget line item, were \$4 million annually for FY1999 and FY2000, and about \$8 million annually since. FS funds for Joint Fire Science have been about \$8 million annually since FY2002 (and previously included an unidentified portion of FS research funds), and are proposed to become part of Fire Preparedness in FY2005. The FS also has been appropriated wildfire funds for fire research and development beginning in FY2001. These funds supplement monies in the FS research account; however, because the portion of funds in the FS research account used for fire research cannot be determined, total FS fire research funding is unknown.

Both the BLM and the FS have received funds to improve deteriorating fire facilities. The BLM has long used a portion of its fire preparedness funds for "deferred maintenance and capital improvements" (i.e., for fire facilities), but the level has fluctuated. FS wildfire funds for fire facilities declined after the initial \$43.9 million in FY2001 and were zeroed out in FY2004. The FS also funds building and maintaining fire facilities from its capital construction and maintenance account, but the portion used for fire facilities is unknown.

Finally, the FS has received wildfire funds for forest health management. This S&PF program focuses on assessing and controlling insect and disease infestations on federal and cooperative (i.e., nonfederal) lands, but includes efforts to control other invasive species, as well. In FY2001 and FY2002, the FS received nearly \$12 million annually in wildfire appropriations for forest health management, and funds have increased since.

Table 4. Other Fire Management Appropriations, FY1999-FY2004
(\$ in millions)

	FY1999	FY2000	FY2001	FY2002	FY2003	FY2004 Enacted	FY2005 Request
Forest Service, Fire	0.0	0.0	71.8	67.6	47.9	54.6	40.0
<i>Joint Fire Science</i>	0.0	0.0	0.0	8.0	7.9	7.9	8.0
<i>Fire research</i>	0.0	0.0	16.0	27.3	21.3	22.0	19.4
<i>Fire facilities</i>	0.0	0.0	43.9	20.4	1.8	0.0	0.0
<i>Forest health</i>	0.0	0.0	12.0	12.0	16.8	24.7	12.7
BLM	9.0	13.3	38.0	27.8	20.2	20.1	20.4
<i>Joint Fire Science</i>	4.0	4.0	8.0	8.0	7.9	7.9	8.0
<i>Fire facilities</i>	5.0	9.3	30.0	19.8	12.3	12.2	12.4
Total	9.0	13.3	109.8	95.4	68.1	74.7	60.4