

**Congressional Fire Services Institute
International Association of Fire Chiefs
National Volunteer Fire Council**

February 22, 2016

The Honorable Thad Cochran, Chair
Committee on Appropriations
United States Senate
S-128 Capitol Building
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Barbara Mikulski, Ranking Member
Committee on Appropriations
United States Senate
S-146A Capitol Building
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Lisa Murkowski, Chair
Committee on Appropriations
Subcommittee on Interior, Environment
and Related Agencies
SD-131
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Tom Udall, Ranking Member
Committee on Appropriations
Subcommittee on Interior, Environment
and Related Agencies
SH-125
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Senators Cochran, Mikulski, Murkowski and Udall:

Our organizations request that you include a minimum of \$16 million in funding for the Volunteer Fire Assistance (VFA) grant program in Fiscal Year (FY) 2017 Department of Interior and Related Agencies Appropriations bill. VFA provides matching funds to volunteer fire departments protecting communities with 10,000 or fewer residents to purchase equipment and training for use in wildland fire suppression.

The United States is facing an alarming trend with the growth of wildland fires. The cost of suppressing these fires is reaching new heights as more than 50% of the U.S. Forest Service's (USFS) annual budget now goes to fighting wildland fires. However, more than 80% of wildland fires are extinguished on initial attacks by local fire departments. The USFS estimates that the value of the service provided by local fire departments exceeds \$36 billion per year. Despite the significant value of service contributed by America's rural fire departments, the federal government's commitment to supporting these agencies has dwindled since Fiscal Year 2006 (see attached charts).

The VFA program, administered by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) provides matching grants to fire departments protecting communities with populations of 10,000 or fewer. VFA grants help these budget-challenged departments procure new supplies and provide training opportunities to their firefighters that would otherwise be out of reach. In Fiscal Year 2010, VFA was funded at \$16 million. The decrease in funding for the VFA grants since 2010, coupled with the elimination of the U.S. Department of Interior's Rural Fire Assistance grant program in the same year, has hampered the ability of local fire departments to continue protecting their communities.

Federal support is critical to ensure volunteer fire departments are able to safely and effectively respond to wildland fires. Our organizations recognize the challenges that Congress faces in trying to adequately fund a range of important programs in today's difficult budget environment. At the same time, we believe that reducing the funding for programs like RFA and

VFA from a combined \$23 million in FY 2010 to \$13 million in FY 2015, leaves volunteer fire departments with fewer resources to prepare to respond to wildland fires and will lead to higher federal spending on fire suppression in the long run. We urge you to provide a minimum of \$16 million for VFA in FY 2017.

Sincerely,

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