

# WILDFIRE RESPONSE AND DROUGHT RESILIENCY ACT

Climate change, a century of fire suppression, and a growing number of people living and recreating within the wildland urban interface have all contributed to increased wildfire risk nationally. Wildfires are now a year-round threat, burning larger areas with greater intensity, and wildfire activity is only projected to increase as drought and climate change reduces soil moisture and converts living forest vegetation into dry fuels. Climate change has also made drought more severe and persistent, with parts of the western United States experiencing their driest conditions in [over 1,200 years](#). Together, the effects of drought and wildfire cost the United States roughly [\\$20 billion](#) in 2021 alone.

We can't simply cut our way out of wildfire risk. Strategic and targeted investments at the landscape scale can help improve conditions for fire-adapted ecosystems, provide defensible space for firefighter response, and protect communities from catastrophic wildfires. Similarly, drought resiliency can be enhanced by investing in water projects with rapid timelines, modernizing data and technology, and providing near-term drought response.

## WILDFIRE (DIVISION A)

Wildfire suppression costs have continued to increase, often at the expense of other land management activities to pre-emptively address wildfire risk or to mitigate impacts to watersheds, wildlife, and conservation lands. In recent years, Congress has taken meaningful action to address wildfire risk, most recently with the enactment of the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law. Division A authorizes additional policies and resources necessary to support a 10-Year Strategy to meaningfully address wildfire risk and provide for the protection and conservation of our national forests and public lands, including:

- **Establishing new pay and hiring authorities for Federal wildland firefighters.** Establishes a minimum basic pay rate (approximately \$20/hr) for wildland firefighters based on the recent Office of Personnel Management "wildland firefighter" job series classification. Allows for annual adjustments and hazard pay. Provides for up to 7 consecutive days of special mental health leave for wildland firefighters. Takes steps to ensure pay parity with structural firefighters and non-federal wildland firefighters.
- **Authorizing a 10-Year National Wildfire Response Plan.** Authorizes ten landscape-scale projects identified by the Secretary of Agriculture for priority implementation and provides for the identification of 20 additional landscape-scale projects within the next 5 years. Authorizes funding for hazardous fuels and prescribed fire activities, along with the resources necessary for the protection and management of high conservation value areas, like priority watersheds, old-growth forests, habitat for at-risk species, and designated roadless areas.
- **Providing tools and resources to assist with wildfire related activities, including prescribed fire training and planning.** Authorizes community capacity and ecosystem restoration grant programs. Requires spatial fire management plans for prescribed fires. Creates new prescribed fire training centers and exchanges. Establishes a Long-Term Burned Area Recovery Account for the Secretary of Agriculture.
- **Giving Tribes and Conservation Corps an expanded role in reducing wildfire risk.** Encourages the use of Conservation and Youth Corps programs in fulfilling the goals of the 10-Year National Wildfire Plan and provides the Secretaries of Agriculture and the Interior with the authority to waive matching fund requirements. Establishes a Tribal Biochar demonstration project.

## DROUGHT (DIVISION B)

Climate change has exacerbated the severity of drought in the United States, putting the water supplies of millions of Americans at risk and imperiling our nation's ecosystems. The impacts of drought and drinking water shortages fall disproportionately on underserved environmental justice communities. Division B advances policy solutions to provide drought relief for American communities. Drought relief measures include:

- **Providing \$500 million for actions to prevent key reservoirs of the Colorado River from declining to critically low water elevations.** The Colorado River supplies water to tens of millions of people and is experiencing severe ongoing drought exacerbated by climate change.
- **Investing in new drought-proof water supply projects.** Supports drought-proof water infrastructure projects with rapid construction timelines, such as water recycling and reuse, innovative desalination projects. Also funds water supply projects to address domestic drinking water supply shortages in underserved environmental justice communities.

- **Securing water reliability for Indian Country.** Provides secure water for tribes by advancing tribal water rights settlements, investing \$1 billion in a new grant program for tribal clean water access, supporting technical assistance for tribal water needs, and providing permanent, reliable funding to meet the federal government's legal trust obligation to secure clean water access for tribes.
- **Advancing modern water management data and technology.** Promotes the use and development of 21st Century water data, tools, research, and technologies, and supports the development of innovative water technologies, including research related to water desalination methods that reduce environmental effects.
- **Protecting and restoring ecosystems.** Advances measures to reverse widespread fish and wildlife species decline exacerbated by drought and climate change. Measures include new voluntary incentives for farmers to provide waterbird habitat, expanded watershed health project funding, support for wildlife refuges along the Pacific Flyway, and improved drought planning efforts to protect biodiversity and sustain key fisheries.

## OTHER FIRE, DROUGHT, AND EXTREME WEATHER PROGRAMS (DIVISION C)

A comprehensive response to drought and wildfire is not simply limited to water infrastructure and forest management. Other Federal agencies have significant value-added capabilities to help respond to fire, drought and extreme weather. Federal agencies also have the ability to provide assistance to families, communities, and businesses when a disaster does strike. Division C ensures a whole of government approach as we address these issues as a nation, including:

- **Providing enhanced assistance for those impacted by recent wildfires.** Waives replacement fees for certain critical documents that are lost in a natural disaster. Allows flexibility for the Fire Management Assistance Grant cost shares. Provides emergency federal assistance to community members at-risk from wildfire smoke in areas where the air quality is unhealthy. Provides additional resources for state and local governments facing cumulative impacts from repeat wildfires or other consecutive disasters. Provides relief for those affected by the Hermit's Peak/Calf Canyon Fires in New Mexico.
- **Improving programs at the Department of Energy, Federal Energy Regulatory Commission Federal Emergency Management Agency, U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and U.S. Fire Administration.** Helps strengthen our electric grid against extreme weather and natural disasters, mitigate for smoke impacts, improve FEMA's response to wildfires, and to investigate major fires or those with unique characteristics.
- **Establishing the National Disaster Safety Board.** An independent entity with the purposes of reducing future loss of life in natural hazards, avoid blaming individual entities, conducting reviews focused on the systemic causes of loss of life, issuing findings and recommendations to the public, and providing technical assistance to state, Tribal, and local entities.
- **Directing the President to establish a National Wildland Fire Risk Reduction Program to reduce the loss of life and property from wildland fires through coordination of Federal efforts.** Supports research and development, including interdisciplinary research, related to wildland fires, fire environments, and associated smoke. Provides for an Interagency Coordinating Committee on Wildland Fire Risk Reduction. Directs the Director of the Office of Science and Technology Policy to establish a National Advisory Committee on Wildland Fire Risk Reduction.

## ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE (DIVISION D)

All people have the right to pure air, clean water, and an environment that enriches life. For many environmental justice communities, these rights are still unrealized. The extremes of wildfire and drought exacerbate numerous environmental challenges that disproportionately harm environmental justice communities. Division D incorporates provisions to address several environmental justice community needs, including:

- **Supporting capacity building measures to improve local environmental conditions.** Creates new environmental justice grant and training programs to empower communities and reduce health disparities, including those driven by drought, wildfire, and other climate events.
- **Centering environmental justice considerations at Executive Branch agencies.** Requires federal agencies to integrate environmental justice into their missions, programs, decision-making and activities.
- **Providing new enforcement tools to counter prohibited environmental discrimination.** Reverses a court decision to restore private rights of action against recipients of federal funding based on discriminatory disparate impacts.

