

Testimony of Rep. Norm Dicks
Chairman, Interior & Environment Appropriations Subcommittee
to the House Natural Resources Committee
Hearing on Wildland Fire Suppression Funds
April 10, 2008

Thank you Mr. Chairman. I appreciate this committee's efforts to take a collaborative approach to help the nation deal with the issue of wildfire suppression funding. I also want to thank my friend Mr. Goodlatte and Chairman Peterson of the Agriculture Committee for their similar concerns. I stand ready to continue to work with both Committees and our colleagues in the Senate to move this issue forward.

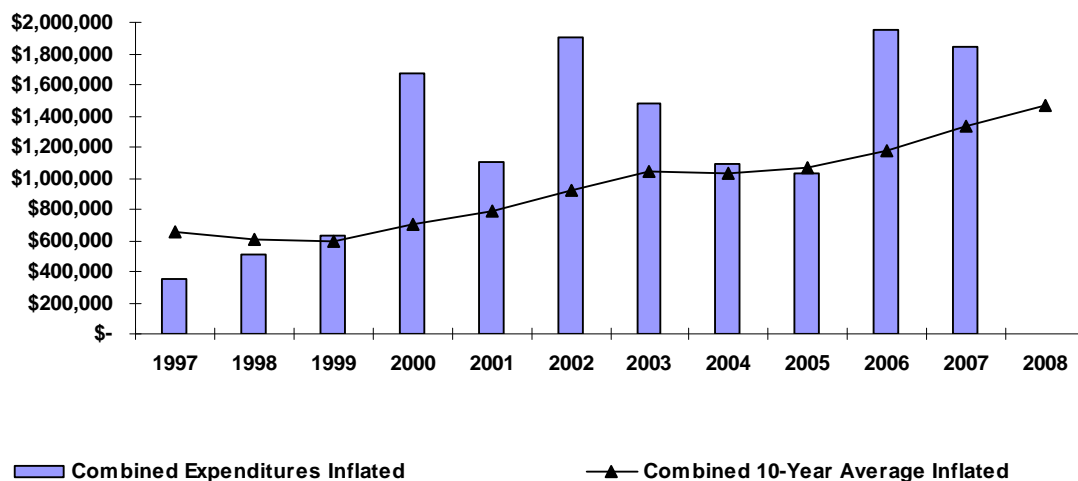
I support the FLAME act because it is a meaningful step to clarify and stabilize the funding situation for emergency wildfire suppression activities of the Forest Service and the Department of the Interior. I also appreciate aspects of the bill authored by the Agriculture Committee, so I hope there will be continued dialogue to bring forth a unified House bill.

An advantage of the approach taken in the FLAME act is the common rules and structures that would be established for our firefighting agencies which are housed in different departments. I think that the FLAME act will help the Congress and future administrations provide greater stability, clarity, and oversight of wildfire suppression activities. This approach also will help control disruptions which occurred during previous Congresses when the Administration and the Congress were unwilling to provide timely and adequate resources for emergency firefighting.

BACKGROUND

Let me take a minute and give the Committee some background on the wildfire suppression funding situation we face. As you all know, the cost of suppressing wildfires has grown dramatically in recent years, but so have the impacts of wildfire, including loss of lives, property, and natural resources. It seems like we set new records every year for costs and damage. We did not have a billion dollar suppression expense year until 1994, but now that happens every year and recently we have been close to \$2 billion per year.

Federal 10-Year Suppression Average
(Dollars in Thousands)



There are a lot of reasons for the increasing wildfire problem. People seem to like to use this problem as support for their own favorite policies. The extremists sometimes say this funding problem is proof that we should log everything or, on the other side, we should let all fires burn. This is a serious problem and those are not the right approaches. Much of the wildfire suppression costs come from a few, very large fires. As discussed in a recent hearing of my Subcommittee, fire suppression costs will continue to be a large challenge for at least 4 reasons.

First, there has been a significant change in climate as it affects wildfires. We are seeing much longer fire seasons, more drought, more extreme forest pest outbreaks, and more extreme weather patterns which can influence fire starts and the extent of large wildfires.

Second, many areas, especially in the arid west, have large fuel loads that have accumulated. This is due to past successful fire suppression which prevented the natural occurrence of small fires which would reduce understory and prevent larger canopy fires. In addition, forestry activities have been declining, which has allowed increased tree density and fuel loads.

Third, we have had large demographic changes in and near our wildlands. The increasing population and the suburbanization of our wildlands make it more and more urgent to control wildfires. There have been, and there probably will continue to be, dramatic increases in population densities, especially near many of our Federal lands.

Fourth, the cost of operations, fuel, and staffing and a reduced tolerance by our society for wildfires have increased costs. While the Congress and the agencies have stressed cost containment and increased accountability, we find that fire suppression costs still rise.

The Appropriations Committee has been engaged on a number of fronts to try to deal with the rising suppression expenses. We have required detailed cost containment studies and reports and directed careful review of all large fire events. We had the National Academy of Public Administration do an entire series of program evaluations. Many useful savings recommendations were made, and many implemented. We continue to rely on the GAO to help with program evaluations and performance recommendations.

All of these program reviews typically end with recommendations that are consistent with continued support for the four main elements of the National Fire Plan presented in 2000:

1. There is continued need for adequate, professional preparedness staffing and funding;
2. Fuels reduction efforts are vital;
3. Rehabilitation of burned areas and fire-adapted ecosystems is needed, and
4. Cooperative assistance with states and communities.

Current Appropriations situation:

Let me take a minute to review the situation we currently face regarding wildfire suppression funding. The extreme fires have led to fire suppression costs being taken from base operating budgets, especially at the Forest Service. In our appropriations process, the CBO scores our bill for outlays at the average suppression expenditures for the past 10 years, inflated, including all emergency costs. Back in fiscal year 1999 this amount was \$584 million for both departments. Now, for fiscal year 2009, it has climbed to \$1.33 billion. This means that constrained budgets are made drastically worse by the suppression funds, and the constraint has made it extremely difficult to fund basic land management. To compound the problem, the President's budget reduces fire preparedness at the Forest Service by \$77 million, or 12%. This means that the OMB is reducing the ability of the Forest Service to contain fires while they are still small. We all know that if we are going to limit the number of big fire events and their

extreme costs, we must have staff and equipment to put fires out before they get big. These are the kind of administrative problems that the current funding situation has spawned.

Another problem has been borrowing non-fire funds to cover unanticipated fire emergency costs. For many years we have allowed non-fire operating funds to be used during fire emergencies, thus decreasing pressure to fund these emergencies with supplemental appropriations. We will evaluate this borrowing authority and see if it should be limited. Since I have been chairman we have diligently provided emergency funding to promptly pay back borrowed funds, and this has helped tremendously.

COMMENTS ON HR 5541, FLAME ACT, RAHALL-GRIJALVA-DICKS

The FLAME Act will provide a consistent funding and administrative structure, common to both the Forest Service and the Interior Department, to partition large fire suppression costs from basic fire operations. This helps provide clarity and consistency. It has the advantage of continued appropriation oversight of spending on large fires. I do have a concern that the current wording in the bill transfers any carry-over from the regular, routine suppression account to the FLAME account. I think that if we are fortunate to have a low cost fire year, as happened in FY 2004 and 2005, that we should keep the carry-over to support future year suppression needs, which are sure to once again be large.

Goodlatte and Peterson, Agriculture committee bill HR 5648

I also appreciate the good work of my colleagues on the Agriculture committee. Their bill also has useful items. I think we can work together to join more of these features to the FLAME act. I do have a concern, as mentioned before, about the use of carryover suppression funds for non-fire activities. HR 5648 allows the use of carry-over fire suppression funds for reforestation of burned areas. As I mentioned before, I think that we need to carry-over any suppression funds for the next year, which may be expensive. I am very much in favor of burned area rehabilitation and reforestation, but these important land management activities should be evaluated and funded under normal situations and not be dependent on carry-over from low cost fire years. I also am concerned that the bill legislates 'stratified cost index', a measure which is still in development, as a key criterion. Lastly, I note that the bill limits the use of the entire new catastrophic fund to those years where the President makes a budget request not less than the 10 year average of expenditures. Our use of appropriated funding should not rely on a specific item in a Presidential budget request.

CONCLUSION

Thank you for inviting me here today. I am ready to continue working together to produce a bill, and work with the Senate to get this passed this year. We will continue to work with the States and communities, and carefully watch the agencies to provide accountability.