



October 29, 2020

Wildfire Management Funding: FY2021 Appropriations

The U.S. Department of Agriculture’s Forest Service (FS) and the Department of the Interior (DOI) are responsible for wildfire response and management across the federal lands within their respective jurisdictions. Both FS and DOI generally receive annual discretionary appropriations for wildfire management activities through the Interior, Environment, and Related Agencies appropriations bills. Wildfire management funding for DOI is provided to the department-level Office of Wildland Fire.

Wildfire management appropriations fluctuate annually but began to increase in the late 1990s and rose markedly after FY2000 (see **Figure 1**). A significant portion of the annual fluctuations and overall increase in funding is related to fire suppression costs, which vary considerably and may be high even during years of relatively mild wildfire activity. For more information, see CRS Report R46583, *Federal Wildfire Management: Ten-Year Funding Trends and Issues (FY2011-FY2020)*.

For FY2020, Congress appropriated a total of \$6.105 billion in discretionary appropriations for wildfire purposes for FS and DOI (see **Table 1**). This amount included \$3.848 billion in regular funding (P.L. 116-94); \$7.0 million in emergency supplemental funding to address issues related to the Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic (P.L. 116-136); and \$2.250 billion pursuant to the wildfire adjustment (P.L. 116-94), discussed below.

FY2021 Discretionary Appropriations

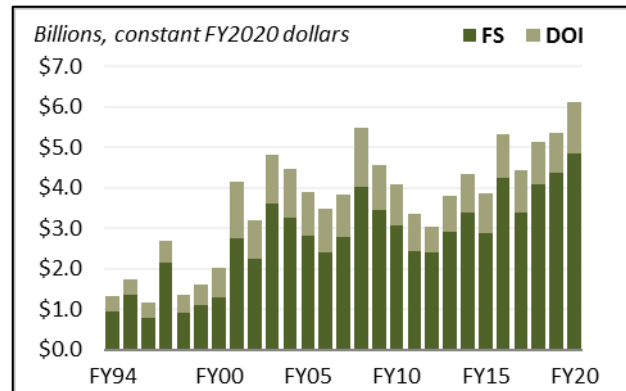
Budget Request

The Trump Administration requested a total of \$6.371 billion in FY2021 discretionary appropriations for wildfire purposes for FS and DOI, a \$265.4 million increase (4%) from the FY2020 enacted appropriations. The request included a total of \$3.413 billion in the agencies’ Wildland Fire Management (WFM) accounts, \$608.1 million to other FS accounts for wildfire purposes, and \$2.350 billion pursuant to the wildfire adjustment.

FY2021 Discretionary Appropriations

On July 24, 2020, the House passed H.R. 7608, which would provide a combined total of \$6.339 billion for FS and DOI wildfire purposes in Division C. This total would include \$3.377 billion to the agencies’ respective WFM accounts, \$612.0 million to other FS accounts for wildfire purposes, and \$2.350 billion pursuant to the wildfire adjustment. This would be a \$233.8 million increase (4%) from FY2020 and a \$31.6 million decrease (-0.5%) from the amount requested by the Administration. The Senate has not taken up H.R. 7608; instead, the agencies have received continuing appropriations for FY2021, set at the FY2020 level, through December 11, 2020 (P.L. 116-159).

Figure 1. Forest Service (FS) and Department of the Interior (DOI) Wildfire Appropriations, FY94-FY20



Source: CRS.

Notes: Figures are inflated to estimated FY2020 constant dollars using the GDP Chained Price Index from the White House Office of Management and Budget.

Wildfire Accounts and Activities

Funding for wildfire management generally falls into the following categories: preparedness, suppression, fuel reduction, and other wildfire activities (e.g., site rehabilitation, assistance programs, research, facilities maintenance). FS and DOI receive appropriations through similarly structured WFM accounts in both agencies. The bulk of the WFM appropriation for both agencies funds preparedness and baseline suppression activities. For DOI, WFM also funds fuel reduction activities, site rehabilitation, research, and facilities maintenance. FS, however, also receives appropriations for fuel reduction and other wildfire purposes through other agency appropriations accounts.

Starting in FY2020, FS and DOI receive additional funding for suppression through the *wildfire adjustment* (2 U.S.C. §901(b)(2)(F), also known as the *wildfire funding fix*), a budgetary mechanism that allows for an upward adjustment of the discretionary spending limits to accommodate a specific amount of additional funding for suppression. These additional funds are effectively exempt from the spending limits. A precondition for using the adjustment is that Congress must appropriate a baseline amount of funding within the limits. The baseline is equal to the 10-year suppression obligation average as reported in FY2015 (\$1.395 billion combined). In FY2020, Congress appropriated the baseline suppression funds to the respective WFM accounts and appropriated the funds provided through the wildfire adjustment to a separate account. The wildfire adjustment is available annually through FY2027, although the discretionary spending limits are currently in effect only through FY2021. The maximum amount available under the adjustment increases annually.

Table I. FS and DOI Discretionary Wildfire Appropriations
(\$ in millions)

Account	FY2021		
	FY2020	Requested	House-Passed H.R. 7608
FS, Total	\$4,852.9	\$5,057.6	\$5,037.6
Wildland Fire Management (WFM), Total	2,357.6	2,409.4	2,385.6
WFM Preparedness	1,339.6	1,398.4	1,374.6
WFM Suppression	1,011.0	1,011.0	1,011.0
WFM Supplemental	7.0	—	—
Wildfire Adjustment	1,950.0	2,040.0	2,040.0
NFS Hazardous Fuels	445.3	510.0	510.0
SPF Cooperative Fire Assistance	100.0	98.1	102.0
DOI, Total	\$1,252.3	\$1,313.1	\$1,301.5
WFM, Total	952.4	1,003.2	991.5
WFM Preparedness	332.8	368.1	338.0
WFM Suppression	383.7	383.7	383.7
WFM Fuels Management	194.0	227.9	227.9
WFM Other	41.9	23.5	41.9
Wildfire Adjustment	300.0	310.0	310.0
Total, FS and DOI	\$6,105.3	\$6,370.7	\$6,339.1

Sources: P.L. 116-94, Division D; P.L. 116-136, Title VII; FY2021 budget justifications for FS and DOI; and H.R. 7608.

Notes: NFS = National Forest System; SPF = State and Private Forestry. Column totals may not add due to rounding.

Preparedness

Preparedness includes the range of tasks necessary to ensure readiness for wildfire response. FS and DOI use preparedness funds to maintain baseline personnel and provide training and education; manage infrastructure, equipment, and resources (e.g., aviation assets, engines, communication equipment); develop, maintain, and advance technological tools to enhance decisionmaking capacity; and prepare and execute fire management plans, cooperative agreements, and interagency coordination. Preparedness activities are funded within FS's and DOI's respective WFM accounts.

Suppression

Suppression is the work associated with extinguishing or confining a fire, and suppression appropriations are used primarily for wildfire response. This includes funding firefighter salaries, aviation asset operations, other support functions in direct support of wildfire incidents, and funding for postfire emergency stabilization activities. Suppression activities are funded through two sources. Baseline suppression funding is provided to FS's and DOI's respective WFM accounts, and funds provided pursuant to the wildfire adjustment are appropriated to separate accounts for FS and DOI (and then transferred to the WFM account as needed). In addition, Congress has at times provided supplemental appropriations specifically for suppression purposes.

Fuel Reduction

The size, distribution, and total quantity of wildland fuels (e.g., vegetation) significantly affect wildfire behavior. Fuel reduction is the manipulation or removal of fuels to reduce

potential wildfire risk. Federal fuel reduction funding may be used for projects (or *treatments*) on federal lands, to provide financial or technical assistance for projects on nonfederal lands, or to develop innovative uses of wood products in an effort to accelerate and incentivize fuel removal from federal lands.

Fuel reduction activities are funded within DOI's Fuels Management activity (WFM account) and within FS's Hazardous Fuels activity (National Forest System account). However, FS and DOI receive funding through other accounts and programs that may be used for activities that also have a fuel reduction component; thus, funding provided to each agency's respective Fuels program is not a comprehensive reflection of the funding available for these activities.

Other Wildfire Activities

FS and DOI both receive appropriations for several other wildfire-related activities. For DOI, funding is provided within the WFM account for postfire rehabilitation, wildfire science and research, and facilities maintenance. For FS, appropriations are provided for wildfire assistance programs through its State and Private Forestry account. Wildfire assistance programs support state wildfire management programs and volunteer fire departments in rural communities. FS funding for wildfire science and funding for long-term postfire rehabilitation activities may be derived from several different FS accounts and programs.

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