

March 25, 2009

Washington, DC—Rep. Peter DeFazio today voted to improve forest health, public safety and the ability of our federal land management agencies to fight forest fires when he voted for H.R. 1404, the Federal Land Assistance, Management and Enhancement (FLAME) Act. The legislation, which passed the House of Representatives by a vote of 412 to 3, creates a FLAME fund for emergency wildfire suppression.

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"Fire suppression costs have increased with alarming speed in recent years. Currently, our agencies simply do not have the resources to effectively respond to these threats. We do not want the problem to escalate, forcing us to make hard choices between money and safety. The FLAME Act ends that threat by providing adequate funding to fight fires," DeFazio said. "Furthermore, it means that fighting fires will no longer drain the coffers of our federal land management agencies. Instead, they will be able to focus on promoting the health, productivity, diversity, and beauty of our forests and public lands."

For more than a decade, the skyrocketing costs of fighting wildland fires have forced federal land management agencies to "borrow" funds from non-fire programs, thus eroding the core mission of these agencies. Wildland fire activities now account for approximately 48 percent of the Forest Service budget, up from just 13 percent in 1991. These activities also account for more than 10 percent of the Interior Department budget. The FLAME Act will put an end to this practice, meaning funds will be appropriately used for their intended purpose such as forest health improvements.

In addition, the bill establishes a grant program within each department designed to assist communities in preparing for wildfires. Grants could be used for purchasing firefighting equipment, and training programs for local firefighters. Grants could also be used for education and public awareness regarding wildfires, and development and implementation of community wildfire protection plans.

The bill also has a robust oversight provision. It requires the Departments of Agriculture and Interior to submit a report to Congress one year after the bill's enactment containing a cohesive wildland fire management strategy. The bill requires the report to include a system identifying the most cost-effective means for allocating fire management resources, a system for assessing the level of risk to communities from wildfires, an illustration of plans by the departments to re-invest in non-fire programs, and a system ensuring that the highest priority fuels reduction projects (which can prevent catastrophic wildfires) are being funded first.