State Fire Assistance

Fact Sheet

American Forests

Idaho Conservation League

National Association of Counties

National Association of State Foresters

Society of American Foresters

The Nature Conservancy

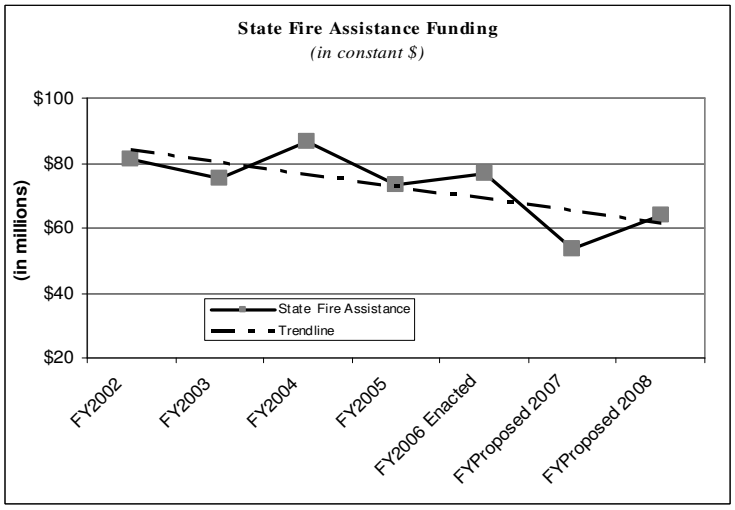
The Wilderness Society

In 2001, the U.S. Forest Service and the Department of the Interior identified over 11,000 communities adjacent to federal lands that are at risk from wildland fire. Beyond these borders, State Foresters conservatively estimate 45,000 communities at risk. Over 80% of all wildland fires in the last five years have occurred on state and private lands. Population pressures in these wildland-urban interface (WUI) communities will continue to grow with the expectation of approximately eight million additional homes built in the WUI by 2010.

With increased funding, State Fire Assistance (SFA) is the federal program that will facilitate successful wildland fire preparedness and management by integrating private lands into landscape-scale fuel mitigation and planning. The proactive planning and preparedness assistance provided by State Fire Assistance is key to the long-term reduction of wildfire suppression costs.

- SFA was developed in the Cooperative Forestry Assistance Act of 1978 to provide financial and technical assistance to states and communities for wildland fire management. It is funded under State & Private Forestry and Wildland Fire Management.
- SFA helps ensure preparedness of state and local firefighting resources, enabling them to effectively address all hazard events as well as respond to wildland fire situations.
- SFA is the only federal fire program that is designed to provide funding for fuel reduction on non-federal lands, regardless of their proximity to federal lands – a crucial part of achieving the goals of the 10-Year Comprehensive Strategy and the Healthy Forests Restoration Act.
- SFA helps communities develop Community Wildfire Protection Plans (CWPPs) – key tools in helping communities prepare for wildland fire.
- SFA educates homeowners on fire safety, particularly through the FIREWISE program.

Fire funding began increasing in FY01 with the initiation of the National Fire Plan. However, funding for State Fire Assistance has been on a downward trend since FY02 (shown by the dotted line), with the largest decrease since FY04. In fact, in FY05-FY07, the President's Budget has recommended cuts of over $20 million to this program. For FY07, this equated to a proposed 30% reduction.



Even with the federal funds matched dollar-for-dollar, this downward funding trend makes the program increasingly difficult to implement.

- **SFA helped 19,000 communities in FY05, only a fraction of the communities-at-risk across the country. At current funding levels, with the conservative estimate of 45,000 communities, each community would receive approximately $1,700.**

- **Due to budget constraints in FY04, Western State Fire Managers were only able to fund 86 of the 204 applications. Double the western funding allocation, $30 million instead of $15 million, would have been needed to meet the demand.**

Examples of Accomplishments Using State Fire Assistance Funding:

- Since FY02, 470,000 acres of hazardous fuels have been treated in and around communities. These treatments help achieve the goals of the 10-Year Comprehensive Strategy and the Healthy Forests Restoration Act by reducing hazardous fuels where most necessary – in the WUI – and making it safer for firefighters.

- Over 1,100 Community Wildfire Protection Plans covering over 3,300 communities have been completed to help prioritize wildfire mitigation efforts.

- The Southern Wildfire Risk Assessment was developed by the Southern Group of State Foresters to prioritize projects – allowing scarce resources to be used where needed most.

- Since FY 02, 165,000 wildland firefighters have received training, enabling them to work seamlessly with firefighters from the federal land management agencies.

- In 2005 State Fire Assistance funds assisted the Southern State Forestry Agencies in responding to over 35,900 wildfires that burned 600,000 acres.

In these fiscally constrained times, effective wildland fire management requires partnerships between agencies and communities. Funding hazardous fuels reduction on federal lands is critical, especially where these lands are in a WUI, and decisions about fuels reduction on federal lands needs to be done in conjunction with affected communities, including state and local agencies. An exclusive focus on federal lands, however, is an incomplete solution and will ultimately undermine mission success. State and private lands must be considered through a landscape-scale approach to planning and implementing hazardous fuels reduction projects if we are to effectively meet the highest priority of federal fire policy[1] – protecting communities threatened by wildland fire. The recently updated Implementation Plan for the 10-year Strategy demonstrates the needed investment in SFA. SFA is the primary federal vehicle for community fire assistance - Goal IV of the Strategy - which is the most important aspect of creating wildfire-ready communities in fire-adapted landscapes.

Effective wildland fire management requires successful partnerships and cooperation between agencies and communities, which can only occur with increased funding for State Fire Assistance and clearly coordinating efforts for fuels reduction activities on federal, state and private lands. The National Association of State Foresters estimates SFA funding needs for FY 2008 at $145 million. While budget constraints may not support this much of an increase over previous years, the number should be considered as an accurate reflection of funding needs.

[1] The 1995 Federal Wildland Fire Management: Policy and Program Review and its 2001 Update both recognize "…public safety is the first priority in every fire management activity" and the 2000 Report to the President states "As a first priority, the Departments will continue to provide all necessary resources to ensure that firefighting efforts protect life and property."