

Letter: Governors call for end to 'fire borrowing'

Publisher's note: The following letter was sent Nov. 15, 2016, to Rep. Paul Ryan, Rep. Nancy Pelosi, Sen. Mitch McConnell and Sen. Harry Reid from governors in the West.

Dear Sen. McConnell and Reid, and Rep. Ryan and Pelosi:

Western governors wish to once again express support for congressional efforts to end the so-called "fire borrowing" practice employed by the U.S. Forest Service (USFS) and the Department of the Interior to fund wildfire suppression activities. We strongly urge Congress to resolve this enduring issue as among its highest priorities when it returns to complete the business of the 114th Congress.

Responsible management of federal lands is a significant concern for western governors. Western states include more than 75 percent of our national forest and grassland system. These public lands serve as critical economic drivers, and they provide numerous conservation benefits, water supply, and recreational opportunities for Western communities and the nation.

States have a particular interest in improving the active management of federal forest lands. State governments possess trust authority over water, wildlife and forest resources, along with primary authority and expertise to protect community health and safety. Poorly managed forests can create significant problems for the landscapes and communities of the West, including: negative effects on air quality and public health, degradation of rivers and streams and associated water

quality, including drinking water; reduced forage for domestic livestock; impaired habitats for wildlife and fish; and the loss of forest products and associated jobs. This also has impacts on local fire protection districts, which often bear the brunt of costs associated with first response to wildfire, and state budgets that are also burdened by the costs of wildfire response.

Our views are summarized in Western Governors' Association (WGA) Policy Resolution 2016-01, National Forest and Rangeland Management. This issue is also the subject of the current WGA Chairman's Initiative. The initiative is examining many of the management practices of federal, state and private landowners to assess their effectiveness and evaluate the need for regulatory and/or statutory changes to improve them.

Restoration and wildfire mitigation work in western forests has been negatively affected by fire borrowing for years. We recognize that Congress is responsible for maintaining process controls to ensure a responsible use of taxpayer dollars. Further, western governors understand the budgetary challenges posed by wildfire funding and the need for agency accountability.

We also assert that changes are needed, as the current funding situation has allowed severe wildfires to burn through crippling amounts of the very funds that should instead be used to prevent and reduce wildfire impacts, costs, and safety risks to firefighters and the public. This represents an unacceptable set of outcomes for taxpayers and at-risk communities, and does not reflect responsible stewardship of federal land.

Western governors are on record as strong supporters of ending the practice of fire borrowing. Congress should pass legislation to fund federal wildfires off-budget (as many states already do), and ensure the USFS budget for forest restoration, recreation, road maintenance, hazardous fuels

reduction, funding to states to treat Wildland-Urban Interface areas, insect and disease response activities, and wildlife/watershed protection is fully restored. We are hopeful that you find an avenue to accomplish this result before the adjournment of the 114th Congress.

Sincerely,

Steve Bullock, governor of Montana

Dennis Daugaard, governor of South Dakota