

# CONSERVATION COMPASS

## New Day Needed for National Forest Budgets



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Boone and Crockett Club

The U.S. Forest Service (USFS) has been around since 1905. The Boone and Crockett Club was instrumental in its establishment. The Club's founder, Theodore Roosevelt,

working in tandem with member Gifford Pinchot (later the first chief of the agency) were the agency's founding fathers. The 191 million acres in the National Forests and National Grasslands, owned collectively by the American people, contain some of the best habitat for fish and wildlife and opportunities for hunting and fishing that remain open to the general public for no charge.

Now arguments rage over for whom and for what the National Forests should be managed. There have been two aborted efforts over the past two years to sell off "isolated parcels" of National Forest to provide revenues to counties adversely affected by recent reduction in timber harvests. Likely, these will be ongoing efforts to dismantle public land ownership and weaken the USFS.

There is an ongoing restructuring and redirection of the USFS, hidden from public view, taking place in the Congressional budget process. The consequences of that ongoing process were addressed by the five living former chiefs of the Forest Service in a letter to Congress. It is self-explanatory and worth your consideration:

As chiefs of the U.S. Forest Service (FS) from 1979 to 2007, we are concerned that the FS is being placed in an untenable financial bind due to the way fire suppression is being routinely handled in the Federal Budget. Congress currently funds fire suppression based on costs averaged over the past 10-year period. This approach assumes that those costs are predictable and constant. Examination of historical data reveals that both assumptions are wrong — sometimes dramatically so. In recent years, costs

of fire suppression have increased (primarily in the West), as the result of accumulating effects of drought coupled with a number of years that are among the warmest on record. These conditions are expected to persist for the foreseeable future. Insect and disease outbreaks, which may be correlated with those conditions, are resulting in a rapid increase in dead woody materials, i.e., an ongoing build up in fuels.

As a result, fire seasons are beginning earlier and lasting longer with fires increasing in intensity and burning more acres. These fires are proving ever more difficult and expensive to control. These

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factors, coupled with inflation, have inexorably driven up cost of fire suppression activities.

Historically, the FS, after exhausting appropriated funds for fire suppression, routinely "borrowed" from trust funds deposited by timber sale purchasers for reforestation and brush disposal to finance fire suppression efforts. Congress, upon request of the Administration, routinely reimbursed the trust funds after the end of fire season when costs were known. This worked so long as deposits in the trust funds were sufficient to cover the "loans." As the timber sale program declined by some 80% in the 1990s, deposits into the trust funds were inadequate to cover increasing fire suppression costs. The "borrowing" from trust funds to even temporarily finance fire

suppression activities is no longer viable. When coupled with the current administrative requirement that FS budget requests for fire suppression be limited to the 10-year average, in the face of increasing costs for fire suppression, the agency is forced to shift funds from other programs to pay for fire suppression...

Such budget shifts result in other FS programs — research, state and private Forestry, and National Forest management — being cut on an ad hoc basis to make up the difference. As the peak of the fire season in the West occurs in the last three months of the fiscal year, causing last-minute budget adjustments between programs, an imprudent, irresponsible, and ever more frequently occurring situation exists in financial management.

This problem has been magnified by the Administration's decision to, over the same period, reduce funds requested for other programs. From Fiscal Year 2000 through the president's budget for 2008, the portion of the USFS budget devoted to fire (both preparedness and suppression) increased steadily from 25% to 44%. This was partially offset by a 35% reduction in other programs after adjustments for inflation. Overall USFS staffing has been reduced by 5,900 positions to help compensate. The 10-year average cost of fire suppression is increasing by some \$80 million per year with no end in sight.

If the nation is to be served by an efficient and effective Forest Service that can carry out its statutory multiple-use mission, this situation must be recognized for what it is — an ongoing disaster. The answer is to provide the agency managerial flexibility to finance fire suppression totally from outside the Forest Service's discretionary budget. To proceed along the present path is, in our collective opinion, nothing more than to continue a game of smoke and mirrors that, increasingly, fools no one and puts the effectiveness of a proud agency, and more important, the effective management of the National Forests at increasing risk. We, collectively, are at your disposal for any help, insights, or advice that we might provide. ■