

Responsible Wildland Fire Recovery Act of 2023



Background

Wildfires in the western United States are increasingly frequent and damaging. The annual number of wildfires has more than doubled since 1983, and during this 40-year period, more than half of the total wildfire damage was incurred in just the last 5 years. Unfortunately, a subset of these fires has been started by well-intentioned land management activities carried out by Federal agencies. For example, the 2022 Hermit's Peak/Calf Canyon fire was ignited by a US Forest Service prescribed burn, and became the largest and most destructive wildfire in New Mexico's history. After wildfires, the Federal government deploys programs to remediate the resulting damage, but these activities typically require a cost share to be borne by the recipient community. In cases where the government is responsible for the wildfire's ignition, remediation costs should rightfully be fully covered. Even in such cases, however, current statute does not allow wildfire remediation programs to be fully funded with Federal dollars. This is particularly damaging for the small, rural communities that are both most affected by wildfires and least prepared to bear the financial burden of rebuilding their homes and infrastructure.

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This bill will allow the Secretary of Agriculture to waive all cost share requirements for the remediation of damage deemed to be a result of management activities conducted by the Secretary on National Forest System land. This waiver will only apply to cash cost shares, not in-kind contributions, and may only be applied at the Secretary's discretion. With this added authority, the Secretary will be able to expedite much needed infrastructural repairs in communities devastated by wildfires that are out of their control. This bill builds upon and complements the Prescribed Burn Approval Act of 2016, which requires the Secretary to coordinate with the applicable State government and local fire officials when authorizing a prescribed burn on Forest Service land that is particularly susceptible to wildfires.

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