

Rural County Representatives of California: Wildfire Disaster Funding Act of 2017

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September 23, 2017 - On Wednesday, a bipartisan coalition of senators introduced a bill that will reform how wildfire suppression is funded, and end the practice of fire borrowing. The Wildfire Disaster Funding Act of 2017 is the latest version of a bill introduced over the past two Congresses that seeks to fund wildfires as natural disasters in response to the growing costs of wildfire suppression. The bill was introduced by Senators Ron Wyden (D-Oregon), Mike Crapo (R-Idaho), Dianne Feinstein (D-California), Jim Risch (R-Idaho), Orrin Hatch (R-Utah), Jeff Merkley (D-Oregon), Corey Gardner (R-Colorado), and Michael Bennet (D-Colorado), along with Maria Cantwell (D-Washington), Ranking Member of the Senate Committee on Energy & Natural Resources.

In a statement of support for the bill, Senator Feinstein urged Congress to “treat wildfires like other natural disasters and allow federal agencies to pay for them like other natural disasters.” The latest incarnation of the Wildfire Disaster Funding Act would end fire borrowing by setting the annual firefighting budget at the current 10-year average and if fire suppression costs exceed this amount, agencies will have access to the same disaster funds used for relief from tornadoes, hurricanes, and floods.

Senators Wyden and Crapo reintroduced the Wildfire Disaster Funding Act a week after the U.S. Forest Service announced 2017 fire suppression costs exceeded \$2 billion. Congress took action earlier this month by including a provision in the hurricane relief package that will add \$300 million to fire suppression accounts, but western senators want a legislative solution that will end fire borrowing. A permanent legislative fix will allow the U.S. Forest Service to focus more funds on forest management programs that will minimize wildfires in the future. The House Natural Resources Committee will have a thorough review of these issues next week in a hearing titled “Exploring Solutions to Reduce Risks of Catastrophic Wildfire and Improve Resiliency of National Forests.” The hearing was posted to the Committee’s calendar on Wednesday, adding to a Congressional agenda that includes a House floor vote to extend the Federal Aviation Administration’s activities. A hearing in the Senate Agriculture Committee on rural development and energy programs for the next Farm Bill is also slated.

Source: Rural County Representatives of California

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