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Wildfire Management Funding: Background, Issues, and FY2018 Appropriations

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Summary

The federal government's wildfire (or wildland fire) management responsibilities are fulfilled primarily by the Forest Service (FS, in the U.S. Department of Agriculture) and the Department of the Interior (DOI). These responsibilities include prevention, detection, response, and recovery related to fires that begin on federal lands. These responsibilities are accomplished through activities such as preparedness, suppression, fuel reduction, and site rehabilitation, among others. There are several ongoing concerns regarding federal wildfire management. These concerns include the total federal costs of wildfire management, the strategies and resources used for wildfire management, and the impact of wildfire on both the quality of life and the economy of communities surrounding wildfire activity. Many of these issues are of perennial interest to Congress, with annual wildfire management appropriations being one indicator of how Congress prioritizes and addresses certain wildfire management concerns.

Congress provides annual appropriations to both FS and DOI for these activities through the Interior, Environment, and Related Agencies appropriations bill, although the bulk of the appropriations go to FS. Wildfire activities are funded in two accounts for each agency: Wildland Fire Management (WFM) and Federal Land Assistance, Management, and Enhancement Act (FLAME) reserve accounts. Over the past 10 years (FY2008-FY2017), Congress has appropriated an average of $3.72 billion annually, with $4.18 billion combined to both FS and DOI in FY2017. The Administration requested a combined $3.72 billion in FY2018, a 12% decrease from FY2017 enacted levels. On September 14, 2017, the Housed passed H.R. 3354, an omnibus measure covering all 12 appropriations bills, including the FY2018 Interior, Environment, and Related Agencies bill. This bill would provide $3.85 billion combined for wildfire purposes, an 8% decrease from FY2017 enacted levels and 3% above the Administration's requested levels.

The Administration's FY2018 request also proposed restructuring FS and DOI's appropriations accounts, in some identical ways (e.g., eliminating funding for both the FLAME suppression accounts) but also in some different ways (e.g., moving funding for hazardous fuels management). These budget restructuring proposals may provide some benefits for FS or DOI, such as providing agency funds designated for the same activity in one account each instead of across two accounts. Restructuring the budget may have some potential drawbacks as well. For example, changing accounts may complicate analysis to inform future appropriations decisions or hinder the ability to evaluate FS's and DOI's performance.

Congress is debating several issues related to federal funding for wildfire management. These issues include the level of federal spending on wildland fire management as well as the effectiveness of that spending (e.g., whether the funding is allowing agencies to meet wildfire management targets). In some years, Congress also faces requests from the agencies for additional appropriations during severe fire activity. Congress has frequently provided additional funding for wildfire management above the level in the annual appropriations bill, usually for suppression purposes. The recurring need for supplemental funds raises questions about the accuracy of the budgeting process for wildfire funding and how the agencies estimate wildfire suppression funding requirements, among other issues.

This report provides an overview of the accounts that fund wildfire management activities and historical wildfire management appropriations data, as well as information on FY2018 appropriations.

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Wildfire (or wildland fire),[1] an unplanned and unwanted fire, can have beneficial and harmful impacts on human, historical, cultural, and ecological resources. Wildfires can reduce fuel loads, increase ecosystem health and functioning, and restore fire-adapted ecosystems. At the same time, wildfires can damage timber resources and soils and degrade water quality and watershed functions. Wildfires also can damage communities, destroy homes,[2] and lead to loss of human life.[3]

Wildfire management is a series of coordinated activities undertaken by federal, state, and local authorities to prepare for, resolve, and recover from wildfire events. These activities generally are categorized as fuel reduction, preparedness, suppression, and site rehabilitation.[4] A number of federal, state, and local agencies can and do respond to wildfires.[5] States are responsible for responding to wildfires that begin on nonfederal (state, local, and private) lands, except for lands protected by federal agencies under cooperative agreements. The federal government is responsible for responding to wildfires that begin on federal lands. The U.S. Department of Agriculture's Forest Service (FS) carries out wildfire response and management across the 193 million acres of national forests and national grasslands. The Department of the Interior (DOI) carries out wildfire management and response on more than 400 million acres of national parks, wildlife refuges and preserves, Indian reservations, and other public lands. Sometimes more than one agency may respond, depending on where the fire occurs and spreads, the potential threats, and the expertise required. In these cases, the National Interagency Fire Center (NIFC) coordinates the national mobilization of resources for wildfire and other incidents throughout the United States.[6]

Both FS and DOI 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 Office of Wildland Fire (a department-level office), which then allocates the funding to four DOI agencies—Bureau of Land Management (BLM), Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA), National Park Service (NPS), and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS).[7] Congress also provides funding for wildfire-related activities through the Federal

[1] The terms *wildfire* and *wildland fire* often are used interchangeably. However, each term has a distinct definition. The National Wildfire Coordinating Group (NWCG) defines *wildland fire* as "any non-structure fire that occurs in vegetation or natural fuels, including prescribed fire and wildfire." NWCG defines *wildfire* as "an unplanned, unwanted wildland fire including unauthorized human-caused fires, escaped wildland fire use events, escaped prescribed fire projects, and all other wildland fires where the objective is to put the fire out." See NWCG, *Glossary of Wildland Fire Terminology*, September 2017, at http://www.nwcg.gov/glossary-of-wildland-fire-terminology. This report will use the term *wildfire* for both.

[2] For more information on wildfire damages to homes and resources, see CRS Report RL34517, *Wildfire Damages to Homes and Resources: Understanding Causes and Reducing Losses*.

[3] An example is the 2013 loss of 19 firefighters of the Granite Mountain Interagency Hotshot Crew assigned to the Yarnell Hill fire. For more information, see CRS Report R43129, *Wildfire Management: Hotshot Crews*.

[4] The federal government funds wildland fire management in similar categories: fuel reduction, preparedness, and suppression, among others. Site rehabilitation activities are funded through more than one budget line item.

[5] For more information on federal assistance, see CRS In Focus IF10732, *Federal Assistance for Wildfire Response and Recovery*.

[6] The National Interagency Fire Center (NIFC) comprises eight agencies and organizations: the Bureau of Land Management (BLM), the Bureau of Indian Affairs, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the National Park Service, the U.S. Forest Service, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, the National Business Center, and the U.S. Fire Administration. Also, a National Association of State Foresters representative is located at NIFC. Additional information about the role of each agency is available in the NWCG *Communicator's Guide for Wildland Fire Management: Fire Education, Prevention, and Mitigation Practices*. The National Interagency Mobilization Guide identifies standard procedures that guide the operations of multiagency logistical support activity.

[7] Through FY2008, wildfire funding for the Department of the Interior (DOI) was appropriated directly to BLM and

Emergency Management Agency, such as emergency financial assistance for some nonfederal wildfires through Fire Management Assistance Grants and the Disaster Relief Fund; those funds and activities are discussed in other CRS products.[8]

Funding History

Wildfire management appropriations began to increase in the late 1990s and rose significantly after FY2000, beginning with the severe 2000 fire season (see **Figure 1**).[9] Since then, wildfire appropriations have varied between a low of $2.9 billion in FY2012 and a high of $5.2 billion in FY2008 (as measured in constant FY2017 dollars). The majority of wildfire management appropriations go to FS. From FY1994 to FY2017, FS received around 71% of the total wildfire management appropriations annually on average and DOI received 29%. FS has received a slightly larger share more recently, though, receiving 76% annually on average over the past 10 years (while DOI's share has decreased to 24% over that time period).

FS wildfire management appropriations constitute a relatively large portion of total FS discretionary funding. For example, over the past 10 years, wildfire appropriations have made up approximately 50% of the agency's discretionary funds, on average (see **Figure 2**), although not all of those funds counted against discretionary spending limits.[10] In comparison, wildfire appropriations account for about 8% of DOI's total discretionary appropriations, on average.[11]

Table 1 displays annual total wildfire management appropriations for the past 10 years, from FY2008 to FY2017. Over that time period, combined FS and DOI wildfire management appropriations have averaged $3.7 billion.[12]

was then allocated among the other bureaus. Since FY2009, appropriations have been made to the DOI department-level Office of Wildland Fire for allocation among the agencies.

[8] For more information, see CRS Report R43738, *Fire Management Assistance Grants: Frequently Asked Questions* and CRS Report R43537, *FEMA's Disaster Relief Fund: Overview and Selected Issues*.

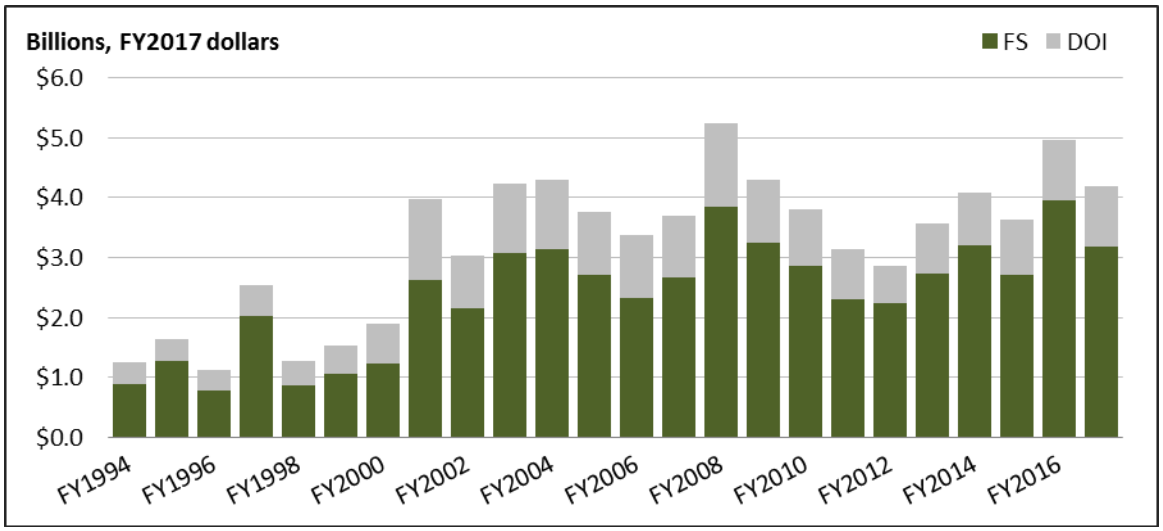
[9] For more information on wildfire management appropriations prior to FY2005, see CRS Report RL33990, *Federal Funding for Wildfire Control and Management*.

[10] Congress often has designated certain funds, including supplemental wildfire appropriations, as emergency spending, not subject to certain procedural or statutory budget enforcement, such as limits or caps on discretionary spending. In FY2017, the appropriations to the Federal Land Assistance, Management, and Enhancement Act (FLAME) accounts were designated as emergency spending. For more information on emergency designations generally, see CRS Report R41564, *Emergency Designation: Current Budget Rules and Procedures*.

[11] This figure represents only the percentage of DOI's appropriations that are provided through the Interior, Environment, and Related Agencies appropriations laws. DOI receives some appropriations through other appropriations laws.

[12] This figure includes emergency funds (e.g., supplemental appropriations) and, until FY2014, appropriations for wildfire assistance activities provided through FS's State and Private Forestry account.

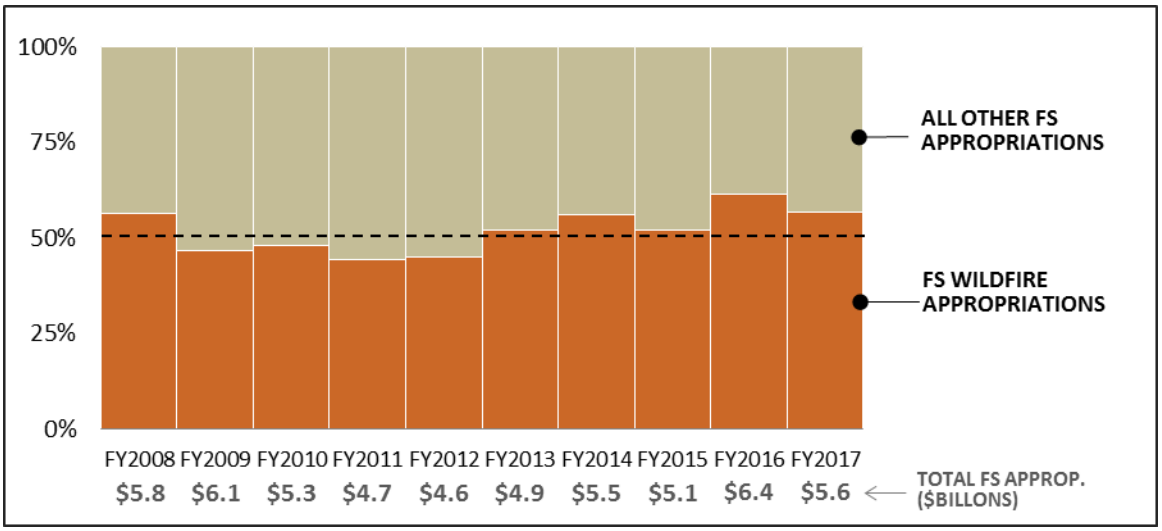
Figure 1. FS and DOI Wildfire Management Appropriations, FY1994-FY2017



Source: Congressional Research Service (CRS). Data compiled from detailed funding tables prepared by the House Committee on Appropriations for FY2000 through FY2017 and agency budget justifications for FY1994 through FY1999.

Notes: DOI = Department of the Interior; FS = Forest Service. Total wildfire management appropriations include appropriations to the Wildland Fire Management (WFM) accounts, the reserve accounts established by the Federal Land Assistance, Management, and Enhancement Act (FLAME), and any additional appropriations enacted for wildfire purposes to both FS and DOI. FS data also include appropriations to other agency accounts that are specified for wildfire purposes. Figures adjusted to FY2017 dollars using the gross domestic product (GDP) deflator price index reported by the U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of Economic Analysis, National Income and Products Accounts Tables, Table 1.1.9.

Figure 2. Distribution of FS Discretionary Appropriations, FY2008-FY2017



Source: CRS. Data compiled from detailed funding tables prepared by the House Committee on Appropriations.

Notes: "FS Wildfire Appropriations" includes all appropriations to FS for wildfire activities, including appropriations to the WFM account, the FLAME account, and additional funding for wildfire. "All Other FS Appropriations" includes all discretionary appropriations provided to FS, including appropriations to the Forest Rangeland and Research, State and Private Forestry, National Forest System, Capital Improvement and Maintenance, and Land Acquisition accounts. This figure includes some appropriations provided to FS that were not subject to discretionary spending limits.

Table 1. Enacted Wildfire Appropriations, FY2008-FY2017

(nominal dollars in millions)

Agency/Account/Activity	FY2008	FY2009	FY2010	FY2011	FY2012	FY2013	FY2014	FY2015	FY2016	FY2017
Forest Service (FS)										
WFM Account	1,943.5	2,131.6	2,103.7	1,968.0	1,734.9	1,868.9	2,162.3	2,333.3	2,386.3	2,833.4
Fire Operations	1,511.4	1,668.9	1,672.5	1,669.2	1,542.7	1,458.5	1,738.1	1,853.8	1,893.6	2,330.6
Preparedness	*665.8*	*675.0*	*675.0*	*673.7*	*1004.4*	*948.5*	*1,057.6*	*1,145.8*	*1,082.6*	*1,082.6*
Suppression	*845.6*	*993.9*	*997.5*	*995.5*	*538.2*	*510.0*	*680.5*	*708.0*	*811.0*	*1,248.0*
Other Fire Operations	432.0	462.7	506.2	498.9	432.2	410.4	424.2	479.5	492.7	502.8
Hazardous Fuels	*310.1*	*328.1*	*350.3*	*349.6*	*317.1*	*301.1*	*306.5*	*361.7*	*375.0*	*390.0*
Other Activities	*122.0*	*134.6*	*155.9*	*149.3*	*115.1*	*109.3*	*117.7*	*117.7*	*117.7*	*112.8*
Rescissions and Other Adjustments	—	—	-75.0	-200.0	-240.0	—	—	—	—	—
FLAME Account[a]	—	—	413.0	90.4	315.4	299.0	315.0	303.1	823.0	342.0[b]
Additional Appropriations	1,326.0[b]	700.0[b]	—	—	—	379.9	600.0	—	700.0[b]	—
Other Wildfire Appropriations[c]	38.5	41.0	46.1	39.0	37.2	32.1	—	—	—	—
FS Total Wildfire Appropriations[d]	3,308.0	2,872.6	2,562.9	2,097.5	2,087.4	2,579.8	3,077.3	2,636.4	3,909.3	3,175.4
Department of the Interior (DOI)										
WFM Account	808.1	859.5	794.9	718.1	483.6	680.0	733.5	804.8	816.7	942.7
Fire Operations	566.3	617.0	674.2	689.4	547.0	526.0	567.8	610.6	615.4	727.8
Preparedness	*276.5*	*281.8*	*290.5*	*290.5*	*276.5*	*264.8*	*281.9*	*319.0*	*323.7*	*332.8*
Suppression	*289.8*	*335.2*	*383.8*	*399.0*	*270.5*	*261.2*	*285.9*	*291.7*	*291.7*	*395.0*
Other Fire Operations	241.8	242.5	245.6	228.7	208.2	161.5	173.2	194.2	201.4	214.9
Hazardous Fuels	*199.6*	*203.1*	*206.2*	*183.3*	*183.0*	*137.7*	*145.0*	*164.0*	*170.0*	*180.0*
Other Activities	*42.2*	*39.4*	*39.4*	*45.3*	*25.1*	*23.8*	*28.2*	*30.2*	*31.4*	*34.9*

Agency/Account/Activity	FY2008	FY2009	FY2010	FY2011	FY2012	FY2013	FY2014	FY2015	FY2016	FY2017
Rescissions and Other Adjustments	—	—	-125.0	-200.0	-271.6	-7.5	-7.5	—	—	—
FLAME Account[a]	—	—	61.0	60.9	91.9	91.7	92.0	92.0	177.0	65.0[b]
Additional Appropriations	384.0[b]	65.0[b]	—	—	—	23.0	36.0	—	—	—
DOI Total Wildfire Appropriations	1,192.1	924.5	855.9	778.9	575.4	794.7	861.5	896.8	993.7	1,007.7
Total (FS & DOI)										
Total, WFM Account	2,751.5	2,991.1	2,898.6	2,686.1	2,218.4	2,548.9	2,895.8	3,138.1	3,203.1	3,776.1
Total, FLAME Account	—	—	474.0	151.3	407.2	390.6	407.0	395.1	1,000.0	407.0[b]
Total, Additional Appropriations	1,710.0	765.0	—	—	—	402.9	636.0	—	700.0	—
Total, Other Wildfire Appropriations[c]	38.5	41.0	46.1	39.0	37.2	32.1	—	—	—	—
Total FS & DOI Wildfire Appropriations[e]	4,500.1	3,797.1	3,418.8	2,876.4	2,662.8	3,374.5	3,938.8	3,533.1	4,903.1	4,183.1

Source: CRS. Data compiled from detailed funding tables prepared by the House Committee on Appropriations.

Notes: Figures generally reflect supplemental appropriations and rescissions but do not reflect scorekeeping adjustments. Prior to FY2009, wildfire appropriations to DOI went directly to the Bureau of Land Management (BLM), which allocated the funds among the other agencies; since FY2009, appropriations have gone to the DOI Office of Wildland Fire Management. Totals may not add due to rounding.

a. The FLAME accounts first received appropriations in FY2010. The FY2011 FLAME appropriation to FS reflects a $200 million rescission.

b. These funds were designated so as not to be subject to discretionary spending limits.

c. Prior to FY2014, appropriations for fire assistance activities were provided to FS through two accounts: the WFM account and the State and Private Forestry (SPF) account. Starting in FY2014, appropriations for fire assistance activities were provided only through the WFM account.

d. Total includes funds provided for fire assistance activities appropriated to the FS SPF account for those years when appropriations were provided under the SPF account. Prior to FY2014, appropriations for fire assistance activities were provided to both the SPF account and the WFM account. Starting in FY2014, appropriations for fire assistance activities were provided only through the WFM account.

e. Total reflects final wildfire appropriation to FS and DOI for WFM, the FLAME account, additional appropriations, rescissions, use of emergency funds, use of prior-year funds, and any funds provided for wildfire activities in other accounts. Total also includes funds that were designated as not subject to discretionary spending limits.

Appropriations Accounts, Programs, and Activities

DOI and FS each have two similarly structured accounts for wildfire funding: a Wildland Fire Management (WFM) account and a Federal Land Assistance, Management, and Enhancement Act (FLAME) account.[13] FLAME is a reserve fund for wildfire suppression that requires certain conditions to be met to transfer funding from the FLAME account to the WFM account. Programs within these accounts generally correspond to the different categories of wildland fire management activities. The WFM appropriation is distributed among two programs: Fire Operations and Other Fire Operations. The Fire Operations program receives the bulk of the WFM appropriation and funds two activities: preparedness and suppression. The Other Fire Operations program funds hazardous fuels reduction activities, joint fire research and science programs (e.g., NIFC operations), and programs to provide financial and technical assistance for state and volunteer wildfire management.

Prior to FY2017, appropriations to FS and DOI wildfire accounts typically were designated by Congress to remain available until expended, meaning those funds were "no-year" appropriations (i.e., appropriations without fiscal year limitations) available in future years. The FY2017 appropriations law (P.L. 115-31) specified that funds in many FS accounts—including the WFM account but excluding the FLAME account—were to remain available through the end of FY2020. DOI's WFM and FLAME accounts were designated as no-year appropriations.

Wildland Fire Management Account

Of the two programs funded by both agencies' WFM accounts, Fire Operations receives the largest share of the funding, accounting for 64% of the combined WFM appropriation on average over the last 10 years.

Within FS's and DOI's respective WFM accounts, the Fire Operations programs fund similar activities for both agencies: preparedness and suppression. FS also uses suppression funds for emergency stabilization and initial site rehabilitation activities (called burned area emergency response). DOI also uses some suppression funds for emergency stabilization, but DOI also receives funds for burned area response within its Other Fire Operations program. In addition, DOI's Other Fire Operations program includes appropriations for fuels management, joint fire science activities, and funds for facilities construction and maintenance. For FS, the Other Fire Operations program also includes appropriations for joint fire science activities and fuels management, albeit under a different name: Hazardous Fuels Management. FS appropriations for facilities and construction activities are funded in other agency accounts.[14]

Fire Operations: Preparedness

Preparedness is defined to include any activity that leads to safe, efficient, and cost-effective fire management, and it includes the range of tasks necessary to protect against, respond to, and recover from incidents.[15] Appropriations for preparedness are used to support efforts that assist

[13] The FLAME accounts were established in Title V of Division A of the FY2010 Department of the Interior, Environment, and Related Agencies Appropriations Act (P.L. 111-88, 43 U.S.C. §1748a).

[14] For more information on other FS appropriations, see CRS In Focus IF10670, *Forest Service: FY2017 Appropriations and FY2018 Budget Request*, and CRS Report R43417, *Forest Service Appropriations: Five-Year Data and Trends and FY2017 Budget Request*.

[15] NWCG, *Glossary of Wildland Fire Terminology*, September 2017.

with fire prevention and detection, equipment, training, and baseline personnel. FS uses preparedness funds to establish and maintain web-based decision support tools; manage and modernize aviation assets; and conduct predictive services analysis, among other things.[16] DOI uses preparedness funds to prepare and execute fire management plans and cooperative agreements; provide infrastructure support; manage firefighting assets; support NIFC; and more.[17]

Congress appropriated a combined total of $1.42 billion for preparedness activities in FY2017 ($1.08 billion for FS; $333 million for DOI), nearly level to the $1.41 billion appropriated in FY2016. Over the past 10 years (FY2008-FY2017), funding for the DOI preparedness activity has been $294 million on average annually. Funding fluctuated at or below $290 million until FY2015 and has increased annually for the past three fiscal years. Appropriations for FS preparedness has averaged $901 million annually over the past 10 years, although FS preparedness funding increased by close to 50% from FY2011 ($674 million) to FY2012 ($1.0 billion). This increase was mostly due to a restructuring of the preparedness and suppression activities, which included shifting aviation and other changes to the preparedness activity. Since the budget restructuring, FS preparedness appropriations have averaged $1.05 billion annually (FY2012-FY2017).

Fire Operations: Suppression

Suppression is the work associated with extinguishing or confining a fire. Resolution of an active wildfire may include activities ranging from immediate and aggressive measures to suppress a wildfire (e.g., personnel and large air tanker response for a wildfire moving quickly toward a populated area), to immediate but less intense measures (e.g., monitoring a grassland wildfire where there is no immediate threat to humans). Funds for suppression typically are provided through two accounts in annual Interior appropriations laws: the WFM account and the FLAME account. If the funding in the WFM suppression activity and the FLAME account is exhausted during any given fiscal year, FS and DOI are authorized to transfer funds from their other accounts to pay for continued suppression activities.[18] This practice is sometimes referred to as *fire borrowing* or *fire transfers*. Congress also may provide additional funds for suppression activities through emergency or supplemental appropriations. Suppression funding data are thus presented in this report in three different sections corresponding to the three different funding sources: WFM suppression, FLAME, and supplemental appropriations. They are collectively discussed in the "Total Suppression Appropriations" section of this report.[19]

WFM suppression appropriations are used primarily for wildfire response. Some items covered by the FS suppression activity are firefighter salaries, aviation asset operations, and incident support functions.[20] The FS suppression activity also covers personnel and resources for the Burned Area Emergency Response (BAER) program.[21] Items covered by the DOI suppression

[16] FS, *FY2018 Budget Justification,* p. 87, at https://www.fs.fed.us/sites/default/files/usfs-fy18-budget-justification.pdf.

[17] DOI, *FY2018 Wildland Fire Management Budget Justification*, p. 146, at https://www.doi.gov/sites/doi.gov/files/uploads/fy2018_wfm_budget_justification.pdf. Hereinafter cited as DOI, *FY2018 Budget Justification*.

[18] The transfer authority has been granted annually in the Interior, Environment, and Related Agencies appropriations act, specifically in the general provisions section for DOI and the administrative provisions section for FS.

[19] More information on wildfire suppression spending is also available in CRS Report R44966, *Wildfire Suppression Spending: Background, Issues, and Legislation in the 115th Congress*.

[20] FS, *FY2018 Budget Justification,* p. 148.

[21] The objective of the Burned Area Emergency Response (BAER) program is to determine the need for and to prescribe and implement emergency treatments on federal lands to minimize threats to life or property resulting from the effects of a fire. Another objective of the BAER program is to stabilize and prevent unacceptable degradation to

activity include selected personnel expenses above what is covered by the preparedness subaccount, temporary emergency firefighters, aircraft flight operations and support, and initial emergency stabilization activities.[22] FS and DOI also may assist each other with suppression activities, on a reciprocal non-reimbursement basis up to $50 million annually.[23] Both FS and DOI typically request and receive appropriations for suppression funds based on the average of the previous 10 years of suppression obligations.[24]

The suppression activity received $1.64 billion in FY2017 ($1.25 billion for FS; $395 million for DOI), an increase of more than $540 million from FY2016 levels ($1.10 billion combined). This nearly 50% increase was primarily because Congress appropriated the full 10-year suppression obligation average entirely in the WFM suppression activity in FY2017. Previously, Congress had appropriated about 70% of the 10-year obligation average in the WFM suppression activity, and the remaining 30% was appropriated in the FLAME account.

Other Fire Operations: Hazardous Fuels Management

Fuel reduction is the manipulation (including combustion) or removal of fuels to reduce the likelihood of ignition and/or to lessen potential damage and resistance to control.[25] FS's Hazardous Fuels Management appropriation and DOI's Fuels Management appropriation are used for fuel reduction projects, or *treatments*, on federal lands and in high-priority areas in the wildland-urban interface, the area where structures are intermingled with—or adjacent to—vegetated wildlands such as forests or rangelands.[26]

In FY2017, Congress appropriated $570.0 million for hazardous fuels reduction activities to both FS ($390.0 million) and DOI ($180.0 million), a 5% increase over the total FY2016 level ($545.0 million). On average, the combined hazardous fuels reduction appropriation has been $516.1 million annually over the last 10 years (FY2008-FY2017). Since becoming a stand-alone budget item in FY2001, the Hazardous Fuels subaccount has received the third-largest share of WFM appropriations for both agencies (after suppression and preparedness).

Other Fire Operations: Miscellaneous Activities

FS and DOI also receive appropriations for several other activities within their respective Other Fire Operations subaccounts. In FY2017, Congress appropriated $148 million combined for all of these activities ($113 million for FS; $35 million for DOI), a 1% decrease from the total FY2016 level ($149 million). Over the past 10 years, Congress appropriated $159 million annually on average ($125 million for FS; $34 million for DOI).

For both FS and DOI, this includes appropriations for the joint fire science program, an interagency partnership that works with and competitively funds other government and private

natural and cultural resources. For more information, see FS, "Burned Area Emergency Response, BAER," at https://www.fs.fed.us/biology/watershed/burnareas/.

[22] DOI, *FY2018 Budget Justification*, p. 30.

[23] This means FS and DOI may assist each other, as needed, without requiring the other agency to reimburse the cost of such services.

[24] For more information on the 10-year suppression obligation average, see CRS Report R44966, *Wildfire Suppression Spending: Background, Issues, and Legislation in the 115th Congress*.

[25] NWCG, *Glossary of Wildland Fire Terminology*, September 2017.

[26] V. C. Radeloff et al., "The Wildland-Urban Interface in the United States," *Ecological Applications*, vol. 15, no. 3 (2005), pp. 799-805. For more information on the wildland-urban interface, see CRS Report RS21880, *Wildfire Protection in the Wildland-Urban Interface*.

institutions to conduct, promote, and disseminate wildfire science research. For FS, this also includes appropriations to conduct research for the National Fire Plan and to provide technical and financial assistance to state and volunteer fire departments.[27] DOI also receives appropriations for burned area response within its Other Fire Operations program, as well as for facilities construction and maintenance. These funds are competitively allocated among the DOI bureaus.

FLAME

In enacted appropriations for FY2010, Congress established the FLAME accounts to cover the costs of large or complex fires and to be used when amounts provided in the FS and DOI WFM accounts for suppression are exhausted. Both the Secretary of Agriculture and the Secretary of the Interior may transfer funds from their respective agency's FLAME account into their agency's WFM account for suppression activities, upon a secretarial declaration. The declaration may be issued if a fire covers at least 300 acres or threatens lives, property, or resources, among other criteria. In establishing FLAME, the conferees on the FY2010 Interior appropriations bill stated their intent that the funding in the FLAME account, together with appropriations to the WFM account, should fully fund anticipated wildfire suppression needs and prevent future borrowing of funds from non-fire programs.[28]

From the FLAME accounts' establishment in FY2010 through FY2015, Congress appropriated $370.9 million on average annually to both FLAME accounts. In FY2016, Congress appropriated significantly more to the FLAME accounts, $1.0 billion in total ($823.0 million to FS; $177.0 million to DOI). This increase was largely in response to the severity and cost of the 2015 fire season. In FY2017, Congress appropriated $407.0 million to the FLAME accounts ($342.0 million to FS; $65.0 million to DOI). Congress designated the FY2017 FLAME funds as emergency requirements, consistent with the direction in Section 502(d) of the FLAME Act.[29] This means the FY2017 FLAME funds were not subject to procedural or statutory budgetary enforcement, such as discretionary spending limits established by the Budget Control Act of 2011.[30]

Supplemental Appropriations

Congress also has provided additional funds for suppression activities through supplemental legislation, including in the following fiscal year's annual appropriations law for the agencies. These appropriations have been requested to fund not only fire transfer reimbursements but also current suppression and rehabilitation costs, among other things. Bill or report language typically specifies how the additional funds are to be used. Congress has, at times, designated the supplemental funds as emergency funding, not subject to certain discretionary spending limits. For example, $700 million in wildfire suppression appropriations was provided for FS in FY2016

[27] Prior to FY2014, appropriations for fire assistance activities were provided to FS through two accounts: the WFM account and the State and Private Forestry account. Starting in FY2014, appropriations for fire assistance activities were provided only through the WFM account.

[28] H.R. 2996, H.Rept. 111-316.

[29] 43 U.S.C. §1748(a)(d)(2)(C)(i).

[30] P.L. 112-25, For more information on about the Budget Control Act, see CRS Report R41965, *The Budget Control Act of 2011*. For further information on emergency designations, see CRS Report R41564, *Emergency Designation: Current Budget Rules and Procedures*.

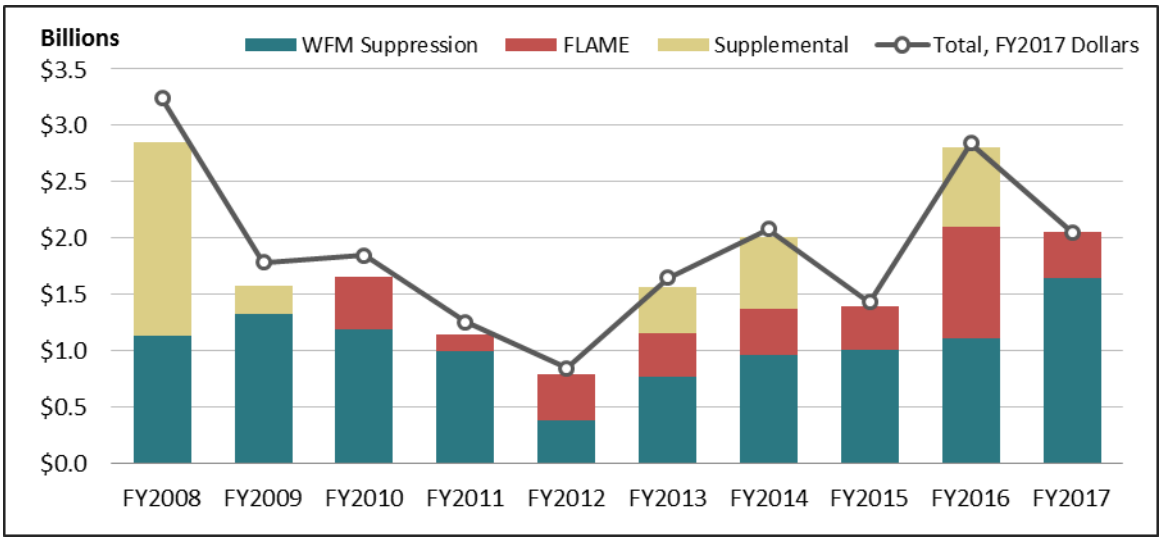
and designated as emergency spending.[31] By contrast, the supplemental appropriations provided in FY2013 and FY2014 for wildfire suppression were not similarly designated.[32]

Congress has provided additional appropriations for suppression in 5 of the 10 fiscal years since FY2008 (see **Table 1**). Since the establishment of the FLAME accounts in FY2010, Congress has provided additional funds in three fiscal years (FY2013, FY2014, and FY2016).

Total Suppression Appropriations

For any given fiscal year, total suppression appropriations to DOI and FS may be a combination of three sources: the WFM suppression activity, the FLAME account, and supplemental appropriations (see **Figure 3**). In FY2017, the total combined suppression appropriation was $2.1 billion ($1.59 billion for FS; $460 million for DOI). Over the past 10 years, the total combined suppression appropriation has averaged $1.98 billion ($1.39 billion for FS; $381 million for DOI). The largest combined appropriation was in FY2008, when Congress provided $2.85 billion ($3.31 billion in FY2017 dollars) in total suppression appropriations. The FY2008 total appropriation included a total of $1.71 billion in nominal dollars provided in three supplemental laws to cover suppression costs incurred in both FY2007 and FY2008.[33]

Figure 3. FS and DOI Suppression Appropriations, FY2008-FY2017



Source: CRS. Data compiled from detailed funding tables prepared by the House Committee on Appropriations.

Notes: Data shown in columns are presented in nominal dollars; line reflects total combined FS and DOI wildfire appropriations adjusted to FY2017 constant dollars using the GDP deflator price index reported by the U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of Economic Analysis, National Income and Products Accounts Tables, Table 1.1.9. "WFM Suppression" includes appropriations to the wildfire suppression activity within the FS's and DOI's WFM accounts. "FLAME" includes appropriations to the FLAME reserve account (established in FY2010). "Supplemental" includes any appropriations provided after the annual appropriation and specified for wildfire

[31] P.L. 114-53, §137.

[32] P.L. 112-175, §§140(b) and 141(b) (FY2013), and P.L. 113-46, §§135 and 136 (FY2014).

[33] $500.0 million was provided in P.L. 110-116 to repay funds transferred from non-fire accounts to pay for suppression activities in FY2007 and for other wildfire purposes; $300.0 million was provided for suppression purposes in P.L. 110-161; and $910.0 million was provided in P.L. 110-329 to repay funds transferred in FY2008 to pay for suppression activities and for other wildfire purposes.

suppression purposes. Supplemental appropriations enacted for suppression purposes in any given fiscal year may have been specified for obligations incurred in the previous fiscal year.

FY2018 Wildfire Appropriations

Continuing Appropriations

Because no full-year appropriations law was enacted before October 1, 2018, Congress has provided continuing appropriations in four continuing resolutions (CRs) for FY2018.[34] The CRs generally have provided funding at the FY2017 levels through February 8, 2018, minus an across-the-board rescission of 0.6791%. The first CR (P.L. 115-56) continued the FY2017 emergency requirements spending designation for both FS's and DOI's FLAME accounts, and it exempted those funds from the rescission. In addition, P.L. 115-56 authorized DOI and the Department of Agriculture (through the FS) to transfer funds from their respective FLAME accounts to repay funds previously transferred from other accounts and used for wildfire suppression purposes.[35]

Supplemental Appropriations

On October 12, 2017, the House passed H.R. 2266, the Additional Supplemental Appropriations for Disaster Relief Requirements Act. The Senate passed the bill on October 24, 2017, and the President signed the bill into law on October 26, 2017 (P.L. 115-72). P.L. 115-72 provided a combined $576.5 million for wildfire suppression purposes to both FS and DOI ($526.5 million for FS; $50.0 million for DOI). These funds were all designated as emergency spending. The funds for DOI were appropriated entirely to DOI's WFM suppression activity. The funds for FS were split between the WFM suppression activity ($184.5 million) and the FLAME account ($342.0 million). The funds provided to the FS were to repay transfers made in FY2017. DOI's funds did not come with that specification. In Section 307, P.L. 115-72 essentially repealed the FLAME funds provided in the first FY2018 CR (P.L. 115-56).

Annual Appropriations

The Administration requested a total of $3.72 billion for wildfire management for FY2018 ($2.85 billion for FS and $874 million for DOI). This figure was a $460 million (12%) decrease from the FY2017 enacted level of $4.18 billion (see **Table 2**). The Administration also proposed several structural changes to both the FS and DOI's wildfire appropriations accounts. For example, the Administration did not request appropriations for either agency's FLAME accounts; instead, the Administration requested all suppression monies through each agency's WFM suppression activity.

The Administration also included some changes to DOI's WFM account, specifically the Other Fire Operations subaccount. The request proposed eliminating the Facilities and Construction activity and funding those projects through each bureau's Deferred Maintenance or Base Construction account.[36] This activity received $8.4 million in FY2017 appropriations. The request

[34] The four CRs are P.L. 115-56, P.L. 115-90, P.L. 115-96, P.L. 115-120. For more information on the FY2018 CR, see CRS Report R44978, *Overview of Continuing Appropriations for FY2018 (P.L. 115-56)*.

[35] P.L. 115-56, Division D, Section 101(a)(7).

[36] DOI, *FY2018 Budget Justification*, p. 55.

also proposed establishing Fuels Management as its own budget subaccount and moving it out of Other Fire Operations.[37]

In addition, the Administration proposed changes to FS's appropriations structure. One change would move Hazardous Fuels Management out of the WFM account and into the National Forest System (NFS) account, for efficiency and efficacy reasons, according to the Administration.[38] Another change would shift some personnel activities from Suppression to Preparedness, to conform with DOI's budget practices.[39] This change also would require FS to re-baseline the calculation of the 10-year suppression obligation average.

On September 14, 2017, the Housed passed H.R. 3354, an omnibus measure covering all 12 appropriations bills, including the FY2018 Interior, Environment, and Related Agencies bill.[40] H.R. 3354 would provide $3.85 billion for combined wildfire appropriations ($2.911 billion for FS and $936 million for DOI), $336 million below FY2017 enacted levels but $124 million above the FY2018 request (see **Table 2**). H.R. 3554 would accept nearly all of the Administration's proposed structural changes to the FS's and DOI's wildfire appropriations, including fully funding the Administration's suppression request in their respective WFM suppression activities and not appropriating any funds to their respective FLAME accounts. The bill also would accept the Administration's proposal to fund FS's Hazardous Fuels activity through its NFS account but would keep DOI's Fuels Management activity within WFM Other Fire Operations (see **Table 3** for wildfire funding by activity). The bill would specify that appropriations to the FS wildfire accounts are to remain available through the end of FY2021 and appropriations to DOI's wildfire accounts are to remain available until expended.[41]

Table 2. FY2017 Enacted, FY2018 Requested and House-Passed Appropriations

(nominal dollars in millions)

Agency/Account	FY2017 Appropriation	FY2018 Request	FY2018 House-Passed (H.R. 3354)
Forest Service			
WFM Account	2,833.4	2,495.0	2,518.7
Fire Operations	2,330.6	2,396.4	2,396.4
Preparedness	*1,082.6*	*1,339.6*	*1,339.6*
Suppression	*1,248.0*	*1,056.8*	*1,056.8*
Other Fire Operations	502.8	98.6	122.3
Hazardous Fuels	*390.0*	*0*	—
Other Activities	*112.8*	*98.6*	*122.3*

[37] Ibid, p. 38. Because these structural changes were not supported by the House in passing H.R. 3354 for FY2018 appropriations, they are not reflected in **Table 2**. U.S. Congress, House Committee on Appropriations, *Department of the Interior, Environment, and Related Agencies Appropriations Bill, 2018*, report to accompany H.R. 3354, 115th Cong., 1st sess., July 21, 2017, H.Rept. 115-238.

[38] FS, FY2018 Budget Justification, p. 87. For more information on the NFS account, see CRS Report R43872, *National Forest System Management: Overview, Appropriations, and Issues for Congress*.

[39] FS, *FY2018 Budget Justification*, p. 145.

[40] Appropriations for Interior, Environment, and Related Agencies are included in Division A of H.R. 3354 as passed by the House.

[41] Prior to FY2017, appropriations to most FS accounts were to remain available until expended. The FY2017 appropriations law specified that funds in many FS accounts—including the WFM account but excluding the FLAME account—were to remain available through the end of FY2020.

Agency/Account	FY2017 Appropriation	FY2018 Request	FY2018 House-Passed (H.R. 3354)
FLAME Account	342.0[a]	0	0
NFS Hazardous Fuels	—	354.3	392.5
Total, FS Wildfire	3,175.4	2,849.3	2,911.2
DOI			
WFM Account	942.7	873.5	935.9
Fire Operations	727.8	711.6	722.2
Preparedness	*332.8*	*322.2*	*332.8*
Suppression	*395.0*	*389.4*	*389.4*
Other Fire Operations	214.9	161.9	213.7
Fuels Management	*180.0*	*149.5*	*182.5*
Other Activities	*34.9*	*15.5*	*31.2*
FLAME Account	65.0[a]	0	0
Total, DOI Wildfire	1,007.7	873.5	935.9
FS and DOI			
WFM Account	3,776.1	3,368.6	3,454.6
FLAME Account	407.0[a]	0	0
NFS Hazardous Fuels	—	354.3	392.5
Total, FS and DOI Wildfire	**4,183.1**	**3,722.8**	**3,847.1**

Source: CRS. Data compiled from detailed funding tables prepared by the House Committee on Appropriations.

Notes: The FS received $527.5 million ($184.5 million to WFM Suppression and $342.0 million to FLAME) and DOI received $50 million to WFM Suppression in FY2018 supplemental appropriations in H.R. 2266, the Additional Supplemental Appropriations for Disaster Relief Requirements Act (P.L. 115-72).

a. These funds were designated as emergency requirements not subject to discretionary spending limits.

Table 3. FS and DOI Wildfire Funding by Activity

(nominal dollars in millions)

FS and DOI Combined	FY2017 Appropriation	FY2018 Request	FY2018 House-Passed (H.R. 3354)
Total Funding for Preparedness	1,415.4	1,661.8	1,672.4
Total Funding for Suppression Activities[a]	2,050.0	1,446.2	1,446.2
Funding for Hazardous Fuels[b]	570.0	503.8	575.0
Total Funding for Other Wildfire Activities	147.7	111.1	153.5
Total, FS and DOI Wildfire Funding	**4,183.1**	**3,722.8**	**3,847.1**

Source: CRS. Data compiled from detailed funding tables prepared by the House Committee on Appropriations.

Notes:

a. This figure includes funding provided for suppression through FS's and DOI's WFM and FLAME accounts. FS received $527 million for suppression and DOI received $50 million in supplemental appropriations in the Additional Supplemental Appropriations for Disaster Relief Requirements Act (P.L. 115-72).

b. For the FY2017 appropriation, this figure includes funding provided for FS Hazardous Fuels Management activity and DOI's Fuels Management activity within their WFM accounts. For the FY2018 request and House-passed appropriation, this figure includes funding provided for DOI's Fuels Management activity within the WFM account and funding provided for FS's Hazardous Fuels Management activity within the NFS account.

Issues

Congress is debating several issues related to federal funding for wildfire management. Issues under debate include the level of federal spending on wildfire management as well as the effectiveness of that spending (e.g., whether the funding is allowing agencies to meet wildfire management targets). Wildfire spending has increased considerably since the 1990s (see **Figure 1**). A significant portion of that increase is related to rising suppression costs, even during years of relatively mild wildfire activity, although the costs vary and are difficult to predict in advance. Congress also is debating the level of appropriations dedicated for certain wildfire management activities. Questions include whether the rising cost of suppression should compete with funding other agency programs and activities and whether investing more in hazardous fuel reduction activities may help to reduce wildfire costs in the future.

In the past, when wildfire suppression funding was exhausted during a fiscal year, the agencies sometimes have had to transfer funds from non-wildfire management suppression accounts. This practice may impact the performance of the activities under those other accounts. In such cases, Congress faces a decision as to whether to reimburse the accounts from which funding was transferred or to otherwise provide supplemental appropriations. The reimbursement or supplemental appropriation often is provided in the following fiscal year. Fire transfers often may disrupt the regular budget cycle and complicate discussions about how much suppression funding is needed for the current fiscal year.

After providing funds for wildland fire management for each fiscal year, Congress has enacted additional funds in 5 of the last 10 years. Three of the five occasions occurred after the establishment of the FLAME accounts (FY2013, FY2014, and FY2016). This may lead to questions regarding the structure of wildfire funding and wildfire suppression budgeting methods.[42] Wildfire suppression funding estimates depend on multiple factors (e.g., weather, fuel load, nearby dwellings, access to wildfire site). Various reasons have been given as to why suppression estimates have at times not accurately forecasted suppression expenses, with estimates typically underestimating suppression spending. Wildfire suppression is complicated, and both the efficiency of resources used for wildfire suppression and the federal protocol for wildfire management have an impact on wildfire suppression costs.

Analyzing trends in wildfire management funding could provide insights useful to Congress during these debates. However, analyzing wildfire funding trends over time—particularly prior to FY2001—is challenging for many reasons. The agencies' account structures have changed over time, with different activities funded through different programs and new accounts created. For example, after the establishment of the FLAME account in FY2010, appropriations that previously had gone entirely to WFM suppression were dispersed between two different accounts.

[42] For more information on supplemental appropriations for wildfire suppression purposes, see CRS Report R44966, *Wildfire Suppression Spending: Background, Issues, and Legislation in the 115th Congress*.

A further complication is that costs for one wildfire season (i.e., a calendar year) often extend into appropriations for two fiscal years, and sometimes appropriations are enacted in one fiscal year to cover costs incurred in previous fiscal years.

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