

U.S. Senate Seeks to Address Forest Management, Fire Borrowing in Forestry Hearing

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As the United States braces for what many expect to be another intense wildfire season, the U.S. Senate finds itself at odds with the White House over the bipartisan draft [Wildfire Budgeting, Response, and Forest Management Act of 2016](#). The bill, released on May 25, would fund the federal government's wildfire mitigation and prevention efforts and take steps to end the practice of "fire borrowing." In July of 2015 the House passed legislation to address similar issues, the Resilient Federal Forests Act of 2015 ([H.R. 2647](#)), which [NACo supported](#). The two chambers will need to reconcile the many differences between their versions should the Senate bill pass.



The health of our federal forests has a direct effect on the public health, safety and economic wellbeing of counties across the United States. Not only do unhealthy forests increase community wildfire risk, they can also negatively impact a community's access to clean water and air, threaten wildlife habitats and reduce county opportunities for forest related tourism and job creation. NACo has consistently advocated for comprehensive legislation that improves active forest management, promotes proactive fuel reduction activities on federal lands and ends fire borrowing, which occurs when the U.S. Forest Service exhausts its fire suppression appropriations and must tap into other programs, such as those supporting hazardous fuels reduction, for funding. Fire borrowing negatively impacts the ability of the federal government to undertake important forest health and fire prevention activities and places the safety of forest communities at risk.

The Senate's bill proposes several actions to promote active forest management and protect communities through wildfire risk reduction, including:

- Address the untenable practice of fire borrowing, which has had a significant negative impact on the ability of federal land managers to actively manage our nation's forests;
- Provide funding flexibility to reinvest unused fire suppression dollars into reducing wildfire risks in at-risk communities;
- Accelerate hazardous fuels reduction work in the areas at greatest risk for catastrophic wildfire;
- Implement new technologies that will provide new tools and capabilities to combat wildfire and ensure that existing tools and technologies are certified and available when they are needed most; and
- Invest over \$500 million in communities with the greatest fire risk to expand Firewise and other community-centered programs, develop and implement community wildfire protection plans, carry out wildfire risk assessments and implement cross-jurisdictional hazardous fuels reduction projects.

In order to curb fire borrowing, the legislation would require Congress to appropriate enough funds to cover the 10-year average annual cost of fire suppression and allow transfers of other limited funds only after all of the appropriated funds have been exhausted. The bill would also allow excess firefighting

appropriations in a given year to be used for prevention efforts to reduce the threat of wildfires, protect watersheds and reduce future suppression costs.

The White House has expressed concerns over this funding strategy, stating that they would prefer to allocate more funding for restoration and risk reduction programs. At a hearing before the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee to discuss the bill, USDA Under Secretary for Natural Resources Robert Bonnie put forth the White House's proposal, which calls on Congress to appropriate 70 percent of the 10-year average for wildfire suppression while allocating the remaining 30 percent for other costs such as restoration and watershed improvements. According to the White House, this would ensure that more resources are preserved for hazardous fuels reduction, controlled burns and other preemptive measures that reduce risk and can help mitigate potential damage.

NACo submitted comments to the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee on the draft bill, encouraging them to work expeditiously to pass comprehensive forest health and wildfire suppression legislation in the Senate and work with the House to enact a final compromise. NACo's letter also reiterated the close relationship between forest management and the Secure Rural Schools Program (SRS) and encouraged the Senate to include language in a final bill that would reauthorize SRS for FY 2016 and beyond. Moving forward, counties will continue to work closely with Congress to enact meaningful forest management and fire borrowing reforms to ensure the long-term viability of federal forests and forest counties.

Resources:

- March 9, 2016 Blog Post: [Wildfire Funding Gaining Support in U.S. Senate](#)
- [NACo Letter to Senate Energy & Natural Resources Committee Leaders](#) on Wildfire Funding and Forest Health
- [Draft Text](#) of the Wildfire Budgeting, Response, and Forest Management Act

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