July 21, 2026

Dear Chairman Newhouse, Ranking Member Salinas, and Members of the House Committee on Agriculture Subcommittee on Forestry and Horticulture:

For more than 30 years, Taxpayers for Common Sense has closely tracked federal spending on America's public lands. We work to ensure federal dollars are spent wisely and transparently in ways that provide the greatest returns for taxpayers, communities, and public forests.

In advance of this week's hearing with U.S. Forest Service Chief Tom Schultz, we would like to highlight several taxpayer resources.

Federal Wildfire Spending

The Forest Service plays a pivotal role in the federal government's management of both wildfire suppression and mitigation. Between FY2017 and FY2026, TCS catalogued $50.1 billion appropriated for direct wildfire activities and an additional $12.8 billion for wildfire-adjacent accounts. The sheer number of funding streams makes it difficult to track where taxpayer dollars are actually going.

For more information, see our U.S. Forest Service Wildfire Spending Accounts Fact Sheet

Federal wildfire spending extends beyond the Forest Service. Our Federal Wildfire Spending Database catalogued $64.7 billion in appropriations across the federal budget for programs that directly address wildfire and an additional $712 billion for programs that indirectly address wildfire. Our database identifies multiyear trends, including persistent underinvestment in mitigation, and highlights gaps in the federal government's tracking and reporting of wildfire-related expenditures.

For more information, see our Federal Wildfire Spending Database

Historically, when suppression funds were depleted during a wildfire emergency, funds from other, non-suppression accounts were transferred to cover immediate wildfire suppression costs, a practice known as fire borrowing. The creation of the Wildfire Suppression Operations Reserve Fund was crucial to ending fire borrowing and ensuring important mitigation and forest management programs that help mitigate future fire risks have sustained funding.

For more information, see our [Five Fast Facts about the Wildfire Suppression Operations Reserve Fund]()

With the Reserve Fund authority set to expire in FY2027, policymakers must act soon or risk once again diverting tax dollars away from the forest management work that reduces long-term suppression costs.

Agency Restructuring and Consolidation

The President's FY2027 Budget Request proposes creating a new agency within the Department of the Interior to consolidate federal wildfire responsibilities. The proposed Federal Wildland Fire Service raises fundamental questions about the federal government's role in wildfire response and spending.

For more information, see our Administration Continues Call for Consolidated Wildfire Agency in FY2027 Budget Request article.

In theory, a single agency could streamline wildfire response and coordination by reducing bureaucratic silos, improving interagency coordination, increasing transparency around wildfire spending, and making it easier for communities and individuals to access federal resources.

However, given that the majority of federal wildfire suppression and response capacity is housed within the Forest Service, moving staff, assets, and expertise out of the Forest Service and into the Department of the Interior at the cusp of a fire season could undermine federal efforts to suppress fire and protect state and local communities. Additionally, proposed budget cuts to various Forest Service programs could weaken the agency and impede its forest management activities, which directly affect wildfire risks and recovery activities. Separating forest management and wildfire activities could also encourage a suppression first mindset that overlooks the ecological benefits of wildfire and the potential drawbacks of certain fuels management activities.

Maintenance Backlog and Taxpayer Subsidies

The Forest Service manages one of the largest road systems of any public entity in the United States, with an estimated 380,000 miles in 2000 and more than 265,000 miles currently maintained. Yet the agency receives only a fraction of the funding needed to maintain that system, and the FY2027 proposed budget would cut capital maintenance appropriations by more than a quarter. Since 1975, federal taxpayers have subsidized more than $5 billion in timber access road construction alone. Proposals that would add new road miles without addressing the costs and maintenance backlog would be fiscally reckless, compounding an already significant liability for taxpayers and local communities.

For more information, see our [Analysis of the FY2027 Forest Service Budget Request]()

The FY2027 budget also seeks to "refocus" the Forest Service on its "core land and resource management mission through timber production." Funding for federal timber sale management would be quadrupled, from $39 million to $175 million. This is concerning for taxpayers, as the Forest Service has a history of money-losing timber sales—particularly in areas like the Tongass National Forest, which yielded a net loss of $1.73 billion from FY1980 to 2019. Taxpayers deserve a transparent cost-benefit analysis of any expansion of below-cost timber sales before committing additional taxpayer dollars to the program.

Taxpayers for Common Sense is committed to working with the committee in its efforts to improve transparency, accountability, and fiscal responsibility at the U.S. Forest Service.

We appreciate the subcommittee's attention to these issues and welcome the opportunity to discuss them further.