



Senator Feinstein and Bipartisan Group of 10 Senators Urge Restoration of \$500 Million in Funding for Firefighting Reserve

November 21, 2005

Washington, DC – U.S. Senator Dianne Feinstein (D-Calif.) and a bipartisan group of 10 senators are calling on Senators Thad Cochran (R-Miss.) and Robert Byrd (D-W.Va.), Chairman and Ranking Member (respectively) of the Appropriations Committee, to reject the Administration proposal to eliminate the Forest Service’s \$500 million firefighting reserve.

“The Forest Service firefighting reserve fund helps protect lives and homes from catastrophic fires,” Senator Feinstein said. **“If this year’s fire season is as damaging as those of recent years, the Forest Service would be forced to cut preventive measures, such as hazardous fuels reduction projects and community fire plan development, in order to cover firefighting costs. Failing to sufficiently fund these prevention programs could result in irrevocable human and financial loss in the event of a catastrophic forest fire.”**

The \$500 million reserve firefighting fund, developed on a bipartisan basis, was approved by Congress last year for use in the event of the depletion of the approximately \$700 million annual firefighting budget. That happened in 2000, 2002 and 2003, when catastrophic wildfires in the West caused firefighting costs to exceed \$1 billion each year.

Attached is the letter sent by Senator Feinstein and the bipartisan group of 10 Senators: Larry Craig (R-Idaho), Jeff Bingaman (D-N.M.), Jon Kyl (R-Ariz.), Ron Wyden (D-Ore.), Michael Crapo (R-Idaho), Max Baucus (D-Mont.), Gordon Smith (R-Ore.), Ken Salazar (D-Colo.), Barbara Boxer (D-Calif.), and Daniel Akaka (D-Hawaii):

The Honorable Thad Cochran
Chairman
Appropriations Committee
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Robert C. Byrd
Ranking Minority Member
Appropriations Committee
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Chairman Cochran and Senator Byrd:

In the Fiscal Year 2005 Interior Appropriations bill, Congress adopted a bipartisan solution to the chronic problem of Forest Service fire fighting cost overruns by establishing a \$500 million Budget reserve fund to be used in serious fire seasons. We urge you to reject the proposal to eliminate the reserve in the October 28 proposed rescission package.

We believe the savings are illusory because if the money is needed for fighting forest fires, it will be spent. In three of the last six years, from Fiscal Year 2000-2005, over \$1 billion was needed for Forest Service fire fighting. Each of those years had a cost overrun of over \$300 million. Based on this six-year record, there is a 50% chance there will be at least \$300 million in fire fighting cost overruns next year.

The past cost overruns were paid in large part with funds already dedicated to Forest Service contracts with rural communities and small businesses across America who were depending upon these contracts for income. The reserve fund was created so the Forest Service would not have to freeze work such as hazardous fuels reduction projects and community fire plan development and implementation in rural America while it fights fires elsewhere. Without the reserve fund other Forest Service projects will be halted in mid-course when their funding is yanked out from under them, the Forest Service will cancel contracts, recall work crews on the ground, and delay needed projects indefinitely.

We urge you to retain this Budget reserve fund, not cut Forest Service programs, and allow the President's Healthy Forest Restoration Act the opportunity to protect our communities from catastrophic fire, and allow Americans continued recreational access to our national forests. We particularly object to the hugely disproportionate cuts – \$534 million out of \$2.3 billion or nearly one-quarter of the proposed savings – that the proposal would impose on the Forest Service and the rural West that adjoins National Forest System lands.

We finally have a bipartisan solution to the longstanding problem of funding emergency firefighting needs. We urge you to protect this bipartisan success by keeping the \$500 million reserve.

Sincerely,

Dianne Feinstein
Jeff Bingaman
Ron Wyden
Max Baucus
Ken Salazar
Daniel Akaka

Larry Craig
Jon Kyl
Michael Crapo
Gordon Smith
Barbara Boxer

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