



Burned Area Rehabilitation: Current status and the establishment of a new program in the FY 2024 Budget Justification

Background

The Department of the Interior, Environment, and Related Agencies Appropriations Bill, 2023 (House Report 117-400) included the following language:

Burned area recovery funding is important to forest health and to preventing future wildfires from devastating the same areas again. The Committee continues to view this work as a priority and directs the Service to report to the Committee within 90 days of enactment of this Act on a strategy to ensure burned area recovery work is being adequately prioritized, including a plan to establish a new budget line in fiscal year 2024 or other actions to prioritize this work, if appropriate.

Introduction

The Forest Service's burned area rehabilitation needs have outpaced available resources, leaving the Forest Service unable to rehabilitate National Forest System (NFS) lands unlikely to recover naturally, and repair or replace fire-damaged infrastructure in a timely manner. Effective rehabilitation actions generally need to occur within five years of a wildland fire. A program with dedicated funding to rehabilitate burned areas would reduce the negative impacts of choosing between rehabilitation of burned areas and other natural resource management priorities.

Previously, the Forest Service received Congressionally appropriated funding for burned area rehabilitation from FY 2001 through FY 2011. In FY 2001, the burned area rehabilitation program was funded at \$123 million and from FYs 2002 through 2011, the program was funded between \$4 and \$12 million per year. Since FY 2011, rehabilitation of burned areas has competed with all other Forest Service priorities for funding. The loss of the dedicated funding following FY 2011 has resulted in less than ten percent of burned area rehabilitation needs being met annually, and the backlog of needed work continues to grow. The calendar year 2021 fire season alone is estimated to have resulted in over \$1 billion in burned area rehabilitation and longer-term post-fire restoration needs for invasive plant treatments, range and recreation infrastructure repair, watershed restoration, wildlife and fish habitat recovery, and revegetation.

The Forest Service has not programmatically addressed burned area rehabilitation needs for many years. Between FY 2020 through 2022, the agency launched a pilot effort to explore opportunities to fund burned area rehabilitation of minor facilities and infrastructure. Purposes of the pilot included the need to identify funding gaps for burned area rehabilitation needs and coordination with the Department of the Interior's Burned Area Rehabilitation (BAR) program to



achieve consistency. The pilot effort also followed the continuum framework of post-fire response, from emergency management under Burned Area Emergency Response to BAR to long-term recovery, as defined in the early 2000's through the National Fire Plan effort. Under this pilot and through multiple funding streams, the Forest Service allocated over \$10 million to fund post-fire repair and replacement of minor facilities and infrastructure damaged or destroyed by wildfire, addressing a small portion of the overall rehabilitation needs of these wildfire seasons.

In FY 2022, the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (Public Law 117-58), also known as the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law (BIL) appropriated \$325 million (\$65 million per year from FY 2022 to FY 2026) in funding under Division J, Title VI. Additional funding to create a permanent BAR program would allow the Forest Service to address post-fire needs more effectively, and consistently.

Actions Taken to Ensure Burned Area Recovery Work is Being Adequately Prioritized

While BAR funding is approved at the national level, BAR projects are prioritized by Forest Service regions after the needs are determined by the local units. In many cases, the immediate infrastructure needs may be known shortly after the fire; however, landscape rehabilitation needs may not be known until the next growing season. Allowing flexibility and multiple requests per burned area is an important consideration for project development and selection. Funding is currently allocated on a quarterly schedule to be responsive to the fires across the regions in all seasons. Funds are expended in a way where they can be tracked back to each wildfire allowing the agency to understand the costs of each fire from suppression, Burned Area Emergency Response, and then finally BAR.

As a part of establishing the BAR program, the Forest Service has developed several tools for the rapid implementation of burned area rehabilitation actions. Tools include rapid assessment frameworks that facilitate National Environmental Policy Act, Endangered Species Act, and National Historic Preservation Act requirements. National contracting and acquisition tools are under development and have been piloted for burned area rehabilitation efforts in California.

Additionally, post-fire program staff are working with the Chief Information Office to develop a database to capture and track post-fire needs and implementation for Burned Area Emergency Response, BAR, and other disaster recovery actions. Currently, actions are recorded in existing databases of record including Forest Service Activity Tracking System and the Infra database, which is the Forest Service's authoritative database for manmade features. The post-fire database will link to these existing data sources to form a greater understanding of post-fire needs and accomplishments without additional data entry required at the field level. Over time this database will provide a comprehensive list of all post-fire needs.



Establishment of a New Budget Line Item (BLI) for the Burned Area Rehabilitation Program

The BAR program with dedicated appropriated funding at \$56 million, is proposed in the FY 2024 President's Budget as part of a strategy to ensure that burned area recovery work is adequately prioritized.

The Forest Service estimates that based on the previous few fire seasons, BAR program will require a minimum of \$55 million annually to rehabilitate NFS lands unlikely to recover naturally, and repair or replace fire-damaged infrastructure. With sustained funding, the Forest Service would have a better ability to respond to the subsequent disasters caused by wildfires, such as flooding and debris flows. Funding would be used to address burned area rehabilitation for fires that occurred in the previous three years, with the expectation that the activities are implemented, and funds expended within five years of fire containment. This would include the actions currently covered under the BAR program with Bipartisan Infrastructure Law funding to repair or replace minor facilities and infrastructure, as well as invasive species control, habitat restoration, and revegetation.

Conclusion

The Forest Service concurs with the Committee's view that burned area recovery work is a priority and includes a specific request for this program in the fiscal year 2024 Budget for \$56 million in dedicated funding, the first such request since 2011. Reestablishing a new, dedicated funding line for rehabilitating burned areas would allow the agency to appropriately prioritize BAR projects and eliminate the need to choose between funding rehabilitation efforts for burned areas or other natural resource management priorities.