



# NATIONAL FEDERATION OF FEDERAL EMPLOYEES

Affiliated with the International Association of Machinists and Aerospace Workers



## NFFE News Release

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# IN AMERICA'S NATIONAL FORESTS, STIMULUS FUNDS ARE SAVING MORE THAN JOBS

Just last week, President Barack Obama signed a \$787 billion stimulus package that he and Congressional supporters say will stimulate the economy and create millions of jobs for American workers. Now that the bill is signed, many Americans are looking to identify ways that stimulus spending will benefit their families and communities.

Wildfire prevention, an issue that's importance is underscored by the devastating wildfires that have raged throughout the Western U.S. in recent years, represents one of the lesser known, yet no less vital, priorities funded by the stimulus package. The spending bill set aside \$500 million for wildfire management, much of it for clearing forests of underbrush fuel, which otherwise contributes to dangerous and unmanageable forest fires. For millions of Americans residing in areas where wildfires are an ever-present and growing threat, this provision of the stimulus bill will help make their communities safer places to live.

Our nation's wildfire problems have worsened significantly over the past two decades. Since the 1990s, the average acreage burned annually by wildland fires has increased by roughly 70 percent. According to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), wildfires destroyed over 5.2 million acres of forest in the latter half of 2008, causing an estimated \$2 billion in damage. During the same year, wildfires killed 16 people and leveled over a thousand structures.

"Due in large part to the accumulation of underbrush fuel in our nation's forests, we have seen an increase in catastrophic wildfires," said Ron Thatcher, NFFE Forest Service Council President. "When we are denied the manpower and resources necessary to carry out our mission, American lives and communities are put at increased risk. Let me tell you, it feels good to finally be heading in the right direction on this."

As a percentage of the agency budget, Forest Service fire management activities have risen from 13 percent in 1991, to a projected 48 percent for 2009. Suppression costs exceeded \$1 billion in six of the last nine years and are trending steeply upward. This leaves progressively less funding to perform other vital land management activities, including fuel reduction projects. The numbers document a diversion of effort, unintentional but real, toward fire suppression in lieu of fire prevention – an approach that is both dangerous and inefficient.

"Katrina taught us it is far more effective to prepare for inevitable events – for example with sturdy dikes and healthy wetlands – than it is deal with emergencies after inadequate protective measures have failed," said Thatcher. "With wildfires too, it is more effective to spend money on the front end to reduce their frequency and intensity, than it is to spend money on the back end trying to contain them after they are out of control. This is exactly the kind of work the stimulus funding will support."

While it remains to be seen if the stimulus bill will mark the beginning of an economic turnaround, there is little doubt that in funding wildfire management it is tackling a pressing national need. Strong bipartisan agreement on the need to reduce forest fuel loads in the battle against wildfires already exists. The stimulus bill provides much-needed resources for this essential work.

"One thing getting lost in the public discussion about the stimulus are the benefits of intelligent investments, like addressing the underbrush removal backlog in our nation's forests," stated Thatcher, noting that it will take years of sustained effort to repair decades of misguided management and neglect. "This serves a vital national interest and at the same time, creates jobs. Some might try to call addressing national priorities like cleaning up our forests big government, but I'd call it smart government."

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*Established in 1917, the NFFE is the oldest union representing civil service federal employees. NFFE currently represents 100,000 federal employees government-wide, including approximately 20,000 workers at the U.S. Forest Service. NFFE is affiliated with the International Association of Machinists and Aerospace Workers.*