Last week in a continued effort to find a long-term wildfire funding fix, Senators Ron Wyden (OR) and Mike Crapo (ID), introduced an updated version of their bipartisan wildfire funding solution, the Wildfire Disaster Funding Act (WDFA). This bill aims to end the cycle of borrowing from accounts not intended for fire suppression, to put out fires and stop the erosion of the Forest Service’s budget by reforming the way the federal government funds wildfires.

Wildfires continue to decimate Western communities as 8.5 million acres have already burned this season, and 26 large active fires continue to burn uncontained. The wildland fire suppression costs for this fiscal year have exceeded $2 billion, making this the most expensive year on record.

In the short-term, Congress has passed an emergency supplemental funding bill to cover the current suppression funding needs that allows the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) and Department of Interior (DOI) the authority to transfer funds from fiscal year 2018 to replenish the funds used on fires burning now.
from their operating budgets. Because of this, agencies have to borrow money from non-fire programs and transfer them to pay fire suppression needs.

A few weeks ago, the USFS had to transfer $300 million from other accounts to meet its current suppression needs, and even that may not be enough to meet those needs through the end of the fiscal year.

For years, the increasing costs of wildfire suppression have hurt the ability of the USFS and DOI to implement necessary land management activities as this practice of ‘fire-borrowing’ results in fewer resources for land managers to work on conservation, wildlife habitat restoration, or fire prevention measures.

Land management agencies are in urgent need of responsible budgeting that ensures first responders have the up-front resources available for wildfire suppression; and stable budgeting that ensures agencies and programs can accomplish their land management goals. WDFA is a comprehensive fix for DOI agencies and the USFS, and would ensure increasing suppression costs stop coming at the expense of other programs.

The Mountain Pact has been closely following and shaping this legislation. You can learn more on our website. Stay tuned for engagement opportunities.