The federal climate change and public lands policy landscape is ever changing and the work is never done. In this Mountain Pact newsletter we share the latest news on fire/public lands funding in Congress and the implementation of the Outdoor REC Act – two areas we have worked on extensively with our local government and chamber partners.

Wildfire Disaster Funding Act (WDFA) of 2017
There has been a marked increase in catastrophic wildfire due to climate change, and currently, wildfire suppression uses over 50% of the United States Forest Service’s (USFS) budget, and is projected to use two-thirds of the budget by 2025. As more and more funding goes to wildfire suppression – particularly in the West – less money is available for other USFS and Department of Interior (DOI) land management programs, such as wildfire prevention and conservation, that benefit forests nationwide.

In whole, wildfire prevention programs are proven to be 90% effective, and cost less than wildfire suppression, so by making funds available to put into prevention programs, the USFS and DOI will be saving money and positioned to meet their other critical land management functions. Further, with an increase in catastrophic wildfires, some wildfires can be classified...
as disasters, and should have access to disaster funding – much like FEMA programs.

On June 8, Representatives Mike Simpson (R-ID) and Kurt Schrader (D-OR) introduced H.R. 2862, the Wildfire Disaster Funding Act of 2017. This bill calls for a comprehensive fire funding fix, similar to the bipartisan 2015 WDFA, which never received a vote even though it was cosponsored by over 150 members of Congress. WDFA of 2017 is now up to 61 bipartisan cosponsors.

The 2017 WDFA includes the following:

1. addresses the continued erosion of agency budgets that results from the increasing 10–year average and stabilizes the level of funding for suppression within the agencies,
2. accesses disaster funding for extraordinarily costly fires, including those that may be calculated as part of the 10–year average and,
3. significantly reduces the need to transfer from non-suppression accounts and programs.

These criteria are necessary for a comprehensive fire funding solution, and have also been included in Sec. 102 of the National Flood Insurance Program Bill that was introduced by Senators Mike Crapo (R-ID) and Sherrod Brown (D-OH) earlier this year. Although the language in this Senate bill is slightly different than the House bill, it addresses all of the necessary items that must be included for comprehensive wildfire funding reform. The bill is currently being reviewed by the Senate Banking Committee.

Wildfire funding reform is critical for the economic and environmental vitality of Western mountain communities. This bill would not only provide emergency relief funding to protect our communities from more frequent and severe wildfires, but it would also significantly reduce impacts on programs that support recreation infrastructure on federal lands – the base of our local economies. Learn more about The Mountain Pact’s work on public lands and fire funding on our website.

Outdoor Recreation Economy Contribution by State

In April of this year, the Outdoor Industry Association (OIA) released a new report detailing the national impact of the outdoor recreation economy to the United States GDP, and has now released economic impact reports detailing how the outdoor recreation industry supports the economy of each state. The outdoor recreation economy generates: $887 billion in annual consumer spending – more than Americans spend on pharmaceuticals and fuel combined – 7.6 million direct jobs, and $125 billion in federal, state and local tax revenue. Of this, $208.9 billion in consumer spending, 2 million direct jobs, and $15.5 billion in state and local tax revenue, which represents just over one–quarter of the national numbers, is produced in the 11 western states of CA, WA, OR, NV, ID, MT, CO, NM, AZ, UT, and WY. In these states, 46.4% of land is owned by either the U.S. Department of Agriculture (often USFS), or the DOI. Together, these numbers highlight the importance of public lands to the economies of western states and mountain communities.

Recognizing the significance of the outdoor recreation economy, the bipartisan Outdoor REC Act was passed late last year. It instructs the Bureau of Economic Analysis (BEA) along
with the Federal Recreation Council (FRC) to officially define the outdoor recreation industry and create an account that will measure the contributions of the industry to the United States GDP. Once finalized, these official numbers will provide critical data to support the continued success of the outdoor recreation industry and the public lands on which it relies.

Earlier this year, The Mountain Pact organized sixteen towns and fourteen chambers of commerce to submit letters to the Trump Administration urging it to prioritize implementing the Outdoor REC Act. The Mountain Pact also submitted public comment encouraging the BEA and FRC to maintain the current definition of outdoor recreation as used by the Outdoor Industry Association. Currently, the BEA and FRC are reviewing public comment letters to create an official definition of the outdoor recreation economy. They are expected to have prototype estimates based on this definition by January of 2018.

As always, stay tuned for more updates and information on federal policies related to climate, public lands and outdoor recreation.

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