

Senators urge Congress to reform budgeting for wildfire suppression

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Senators on both sides of the aisle have urged Congress to reform the nation's budgeting for wildfire suppression, which currently requires the U.S. Forest Service (USFS) to use funds from fire prevention and non-fire programs when fire suppression funding runs dry. At a field hearing in Seattle, Washington on August 28, Senators Maria Cantwell (D-WA) and John Barrasso (R-WY) highlighted the importance of maintaining wildfire prevention programs, such as reducing excessive fuel loads, that will diminish the size and severity of future fires. Earlier in the month, a bipartisan group of 11 Western senators pledged to reform wildfire budgeting.

Bills have been introduced that would eliminate "fire borrowing," but Democrats and Republicans have disagreed over the mechanics of a solution. Some senators want the USFS budget to contain all wildfire suppression funding, while others would supplement catastrophic fire seasons with funding from different sources. Still others would make wildfire suppression funding contingent upon hazardous fuels removal, which would reduce long-term costs.

These discussions have occurred amidst the release of a USFS report on the impact of fire borrowing on non-fire programs and USFS Chief Tom Tidwell ordering a freeze in non-fire spending to ensure that funds are available to cope with a catastrophic 2015 wildfire season that has burned more than 7.5 million acres across the Western U.S.

Source: E&E News, Senate Energy and Natural Resources
