

**Congressional Fire Services Institute
International Association of Fire Chiefs
National Association of State Foresters
National Volunteer Fire Council**

February 21, 2020

The Honorable Nita Lowey, Chairwoman
House Committee on Appropriations
H-307 The Capitol
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Kay Granger, Ranking Member
House Committee on Appropriations
1016 Longworth House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Betty McCollum, Chair
Committee on Appropriations
Subcommittee on Interior, Environment,
and Related Agencies
2007 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable David Joyce, Ranking Member
Committee on Appropriations
Subcommittee on Interior, Environment,
and Related Agencies
1016 Longworth House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Chairwoman Lowey, Ranking Member Granger, Chair McCollum, and Ranking Member Joyce,

The undersigned organizations are writing to express our strong support for maintaining effective funding levels in the fiscal year (FY) 2021 appropriations process for essential wildfire risk reduction and protection programs within the USDA Forest Service's (USFS) State and Private Forestry (S&PF) program area. The important work accomplished through the State Fire Assistance (SFA) and Volunteer Fire Assistance (VFA) programs (also referred to as the National Fire Capacity and Rural Fire Capacity programs) helps decrease total federal emergency wildland fire suppression costs and reduce the threat of fire to communities on public and private lands.

America's forests and forest-dependent communities are at risk from outbreaks of pests and pathogens, persistent drought, and the buildup of hazardous fuels. Urbanization and development patterns are placing more homes and communities near fire-prone landscapes, leading to more destructive and costly wildland fires. In 2018, wildland fires burned more than 8.7 million acres and resulted in more than \$3 billion in suppression expenditures.

SFA is an important federal mechanism for assisting states and local fire departments in responding to wildland fires and in conducting land management activities that mitigate fire risk on non-federal lands. The program helps train state and local first responders who are often first to arrive at a wildland fire incident, as well as equip them with the tools they need to put wildland fires out efficiently and safely.

For example, in FY 2018 the SFA program provided over \$28 million in funding for hazardous fuels treatments, benefiting 1,065 communities in the wildland-urban interface (WUI). This funding led directly to the treatment of 49,400 acres of hazardous fuels, with another 184,808 acres treated with leveraged funding from partners. Additionally, roughly \$3.7 million in assistance was provided to conduct 3,882 risk assessments and fire management planning projects in 2,873 communities. In FY 2018, SFA funding assisted nearly 13,000 communities through a variety of different activities, including funding training for 97,210 firefighters.

The localized support provided by SFA is crucial because approximately 80 percent of wildland fires burn within state and local fire department jurisdictions. Even when it comes to wildland fires on federal lands, SFA-supported crews and apparatus are often the first to respond.

Our organizations are grateful for the Committee's decision to increase SFA funding to \$82 million in FY 2020. Increases in SFA funding will help expand wildland fire preparedness and mitigation capacity for state forestry agencies. Attacking fires when they are small is the key to reducing fatalities, injuries, loss of homes and cutting federal firefighting costs. The need for increased funding for fire suppression on federal lands has broad support. The need to increase fire suppression funding for state and private lands, where many fires that impact federal lands begin, is just as urgent. ***With that in mind, in FY 2021, we urge you to provide \$87 million for the State Fire Assistance program.***

The VFA program provides support to volunteer fire departments protecting communities with populations of 10,000 or fewer residents. National needs assessment survey data shows that fire departments protecting smaller communities tend to lack adequate resources and rely more on volunteer staffing compared to departments protecting communities with larger populations. Fire departments that regularly respond to wildland fires face particularly acute resource challenges as the equipment, training, and apparatus used to fight wildland fire is almost entirely different from that used to fight structure fires. The VFA program helps bridge these resource gaps for thousands of fire departments across the country. Funding is allocated to each state and then distributed to the local level, typically by the state forester's office. Grant sizes vary by state but are typically not larger than a few thousand dollars per agency. Some fire departments use VFA grants to pay for training and equipment, while others use it to modify surplus Department of Defense property like tanker trucks for use in wildland fire suppression.

VFA ensures adequate capacity to respond to wildland fires, reducing the risk to communities, people, homes and property, and firefighters. This capacity is critical because these state and local resources are the first responders to more than 80% of wildland fires – whether on state, federal or private lands. According to the USFS, during FY 2018, the VFA program provided assistance to 13,959 communities, trained 21,868 firefighters, expanded or organized 48 fire departments, and purchased, rehabilitated, or maintained nearly \$11 million in equipment. Our organizations greatly appreciate the Committee's work to increase VFA funding to \$18 million in FY 2020. ***In FY 2021, we urge you to provide no less than \$19 million for the Volunteer Fire***

Assistance Program, consistent with the level approved by the Committee last June in H. Rept. 116-100.

We appreciate the difficult task the Committee faces in the current budget climate. It is important to remember, however, that these vital programs safeguard human life, habitat, and property, and reduce the overall cost of wildland fire management. Accordingly, we urge you to support funding for these critical programs.

Thank you for your consideration of this important request.

Sincerely,

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International Association of Fire Chiefs
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