Coalition calls on Congress to fund fire program; protect communities, restore forests

by Bend_Weekly_News_Sources

(Washington, D.C.) - A coalition of governmental, community and conservation organizations said Tuesday there is an urgent need to improve state and community wildfire protection and called on Congress to support increased funding for the State Fire Assistance (SFA) program managed by the U.S. Forest Service.

Some of the coalition members that signed a letter in support of the additional funding included the International Association of Fire Chiefs, Denver Water, the National Association of Counties, The Wilderness Society and the Western Governorsâ€™ Association. A full list of signatories may be found on the letter that is linked to below.

The Administration has proposed a 14 percent reduction in SFA funding for the 2008 fiscal year. State foresters estimate that SFA funding needs to increase nearly 85 percent to $145 million in order to meet the current and emerging community needs for wildland fire preparedness and protection.

â€œWashington continues to cut the Forest Service budget, even though the cost of suppressing fires is skyrocketing,â€• said Arizona Governor Janet Napolitano, who serves as WGAâ€™s lead for Forest Health issues. â€œThe State Fire Assistance program is cost effective and helps prevent small wildfires from becoming dangerously large and very expensive to control.

It also provides the seed funding for state foresters to collaborate and proactively thin hazardous fuels, restore our forests and reduce the threat of wildfires.â€•

The SFA is the only federal program tailored to address the challenges of what is called the â€œwildland urban interfaceâ€•. It provides cost-sharing funds to state forestry agencies to help states and communities successfully prepare for and respond to wildland fires. The funding is also used to support Community Wildfire Protection Planning (CWPP) and the reduction of hazardous fuels on lands regardless of ownership via prescribed fire and mechanical treatments. This both protects communities and ultimately enables fire to play a more natural, restorative role on the land.

â€œEffective wildland fire management requires partnerships between agencies and communities and the State Fire Assistance program is critical to making that happen," said William H. Meadows, president of The Wilderness Society. "Particularly important is the funding that communities can use to develop Community Wildfire Protection Plans to identify those areas where preventative actions should be prioritized." The CWPP program assists state and private landowners in collaboratively identifying their priorities for landscape-scale fire management and forest health treatments.

"State Fire Assistance gives counties at risk for wildland fire the best bang for the buck,â€• said Robert Cope, County Commissioner for Lemhi County, Idaho and President of the National Association of Counties' Western Interstate Region. â€œSFA dollars can be used to develop and update fire mitigation plans as well as to pay for on-the-ground projects to implement those plans."

This coalition now is calling on Congress to step up and support substantial and sustained levels of funding for SFA, a program that is critical to achieving the goals of the 10-year Strategy (www.westgov.org/wga/initiatives/fire/implem_plan.pdf) and the Healthy Forests Restoration Act â€“ protecting communities and improving the health of our forests.

The letter can be found at http://www.wflccenter.org/news_pdf/224_pdf.pdf

Fact sheets on accomplishment highlights on SFA can be found at http://www.wflcweb.org/infomaterials/issue_briefs.php