

## **Outdoor Alliance Washington**

Access Fund • American Alpine Club • American Whitewater  
El Sendero • Evergreen Mountain Bike Alliance • The Mountaineers  
Washington Climbers Coalition • Washington Trails Association

July 10, 2014

**RE: Fire Funding Impacts on Outdoor Recreation in Washington**

Dear Representatives DelBene, Heck, Herrera Beutler, Kilmer, McMorris Rodgers and Reichert,

The Access Fund, the American Alpine Club, American Whitewater, El Sendero, Evergreen Mountain Bike Alliance, The Mountaineers, Washington Climbers Coalition and Washington Trails Association - all human powered recreation organizations in Washington State - come together as a coalition on issues relating to recreation, access and conservation. As the group Outdoor Alliance Washington, we represent more than 34,000 members who recreate on public lands.

We have a significant interest in the funding that land management agencies have available for both wildfire suppression and for programs that benefit outdoor recreation. Our activities are both affected by wildfires and require investments, including trail maintenance and active land management. Wildfires are not uncommon in Washington, with over 150,000 acres burned in 2013<sup>1</sup>. Across the nation, each year brings more so called “megafires” that have all the destructive qualities of other natural disasters like tornadoes and hurricanes.

On behalf of all of us that enjoy human powered outdoor recreation in Washington, we thank you for cosponsoring the Wildfire Disaster Funding Act of 2014 (HR 3992).

For years, both the Forest Service and the Bureau of Land Management have had to transfer money from other programs to fight fires. The worst result might be the vicious cycle created by depleting funds for work to mitigate the risk of fires in order to pay for fire suppression. But recreation programs in particular are also negatively impacted.

Agency programs that benefit recreation often happen in the summer season. This timing puts recreation budgets on a collision course with fire suppression costs. Every summer, many of the resources set aside for program delivery that benefits recreation get diverted to fight fires. In Washington alone, the 2012 fiscal year saw \$40,000 in road and trail restoration and \$90,000 in trail projects either cancelled or deferred. The last fiscal year was worse, with over \$290,000 in trails projects deferred<sup>2</sup>.

While the funds transferred are significant, the effect of staff transfers is perhaps greater. During fire season, seasonal and yearly staff are often diverted to fight fires, leaving trail and other projects postponed or scrapped altogether. Similarly, valuable collaboration and planning efforts can get set back a full year or more when staff time is transferred.

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<sup>1</sup> National Interagency Fire Center

[http://www.predictiveservices.nifc.gov/intelligence/2013\\_Statssumm/fires\\_acres13.pdf](http://www.predictiveservices.nifc.gov/intelligence/2013_Statssumm/fires_acres13.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> “Fire Transfer Impacts by State and Territory,” USDA Forest Service.

<http://www.fs.fed.us/publications/forest-service-fire-transfer-state-impacts.pdf>

Finally, the impacts on recreation go beyond funding and staffing transfers, and can last for years after a fire. Many times burnt areas remain closed to recreation access because there is no funding available for crews to reopen them. All of these on-the-ground impacts of this budgeting issue, including reduced program delivery, diverted staff time and shortchanged restoration, are costly and avoidable.

We believe the bipartisan Wildfire Disaster Funding Act offers a promising alternative, allowing the agencies to meet the growing costs of fire suppression without impacting other programs. By funding suppression costs through a budget cap adjustment, this Act would provide a budget-neutral, reliable funding structure, consistent with other agencies' responses to natural disasters.

Longer fire seasons, increased development, historically high fuel loads and other factors will continue to drive increasing costs of firefighting. In order to protect other critical agency programs, including those that benefit recreation, extreme wildfires should be declared natural disasters and excess fire suppression costs should be treated differently. Agencies should not have to dig a hole in vital program budgets to fill a hole in fire suppression funds.

Best regards,

Andrea Imler, *Advocacy Director*, Washington Trails Association  
Eddie Espinosa, *Northwest Region Manager*, American Alpine Club  
Glenn Glover, *Executive Director*, Evergreen Mountain Bike Alliance  
Gus Bekker, *President*, El Sendero Backcountry Ski Club  
Joe Sambataro, *Northwest Regional Director*, Access Fund  
Martinique Grigg, *Executive Director*, The Mountaineers  
Matt Perkins, *Washington Climbers Coalition*  
Thomas O'Keefe, *Pacific Northwest Stewardship Director*, American Whitewater

cc:

Tom Flynn, *Regional Director*, Outdoor Alliance