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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 Interior, Environment, and Related Agencies appropriations laws. Wildfire management funding for DOI is provided to the department-level Office of Wildland Fire.

Wildfire management appropriations fluctuate annually but 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**).

FY2021 Discretionary Appropriations

Budget Request

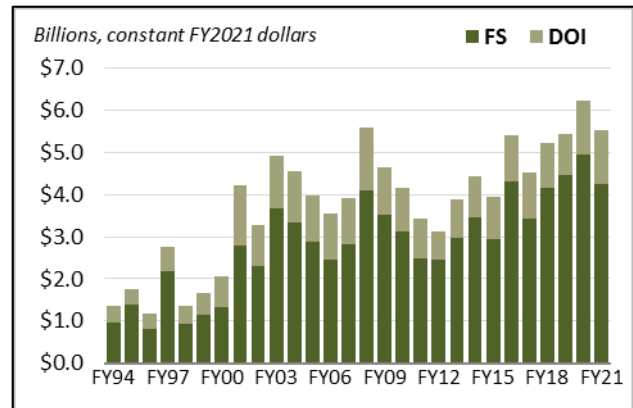
The Trump Administration requested a total of \$6.371 billion in FY2021 discretionary appropriations for wildfire purposes for FS and DOI. The request included a total of \$3.413 billion in the agencies’ Wildland Fire Management (WFM) accounts, \$608.1 million to other FS accounts for wildfire purposes,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

FY2021 Enacted Appropriations

Congress appropriated \$5.543 billion in total combined appropriations for FS and DOI wildfire purposes for FY2021 (P.L. 116-260). This included an increase in DOI wildfire funding as compared with FY2020 but a decrease in FS wildfire funding. Much of the decrease in FS wildfire funding can be attributed to a budget restructuring that established a *salaries and expenses* budget line item in WFM and most other FS accounts. In some cases, this contributed to relatively large decreases to WFM programs (and other FS wildfire-related programs) as compared with FY2020. The FY2021 appropriations law also shifted some funding from WFM and several other FS accounts into a new account.

In earlier action, the House passed H.R. 7608, which would have provided a combined total of \$6.339 billion for FS and DOI wildfire purposes in Division C. Several continuing resolutions provided funding at FY2020 levels before enactment of P.L. 116-260 on December 27, 2020.

Figure 1. Forest Service (FS) and Department of the Interior (DOI) Wildfire Appropriations, FY94-FY21



Source: CRS.

Notes: Figures are adjusted to estimated FY2021 constant dollars using the GDP Chained Price Index from the White House Office of Management and Budget.

Wildfire Accounts and Activities

FS and DOI each have a respective WFM account. Prior to FY2021, funding for wildfire management generally fell into the following categories: preparedness, suppression, fuel reduction, and other wildfire activities (e.g., site rehabilitation, assistance programs, research, facilities maintenance). Starting in FY2021, however, FS funds the salaries and expenses related to these activities as a separate budget line item in its WFM account. FS 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 essentially are 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 (\$1.011 billion for FS and \$383.7 million for DOI). In FY2021, 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, and the maximum amount available under the adjustment increases annually. However, the statutory limit on total discretionary spending is in effect only through FY2021.

Table 1. FS and DOI Discretionary Wildfire Appropriations (\$ in millions)

Account	FY2020	FY2021		
		Requested	H-Passed H.R. 7608	Enacted
FS, Total	\$4,852.9	\$5,057.6	\$5,037.6	\$4,240.1
Wildland Fire Management (WFM), Total	2,357.6	2,409.4	2,385.6	1,927.2
WFM Salaries and Expenses	—	—	—	764.2
WFM Preparedness	1,339.6	1,398.4	1,374.6	152.0
WFM Suppression	1,011.0	1,011.0	1,011.0	1,011.0
WFM Supplemental	7.0	—	—	—
Wildfire Adjustment	1,950.0	2,040.0	2,040.0	2,040.0
NFS Hazardous Fuels	445.3	510.0	510.0	180.4
SPF Cooperative Fire Assistance	100.0	98.1	102.0	92.4
DOI, Total	\$1,252.3	\$1,313.1	\$1,301.5	\$1,302.6
WFM, Total	952.4	1,003.2	991.5	992.6
WFM Preparedness	332.8	368.1	338.0	347.1
WFM Suppression	383.7	383.7	383.7	383.7
WFM Fuels Management	194.0	227.9	227.9	220.0
WFM Other	41.9	23.5	41.9	41.9
Wildfire Adjustment	300.0	310.0	310.0	310.0
Total, FS and DOI	\$6,105.3	\$6,370.7	\$6,339.1	\$5,542.7

Sources: P.L. 116-94; P.L. 116-136; FY2021 budget justifications for FS and DOI; H.R. 7608 (116th Congress); and P.L. 116-260.

Notes: NFS = National Forest System; SPF = State and Private Forestry. The FS WFM Salaries and Expenses budget line item was established in P.L. 116-260. Column totals may not add due to rounding.

Preparedness

Preparedness includes the range of tasks necessary to ensure readiness for wildfire response. Prior to FY2021, FS and DOI both used 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. Starting in FY2021, however, many of these activities for FS are covered in the new salaries and expenses WFM budget line item.

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, at times Congress has provided supplemental appropriations specifically for suppression purposes.

Fuel Reduction

Fuel reduction is the manipulation or removal of wildland fuels (e.g., vegetation) 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 [NFS] account). The decrease in FS FY2021 funding is largely because the salaries and expenses related to these activities were funded separately in the NFS account. In addition, 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 FS accounts and programs.

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