

May 6, 2025

The Honorable Lisa Murkowski
Chair, Appropriations Subcommittee on
Interior Environment and Related Agencies
US Senate
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Mike Simpson
Chair, Appropriations Subcommittee on Interior,
Interior, Environment and Related Agencies
US House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Jeff Merkley
Ranking Member, Appropriations
Subcommittee on Interior, Environment
and Related Agencies
US Senate
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Chellie Pingree
Ranking Member, Appropriations
Subcommittee on Interior, Environment
and Related Agencies
US House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Chairwoman Murkowski, Chairman Simpson, and Ranking Members Merkley and Pingree:

As you begin work for Fiscal Year (FY) 2026, we respectfully request increased funding to help state and local agencies fight wildfires across the nation. To fully and adequately fight fires and keep our homes and communities safe, the undersigned organizations request a total of **\$85 million for the State Fire Assistance (SFA) Program and \$25 million for the Volunteer Fire Assistance (VFA) Program for FY 2026**. We thank the Committees for providing increases for both programs in your FY 2025 marks and urge the continued growth in resources commensurate with heightened needs on the ground.

America's forests and forest-dependent communities are at risk from outbreaks of pests and pathogens, persistent drought, and the buildup of hazardous fuels. Urbanization and development patterns are placing more homes and communities near fire-prone landscapes. Due to these and other factors, the United States has been experiencing a crisis over the last two decades. Wildfires have been growing in unprecedented size, complexity, and destructivity, and are threatening parts of the nation not historically impacted by fire. Prior to 2003, our forests and communities experienced an average of 2.8 million acres burning annually. Since 2004, however, wildfires have annually burned over 7.2 million acres on average, with historic highs in the numbers of acres burned in 2015, 2017, and 2020. As of today, we have already seen nearly 1 million acres burned across the country in 2025 with the majority of our fire year, including the western fire season, still ahead of us.

Congress must continue to fund the work of fighting fires on the ground. The VFA and SFA programs are essential wildfire risk reduction and protection programs within the USDA Forest Service's (Forest Service) State, Private, and Tribal Forestry (SP&TF) program area. The important work accomplished through SFA and VFA helps decrease total federal emergency wildland fire suppression costs and reduces the threat to communities from fire on public and private lands.

SFA is an important federal mechanism for assisting states and local fire departments in responding to wildland fires and in conducting land management activities that mitigate fire risk on non-federal lands. The program helps train state and local emergency responders who are usually first to arrive at a wildland fire incident, and the program is critical to equip them with the tools, training and resources they need to put wildland fires out efficiently and safely. For example, in FY 2024, the

SFA program provided over \$14 million in funding for hazardous fuels treatments, which was used by states and their partners to directly or indirectly treat over 520,000 acres, either with prescribed fire or mechanically. Another \$2.6 million in SFA assistance was provided to develop 834 community wildfire plans and assessments. SFA also provided almost \$9 million in equipment, and over \$3.4 million to conduct more than 4,400 wildfire prevention projects. In total, SFA helped over 8,800 communities manage their wildfire risk, and trained 26,200 wildland firefighters in FY 2024 alone.

The localized support provided by SFA is crucial because approximately 80 percent of wildland fires burn within state and local fire department jurisdictions. Even with wildland fires on federal lands, SFA-supported crews and apparatus are often the first to arrive for initial attack. Increases in SFA funding will help expand wildland fire preparedness and mitigation capacity for state forestry agencies. Attacking fires when they are small is the key to reducing fatalities, injuries, loss of homes and cutting federal firefighting costs. The need for increased funding for fire suppression on federal lands has broad support. The need to increase fire suppression funding for state and private lands - where many fires that impact federal lands begin - is just as urgent. **With that in mind, in FY 2026, we urge you to provide no less than \$85 million for the State Fire Assistance program.**

The VFA program provides support to volunteer fire departments protecting communities with populations of 10,000 or fewer residents. National needs assessment survey data shows that fire departments protecting smaller communities tend to lack adequate resources and rely more on volunteer staffing compared to departments protecting communities with larger populations. Fire departments that regularly respond to wildland fires face particularly acute resource challenges as the equipment, training, and apparatus used to fight wildland fire is almost entirely different from that used to fight structure fires. The VFA program helps bridge these resource gaps for thousands of fire departments across the country.

VFA ensures adequate capacity to respond to wildland fires, reducing the risk to communities, people, homes and property, and firefighters. This capacity is critical because these state and local resources are the first responders to more than 80 percent of wildland fires – whether on state, federal or private lands. According to the Forest Service, during FY 2024, the VFA program provided aid to 10,454 rural communities, trained 8,542 firefighters, expanded or organized 25 fire departments, and provided 4,700 grants totaling over \$17 million to these departments for the purchasing, rehabilitating, or maintaining of critical equipment. **In FY 2026, we urge you to provide no less than \$25 million for the Volunteer Fire Assistance Program.**

We appreciate the difficult task the Committee faces in the current budget climate. It is important to remember, however, that these vital programs safeguard human life, habitat, and property, and reduce the overall cost of wildland fire management. Accordingly, we urge you to continue to bolster support for these critical programs.

Thank you for your consideration of this important request.

Sincerely,

Congressional Fire Services Institute
Forest Stewards Guild
International Association of Fire Chiefs
International Code Council

National Association of State Fire Marshals
National Association of State Foresters
National Volunteer Fire Council
National Wild Turkey Federation

Rural Voices for Conservation Coalition
Tall Timbers
The Nature Conservancy
University of Washington