



Legislative & Policy Update – August 2023

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The [Council of Western State Foresters](#) (CWSF) Legislative & Policy Update provides information on issues of importance to CWSF. Policy and legislative updates are found on the CWSF webpage [here](#). Please note that the items highlighted in these updates are only a selection of the issues CWSF and the Western Forestry Leadership Coalition (WFLC) are monitoring. Keep an eye out for our monthly newsletter that will provide summaries on other key legislative and programmatic issues. If you have not yet subscribed, you can do so [here](#). For more information, please contact [Neil Simpson](#) Director of Policy.

This month’s policy update highlights the fiscal year (FY) 2024 appropriations, the Farm Bill, efforts to increase federal wildland firefighters’ pay, and a new Notice of Funding Opportunity (NOFO) for temporary bridges.

Fiscal Year 2024 Appropriations

Prior to the August recess, the Senate and House Appropriations Committees each passed Fiscal Year 2024 Interior - Environment Appropriations Bills, [S 2605](#) and [HR 4821](#), respectively. Compared to proposed cuts to other agencies’ budgets, the USDA Forest Service (Forest Service) budgets proposed by both the House and Senate committees remain relatively stable from FY 23.

The following table highlights the high-level budget proposals and select Budget Line Items (in millions) of the Senate and House Bills and compares them to FY 23 enacted appropriations.

<u>Program</u>	FY23 Enacted*	FY24 House Draft	FY24 Senate Draft
State, Private, and Tribal Forestry (SPTF) Total	\$337.76	\$305.20	\$327.40
Forest Stewardship Program	\$12.50	\$12.00	\$12.50
State Fire Assistance	\$76.00	\$79.00	\$76.00
Volunteer Fire Assistance	\$21.00	\$22.00	\$21.00
Urban and Community Forestry	\$40.00	\$40.00	\$40.00
Landscape Scale Restoration	\$17.00	\$16.00	\$17.00
Forest Health on Cooperative Lands	\$33.00	\$30.00	\$33.00
Forest Legacy Program	\$77.94	\$94.21	\$95.24
National Forest System Total	\$1,974.39	\$1,816.44	\$1,978.39
Forest Service Operations Total	\$1,152.74	\$1,069.09	\$1,152.74
Forest and Rangeland Research Total	307.27	\$275.00	\$307.27

<u>Program</u>	FY23 Enacted*	FY24 House Draft	FY24 Senate Draft
Forest Inventory and Analysis (FIA)	\$32.20	\$32.20	\$32.20
Wildland Fire Management Total	\$945.96	\$2,116.96**	\$2,123.96**

**In FY 23, \$30.17 was directed to FIA from SPTF and \$32.30 was directed to FIA from Forest and Rangeland Research*

***Bills for FY 24 Appropriations state \$1.011 billion shall be available for wildfire suppression*

Congress will return from August recess after Labor Day, leaving only limited time to reconcile the differences in the House and Senate bills. If a full appropriations bill is not passed by the end of September, a continuing resolution would be needed to avoid a government shutdown. Track appropriations progress at the [Congressional Research Service](#).

Farm Bill

The 2018 Farm Bill is set to expire on September 30, 2023, and it is becoming more and more likely that a new Farm Bill will not be drafted and passed prior to this expiration. As reported in [Reuters](#), top leaders of the House and Senate Agriculture Committees have indicated the Farm Bill will likely not be completed by September 30 and talks of an extension are underway.

To learn more about State Foresters’ priorities for the upcoming Farm Bill, view the [National Association of State Foresters’ Farm Bill webpage](#).

Federal Firefighter Pay

Relatively low pay has been cited in a recent [Government Accountability Study](#) as a barrier to recruitment and retention within the federal wildland firefighting workforce, and while the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law appropriated temporary funding to increase firefighter pay, current projections show that funding will run out by the end of FY 23.

There is significant momentum around extending or making permanent the increase in federal firefighters’ pay. The Wildland Firefighter Paycheck Protection Act of 2023 ([S 2272](#)) has been introduced in the Senate, and three separate bills ([HR 1235](#), [HR 4831](#), and [HR 5169](#)) have been introduced in the House. Additionally, in his recent [Emergency Funding Request](#), President Biden included a request for \$45 million for the Department of Agriculture and \$15 million for the Department of the Interior to “implement wildland firefighting pay reform through the first quarter of FY 2024” to avoid federal firefighters facing a “pay cliff as soon as October.”

Temporary Bridge Funding Opportunity

On August 1, 2023, the Forest Service posted a [NOFO](#) of up to \$8 million to support the development of rental, loan, and cost-share programs for portable bridges and other temporary water crossing structures that protect water quality.

The NOFO encourages collaboration with partners such as loggers associations and Water Conservation Districts, and a few noteworthy details include:

- States may develop loan or rental programs in which the state will retain ownership of the bridges.
- States may develop cost-share programs in which the participants pay a share of the bridge cost and become the owners of the bridge.
- The Forest Service has secured an exception from certain equipment provisions. Bridges with a purchase value of \$35,000.00 or less are exempt from the federal interest in bridges as long as they are used for their intended purpose.
- Project agreements are expected to last no more than 2 – 3 years.

Applications are being accepted on a rolling basis and are due the last Friday of the month in April, August, or December.