

Forest Service under pressure to act on wildfire funding: The agency has yet to say where it will spend billions of dollars from the 2021 infrastructure law and other recent appropriations by Marc Heller
(*Greenwire*, Nov. 1, 2022)



GREENWIRE | Nearly a year after Congress directed billions of dollars to national forests in the bipartisan infrastructure law, the Forest Service hasn't detailed where it plans to spend much of that money — and pressure is growing on the agency to move faster.

Democratic lawmakers from Colorado on Tuesday [wrote to Forest Service Chief Randy Moore](#), asking for more information about how the Forest Service intends to use money from the infrastructure bill and the more recently passed Inflation Reduction Act, which together provided more than \$10 billion to address a backlog of management projects in national forests.

This move comes as companies that harvest timber in national forests are expressing concerns that the Forest Service hasn't identified where it will

spend funding for "emergency" forest projects aimed at reducing wildfire dangers.

The infrastructure bill, signed by President Joe Biden last Nov. 15, provided more than \$5 billion for work to reduce potential wildfire fuel, but the forest agency hasn't given regional managers guidance on how emergency funds will be used, said Bill Imbergamo, executive director of the Federal Forest Resource Coalition, representing timber companies that work in the 193-million-acre forest system.

An agency spokesperson, Wade Muehlhof said in an email that the Forest Service is working with the Department of Agriculture, which oversees it, to craft an approach. In a column on the agency's website in November 2021, Moore said about \$3 billion of the \$5.5 billion for the Forest Service in that measure would be reserved for reducing wildfire risk and restoring ecosystems.

"It is a bit premature to discuss implementation at this point," Muehlhof said.

Officials and industry groups agree that projects are badly needed, including to reduce the density of trees in some forests that haven't seen fire or thinning in many years. In other places, forest managers say post-wildfire work is needed to take out dead trees that could provide fuel for the next fire and to protect water quality because many forested areas provide drinking water to communities.

The extent of such work is a subject of debate in environmental circles, since standing dead or burned trees provide wildlife habitat. And environmental groups caution against easing reviews under the National Environmental Policy Act or approving big projects that they say serve mainly logging interests, especially in places where the benefit of thinning is more debatable ([Greenwire](#), July 5).

Other projects, though, have already cleared the NEPA reviews. And in many cases, projects to create fuel breaks or remove hazardous fuels receive categorical exclusions from the law, meaning they can proceed with a less rigorous review.

Imbergamo said there are projects that have cleared NEPA reviews, such as restoration work in the Payette National Forest in Idaho, that haven't received funding or been identified as priorities by the Forest Service.

The Colorado lawmakers, led by Sens. Michael Bennet and John Hickenlooper and joined by four Democratic House members, cited their state's recent experience with wildfires driven in part by climate change and hailed the passage of the \$10 billion in forest funding in the legislation, including \$600 million for wildland firefighting.

"However, critical details about the timing and specific use of these funds remain undetermined, including the initial \$18 million of Infrastructure Law funds allocated to Colorado," they said.

In their letter, the lawmakers asked Moore to provide more information about how the agency will prioritize projects as part of its 10-year wildfire strategy released earlier this year, as well as the methods it's using to determine goals for treated acres and "high risk firesheds," or areas most at risk of wildfire.

"As climate change intensifies the frequency and severity of wildfires across the West, it is imperative that the Forest Service move expeditiously to allocate the new funding. The \$10 billion in combined funding from the Infrastructure Law and the IRA represents a historic opportunity to address wildland fire and forest management across jurisdictions, at a scale commensurate with the West's wildfire crisis, through shared priority setting with States, Tribes and other partners," they said.

The funding for "emergency" work in the infrastructure bill has drawn the attention of Imbergamo's group and illustrates the challenges of coordination between the Forest Service, USDA and the White House once the money is in hand.

While the Biden administration has said it's committed to stepped-up forest management to tackle the wildfire crisis, it's also endeavored to protect mature and old-growth forests and to reverse some of the Trump administration's relaxation of environmental reviews, actions that can slow or prevent forest projects in some places.

Imbergamo said his group had hoped for more progress after a year. "Instead, the agency has only approved a handful of fuel break projects and has passed

up opportunities to implement projects which have already been approved," he said.

He added, "The Forest Service can't successfully reduce hazardous fuels on the national forests without thinning forests, and the most effective way to do that is through carefully planned timber sales. We're ready to partner with the Forest Service to reduce fire danger while creating good paying jobs in rural areas."

The governor of Idaho, Brad Little, told Moore [in an August letter](#) that he's prepared to join with the Forest Service to make disaster declarations for high-risk forests before fire strikes — and that branding wildfires simply as a symptom of climate change may understate their impact.

"Some are trying to rebrand wildfires as 'climate fires' — a term that does not accurately capture the breadth of the problem or reflect the unique steps states like Idaho are taking to improve the health of our lands, giving them a fighting chance against wildfires that forever alter the landscape, pollute the air and water, and damage lives," said Little, a Republican who broke with GOP orthodoxy in 2019 to declare that climate change is real.

Moore has acknowledged the big task ahead for his agency as the Forest Service decides where to target the influx of money from Congress.

In his column last year, Moore told employees, "This historic legislation gives us more of the funding we need to ensure that the people and communities we serve get all the benefits they want and need from the nation's forests and grasslands. Congress will be watching and holding us accountable, so it will be up to us to deliver.