

CRS Report for Congress

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Wildfire Protection Funding

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Summary

Recent severe fire seasons have prompted a significant rise in funding for wildfire protection; wildfire appropriations in FY2006 were more than \$2.5 billion. Most of the funds (\$2.4 billion in FY2006) are to protect federal lands, with funds for reducing fuel loads, for equipment and training, for fighting fires, and for restoring burned sites. Federal funding (\$102 million in FY2006) also supports state efforts to protect nonfederal lands. Some wildfire funding (\$69 million in FY2006) is used for fire research, fire facilities, and programs to improve forest health. Congress continues to debate wildfire funding levels, with a growing focus on the cost of wildfire suppression. This report will be updated annually to reflect changes in wildfire funding.

Recent severe fire seasons have prompted substantial debate and proposals related to fire protection programs and funding. The severe 2000 fires led President Clinton to propose a new National Fire Plan, to increase funding to protect federal, state, and private lands. Congress largely enacted this request, and has maintained higher wildfire funding. (See **Table 1**.)

The severe 2002 fire season led the Bush Administration to propose a Healthy Forests Initiative to expedite procedures for reducing the fuel levels on federal lands. Following extensive congressional discussions, Congress enacted the Healthy Forests Restoration Act of 2003 (P.L. 108-148) to expedite fuel reduction on federal lands and to authorize other forest protection programs. (For more on wildfire legislation, see CRS Report RS22024, *Wildfire Protection in the 108th Congress*, by Ross W. Gorte.)

This report briefly describes the three categories of federal programs for wildfire protection. One is to protect the federal lands managed by the USDA Forest Service (FS) and the U.S. Department of the Interior (with wildfire programs coordinated by the Bureau of Land Management [BLM]). A second category assists state and local governments and communities in protecting nonfederal lands; these programs are used to reduce wildland fuels, to otherwise prepare for fire control, to contain and control wildfires, and to respond after severe wildfires have burned. A third category of federal programs supports fire research, fire facilities, and improvements in forest health.

Table 1. Total Appropriations to Wildfire Accounts, FY1999-FY2007
(in millions of dollars)

	FY1999	FY2000	FY2001	FY2002	FY2003	FY2004	FY2005	FY2006 Enacted	FY2007 Request
FS	722.4	1,008.0	1,882.8	1,560.3	2,290.0	2,347.0	2,128.5	1,746.1	1,768.2
BLM	336.9	591.0	977.1	678.4	875.2	883.6	831.3	755.3	769.6
Total	1,059.3	1,598.9	2,859.9	2,238.8	3,165.1	3,230.6	2,929.8	2,501.4	2,537.8

Note: The totals in this table are the sum of totals in the other tables, excluding the wildfire assistance programs funded through FS State & Private Forestry.

The tables in this report present data on funding for the three categories of federal fire programs. The FS and BLM use three fire appropriation accounts — preparedness, suppression operations, and other operations — to fund most federal fire programs. However, the agencies include different activities in the accounts (e.g., the BLM includes fire research and fire facility funding in the preparedness account, while the FS includes these in other operations) and the accounts change over time (e.g., the agencies split operations funding into suppression and other operations in 2001). Thus, the data, taken from the agency budget justifications for the National Fire Plan, have been rearranged for the tables in this report to present consistent data and trends on the three categories of federal wildfire programs over a nine-year period.

Federal Lands

One category of wildfire management funding is for protecting federal lands. **Table 2** shows wildfire management appropriations for FY1999 — FY2006 and the FY2007 budget request for protecting federal lands from wildfires. (Current information on fire management appropriations is contained in CRS Report RL32893, *Interior, Environment, and Related Agencies: FY2006 Appropriations*, coordinated by Carol Hardy Vincent and Susan Boren.) The data in this table exclude funding for the other two categories of federal wildfire funding — for assistance to state and local governments, communities, and private landowners and for research, fire facility maintenance, and forest health improvement. The BLM included funds for fire research and fire facilities under its Preparedness budget line item through FY2004; these funds have been excluded from the table. **Table 2** shows appropriations by fiscal year, with emergency funding identified for the year in which it was provided, rather than in the year it was spent. The agencies are authorized to borrow from other accounts for fire suppression, and emergency funds generally repay these borrowings.

Table 2 shows that federal land fire management appropriations rose substantially in FY2001 and have remained high, with fluctuations generally depending on the severity of the preceding fire season. Total fuel reduction funding — to reduce the fuel loads on federal lands — more than tripled in FY2001, and has since risen further for the FS while remaining relatively stable for the BLM. Total funding for preparedness — equipment, training, baseline personnel, prevention, detection, etc. — also rose in FY2001, then was stable for the FS before rising again in FY2004, while stabilizing for the BLM. Total site rehabilitation funds under fire management peaked in FY2001 to restore lands burned during the severe 2000 fire season. However, funds in other budget line items, such as watershed improvement, are also used to restore burned areas.

Table 2. Wildfire Funding to Protect Federal Lands, FY1999-FY2007
(\$ in millions)

	FY99	FY00	FY01	FY02	FY03	FY04	FY05	FY06 Enacted	FY07 Request
Forest Service	722.4	1,008.0	1,702.4	1,415.6	2,162.7	2,233.2	2,026.2	1,637.2	1,695.8
<i>Fuel Reduction</i> ^a	65.0	70.0	205.2	209.0	236.6	258.3	292.5	280.1	291.8
<i>Preparedness</i>	374.8	408.8	611.1	622.6	612.0	671.6	676.5	660.7	655.9
<i>Suppression</i>	180.6	139.2	319.3	255.3	418.0	597.1	648.9	690.2	746.2
<i>Emergency Funds</i> ^b	102.0	390.0	425.1	266.0	889.0	699.2	395.5	0.0	0.0
<i>Site Rehabilitation</i> ^c	0.0	0.0	141.7	62.7	7.1	6.9	12.8	6.2	2.0
BLM	327.9	577.7	929.1	640.6	845.0	853.6	801.3	731.8	755.9
<i>Fuel Reduction</i> ^d	33.8	47.0	195.0	186.2	185.6	183.9	201.4	208.1	199.8
<i>Preparedness</i> ^e	147.9	152.6	276.7	253.0	255.2	254.2	258.9	268.8	274.8
<i>Suppression</i>	96.2	158.1	153.1	127.4	159.3	192.9	218.4	230.7	257.0
<i>Emergency Funds</i>	50.0	200.0	199.6	54.0	225.0	198.4	98.6	0.0	0.0
<i>Site Rehabilitation</i> ^f	0.0	20.0	104.8	20.0	19.9	24.2	23.9	24.1	24.3
Total	1,050.3	1,585.6	2,631.5	2,056.3	3,007.6	3,086.8	2,827.5	2,369.0	2,451.8
<i>Fuel Reduction</i>	98.8	117.0	400.1	395.2	422.3	442.2	463.9	488.2	491.5
<i>Preparedness</i>	522.7	561.3	887.9	875.7	867.2	925.8	935.4	929.5	930.7
<i>Suppression</i>	276.8	297.3	472.4	382.7	577.3	790.0	867.3	920.9	1,003.2
<i>Emergency Funds</i>	152.0	590.0	624.6	320.0	1,114.0	897.6	494.1	0.0	0.0
<i>Site Rehabilitation</i>	0.0	20.0	246.6	82.7	26.9	31.1	36.8	30.3	26.3

Note: This table differs from the similar table in CRS Report RL32893, *Interior, Environment, and Related Agencies: FY2006 Appropriations*, because of adjustments for the two non-federal land categories of federal wildfire funding.

- Includes emergency appropriations — \$10.0 million in FY2003, \$24.9 million in FY2004, and \$30.0 million in FY2005.
- Excludes emergency funds for fuel reduction and state assistance — \$30.0 million in FY2003, \$49.7 million in FY2004, and \$30.0 million in FY2005.
- Unidentifiable amount funded from other budget line items, such as watershed improvement.
- Calculated at 26% of wildfire operations (see page IV-36 of the FY2001 BLM budget justification).
- Excludes joint fire science research and facilities funding enacted within the BLM preparedness account through FY2004.
- Unidentified amount included in suppression funding.

Total funding for fire suppression — fighting fires — rose substantially for the BLM in FY2000 and for the FS in FY2001, dropped for both agencies in FY2002, and has risen substantially since. Emergency fire funding, as contingency appropriations or emergency supplemental appropriations, has fluctuated widely for both agencies since FY1999, but with an overall increase. For FY2006, the Bush Administration proposed no contingency

funding, and requested more suppression funding in a successful attempt to make emergency funding unnecessary. Whether this approach will be successful again for FY2007 depends on the severity of the 2006 and 2007 fire seasons.

Some Members of Congress and interest groups have expressed concern about the adequacy of firefighting appropriations and the effects of borrowing from other accounts to pay for firefighting. Proponents of the various FS and BLM programs are concerned that the borrowings significantly delay planned activities and that less than full repayment alters the budget priorities originally established by the appropriations committees. Others, however, argue that borrowing is necessary because of the emergency nature and high priority of firefighting and the appropriations committees determine which accounts are repaid.

Assistance for Nonfederal Lands

The federal government, primarily through the FS, has a group of wildfire programs to provide assistance to states, local governments, and communities to protect nonfederal (both government and private) lands.¹ Except for lands protected under cooperative agreement, states are responsible for fire protection of nonfederal lands.

Most FS fire assistance programs are funded under the agency's State and Private Forestry (S&PF) branch. State fire assistance provides financial and technical help for fire prevention, fire control, and prescribed fire use by state foresters, and through them, to other agencies and organizations. In cooperation with the Administrator of General Services (GSA), the FS is encouraged to transfer "excess personal property" (equipment) from federal agencies to state and local firefighting forces. The FS also provides assistance directly to volunteer fire departments. Since FY2001, substantial fire assistance funding has come through wildfire appropriations, rather than S&PF. Finally, the 2002 Farm Bill (P.L. 107-171) created a new community fire protection program to authorize the FS to act on nonfederal lands (with the consent of landowners) to assist in protecting structures and communities from wildfires.

Wildfire funds have also been provided for economic assistance. For three years (FY2001-FY2003), FS wildfire funds were added to the S&PF Economic Action Program (EAP) for training and for loans to existing or new ventures to help local economies. In addition, in FY2001, the FS received fire funds to directly aid communities recovering from the severe fires in 2000. The BLM has received continued funding to assist rural areas affected by wildfires since FY2001.

Funding for these assistance programs is shown in **Table 3**. Funds in the wildfire account are shown first, with funds for the FS S&PF cooperative fire programs below. Total funds for assistance in protecting nonfederal lands increased substantially in FY2001, from \$27.2 million (all FS S&PF funds) to \$148.5 million. Funding dropped about 20% in FY2002 (to \$117.5 million) and has fluctuated since. Wildfire funds for these programs were enacted for the first time in FY2001 and have been maintained for FS state and volunteer assistance programs and BLM rural assistance. However, FS

¹ For more details on these programs, see CRS Report RL31065, *Forestry Assistance Programs*, by Ross W. Gorte.

community assistance to aid communities affected by fires in the summer of 2000 was a one-time appropriation, and FS EAP funds were enacted for only three years.

Other Fire Funding

A third category of wildfire appropriations includes money for fire research, fire facility construction and maintenance, and forest health management. Wildfire funds for fire research have been enacted for both the BLM and the FS for the Joint Fire Science program. BLM's appropriations, in the wildfire preparedness budget line item, were \$4 million annually for FY1999 and FY2000, about \$8 million annually for FY2001-FY2005, and nearly \$6 million for FY2006 and requested for FY2007. FS funds for Joint Fire Science have been about \$8 million annually since FY2002 (and previously included an unidentified portion of FS research funds), but are proposed to be cut in half in FY2007. The FS also has been appropriated wildfire funds for fire research and development beginning in FY2001. These funds supplement monies in the FS research account; however, because the portion of funds in the FS research account used for fire research cannot be determined, total FS fire research funding is unknown.

Both the BLM and the FS have received funds to improve deteriorating fire facilities. The BLM has long used a portion of its fire preparedness funds for "deferred maintenance and capital improvements" (i.e., for fire facilities), but the level has fluctuated. FS wildfire funds for fire facilities declined after the initial \$43.9 million in FY2001 and ended in FY2004. The FS also builds and maintains fire facilities with its capital construction and maintenance account, but the portion used for fire facilities is unknown.

Finally, the FS has received wildfire funds for forest health management. This S&PF program focuses on assessing and controlling insect and disease infestations on federal and cooperative (i.e., nonfederal) lands, but includes efforts to control invasive species. In FY2001 and FY2002, the FS received nearly \$12 million annually in wildfire funds for forest health management, rising to nearly \$25 million annually for FY2004-FY2006, and proposed to be cut to less than \$12 million in FY2007.

Table 3. Federal Funding to Assist in Protecting Nonfederal Lands, FY1999-FY2007

(\$ in millions; includes emergency appropriations)

	FY99	FY00	FY01	FY02	FY03	FY04	FY05	FY06 Enacted	FY07 Request
FS, Wildfire Mgt.	0.0	0.0	108.5	77.1	79.4	59.2	48.1	53.6	36.9
<i>State Fire Assistance</i>	0.0	0.0	52.9	56.4	66.3	51.1	40.2	45.8	29.1
<i>Volunteer Fire Asst.</i>	0.0	0.0	8.3	8.3	8.2	8.1	7.9	7.8	7.8
<i>Economic Action</i>	0.0	0.0	12.5	12.5	5.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
<i>Community Assistance</i>	0.0	0.0	34.9	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
BLM Rural Assistance	0.0	0.0	10.0	10.0	9.9	9.9	9.9	9.9	0.0
Total Wildfire Funds	0.0	0.0	118.5	87.1	89.3	69.1	58.9	63.4	36.9
Forest Service, S&PF	22.9	27.2	29.9	30.4	30.5	63.3	38.8	38.8	32.8
<i>State Fire Assistance</i>	20.9	23.9	24.9	25.3	25.5	58.2	32.9	32.9	27.0
<i>Volunteer Fire Asst.</i>	2.0	3.2	5.0	5.1	5.0	5.0	5.9	5.9	5.9
Total Assistance	22.9	27.2	148.5	117.5	119.8	132.4	97.8	102.2	69.7

Table 4. Other Fire Management Appropriations, FY1999-FY2007

(\$ in millions)

	FY99	FY00	FY01	FY02	FY03	FY04	FY05	FY06 Enacted	FY07 Request
FS, Fire	0.0	0.0	71.8	67.6	47.9	54.6	54.3	55.3	35.4
<i>Joint Fire Science</i>	0.0	0.0	0.0	8.0	7.9	7.9	7.9	7.9	4.0
<i>Fire research</i>	0.0	0.0	16.0	27.3	21.3	22.0	21.7	22.8	20.1
<i>Fire facilities</i>	0.0	0.0	43.9	20.4	1.8	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
<i>Forest health</i>	0.0	0.0	12.0	12.0	16.8	24.7	24.7	24.6	11.4
BLM	9.0	13.3	38.0	27.8	20.2	20.1	20.1	13.6	13.6
<i>Joint Fire Science</i>	4.0	4.0	8.0	8.0	7.9	7.9	7.9	5.9	5.9
<i>Fire facilities</i>	5.0	9.3	30.0	19.8	12.3	12.2	12.2	7.7	7.7
Total	9.0	13.3	109.8	95.4	68.1	74.7	74.4	68.9	49.1