

OUTDOOR ALLIANCE

August 1, 2024

Sen. Alex Padilla
Co-Chair, Bipartisan Wildfire Caucus
331 Hart Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

Sen. Steve Daines
Co-Chair, Bipartisan Wildfire Caucus
320 Hart Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

Rep. Joe Neguse
Co-Chair, Bipartisan Wildfire Caucus
2400 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

Rep. John Curtis
Co-Chair, Bipartisan Wildfire Caucus
2323 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

Re: Outdoor recreation community support for wildfire legislation.

Dear Senators Padilla and Daines, Representatives Neguse and Curtis, and members of the Bipartisan Wildfire Caucus:

On behalf of the human-powered outdoor recreation community, thank you for your work to build resilience to wildfire across our nation's landscapes and communities. We write to express our support for wildfire and forestry legislation in the 118th Congress and to encourage you to advance a bipartisan wildfire package in 2024.

Outdoor Alliance is a coalition of ten member-based organizations representing the human powered outdoor recreation community. The coalition includes Access Fund, American Canoe Association, American Whitewater, International Mountain Bicycling Association, Winter Wildlands Alliance, The Mountaineers, the American Alpine Club, the Mazamas, Colorado Mountain Club, and Surfrider Foundation and represents the interests of the millions of Americans who climb, paddle, mountain bike, backcountry ski and snowshoe, and enjoy coastal recreation on our nation's public lands, waters, and snowscapes.

The 2024 wildfire season is already underway, following significant heat events across much of the country. Already, more than 4 million acres have burned in 2024, and many Americans are experiencing degraded air quality from large wildfires in both the U.S. and Canada. With months to go before peak fire



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conditions subside, the current fire season holds potential to test the limits of our nation's wildfire response, as well as our communities and ecosystems.

In recent decades, an increase in the size and severity of wildfires—particularly in the western U.S.—has affected outdoor recreation and the outdoor economy through closures, smoke, damage to scenic values, and other economic and ecological impacts.¹ As these trends intensify, the outdoor community is increasingly invested in wildfire resilience at both the community and landscape scale.

Fortunately, Congress is better positioned than ever before to advance strong, broadly-supported wildfire legislation. In 2023, the Wildland Fire Mitigation and Management Commission (hereinafter the “Commission”) released a first-of-its-kind report detailing 148 actionable recommendations to address the wildfire crisis.² The report is comprehensive in its approach to wildfire management and details recommendations to address every level of wildfire resilience, from building resilient landscapes, to strengthening our fire response, to hardening communities, to workforce development, to post-fire rehabilitation, and beyond. These consensus-based recommendations provide a roadmap for improving wildfire policy, and we appreciate the hard work by many of your offices to turn the Commission recommendations into legislation.

Outdoor Alliance strongly supports the following bills, which would put the Commission recommendations into action. We encourage you to advance these bills, or their key components, as the core of a comprehensive wildfire package this year:

- National Prescribed Fire Act of 2024 (S. 4424/H.R. 8557)
- Modernizing Wildfire Safety and Prevention Act of 2024 (H.R. 8656)
- Enhancing Mitigation and Building Effective Resilience Act (S. 4628)
- Wildland Firefighter Paycheck Protection Act of 2023 (S.2272/H.R. 5169)
- Fire Ready Nation Act (S. 4237/H.R. 8449)

¹ See, Jamie Ervin, *Wildfire and Outdoor Recreation in the West: How Recreationists Can Support a Fire-Resilient Future*, Policy Report, Outdoor Alliance, Washington, D.C. (2023).

² Wildland Fire Mitigation and Management Commission, *ON FIRE: The Report of the Wildland Fire Mitigation and Management Commission* (2023).



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We have provided more information about each of these bills below, with a particular focus on provisions that affect outdoor recreation.

National Prescribed Fire Act of 2024 (S. 4424/H.R. 8557)

Outdoor Alliance strongly supports the National Prescribed Fire Act of 2024 (NPFA), which would increase the pace and scale of prescribed fire across our nation’s fire-adapted and fire-dependent landscapes. It is widely acknowledged that widespread exclusion of fire (including cultural burning) from fire-adapted ecosystems over the past two centuries increased fuels and structural homogeneity across numerous western ecosystems (particularly forests), leading to more severe fires.³ Prescribed fire is a critically-important tool for addressing this fire deficit, and in turn mitigating wildfire risk to ecosystems and communities. Indeed, prescribed fire (and “beneficial fire” more broadly) was identified as a key wildfire resilience strategy by the Commission, with multiple recommendations focusing on increasing prescribed fire and cultural burning.⁴

Despite its importance, prescribed fire is greatly underused, particularly in the West, due to a long list of barriers to implementation, including inadequate workforce capacity, lack of incentives for land managers to plan and implement prescribed burns, lack of dedicated funding, perceived risk among land managers and the public, issues with permitting for smoke emissions, challenges with weather windows, and more.⁵ The NPFA comprehensively addresses these barriers so that land managers can expand prescribed fire to levels commensurate with the wildfire crisis where it is safe and ecologically appropriate. Key components of the bill include establishing targets and incentives for prescribed fire use, creating new pathways for non-federal partners like Tribes to conduct prescribed burns on federal lands, improving work benefits and liability protections for prescribed burners, and easing air quality permitting for essential prescribed fire activities.

³ See, Ervin, *supra* note 1, at 6-8.

⁴ See, Wildland Fire Mitigation and Management Commission, *supra* note 2, at 55-63. Commission recommendations 10-16 emphasize increasing beneficial fire use.

⁵ See, Crystal Kolden, *We’re Not Doing Enough Prescribed Fire in the Western United States to Mitigate Wildfire Risk*, 2(2) *Fire* (2019); See also, Courtney Schultz et. al., *Policy barriers and opportunities for prescribed fire application in the western United States*, 28(11) *Int. J. Wildland Fire* (2019).



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Modernizing Wildfire Safety and Prevention Act of 2024 (H.R. 8656)

H.R. 8656 would directly implement 18 Commission recommendations around workforce development, supporting wildland firefighters, smoke management, and wildfire technology. This legislation would help build the workforce necessary to address the wildfire crisis by establishing a Middle Fire Leaders Academy to provide wildland fire training opportunities needed to recruit an adequate workforce. Importantly, the bill would also improve work benefits for wildland firefighters by extending the break in service provision to two years—ensuring that wildland firefighters are not forced to forfeit hard-earned retirement benefits when it is necessary to take time off of work.

Outdoor Alliance especially supports Section 301, which would establish a nationally-consistent monitoring and alert system for wildfire smoke. Hazardous wildfire smoke emissions create a serious public health concern that can make outdoor recreation unsafe across large regions of the country, and access to accurate, real-time smoke forecasts can be difficult, or even impossible to find. Smoke emissions can deter both recreational activities and impact recreational tourism, harming local economies. H.R. 8656 would improve interagency coordination around smoke management and also make technological improvements to help provide accurate, easily accessible information about smoke emissions available to the public, making outdoor activities easier to safely pursue during fire season.

Enhancing Mitigation and Building Effective Resilience Act (S. 4628)

The Enhancing Mitigation and Building Effective Resilience (EMBER) Act would implement more than 20 Commission recommendations. While we support the bill in its entirety, we particularly appreciate the following sections of the bill:

- *Performance metrics:* The EMBER Act would require federal managers to consider a more holistic set of factors in wildfire mitigation beyond acres treated, including protection of cultural, ecological, and social values, and long-term wildfire resilience.
- *Indigenous land stewardship:* The EMBER Act provides direction to encourage federal land managers to partner with Tribes in wildfire response, mitigation,



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and management, and would also require a panel to study tribal inclusion in wildfire response and co-stewardship.

- *Prescribed fire:* The EMBER Act would simplify the process of implementing prescribed fires by instructing federal land managers to use interagency resource ordering systems. The bill would also increase training opportunities for local fire entities, including for prescribed fire.
- *Improved fire planning:* The EMBER Act would direct federal land managers to increase the use of programmatic environmental analyses in order to encourage larger wildfire mitigation projects. We appreciate that this approach streamlines—rather than bypasses—environmental review. The bill would also require a periodic review of the wildfire environment to assist with planning and adaptive management.
- *Disaster recovery:* The EMBER Act better enables the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) and other federal agencies to help communities recover post-fire, such as by addressing cascading impacts from wildfires whereby flooding, landslides, or other hazards cause an emergency to extend beyond an initial fire event.

We thank the bill sponsors for their work on this important legislation.

Wildland Firefighter Paycheck Protection Act of 2023 (S.2272/H.R. 5169)

A robust wildland fire workforce is essential for protecting America's communities from fire and for achieving wildfire restoration goals. Wildland firefighters are highly specialized, trained federal employees who work long hours, often far from home, in a physically and emotionally taxing environment. These working conditions are only becoming more challenging as climate change brings longer, hotter fire seasons and more extreme conditions. Wildland firefighters received a long overdue pay raise through the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act in 2021, and Congress recently extended the raise through FY24 appropriations. The Wildland Firefighter Paycheck Protection Act would make these benefits permanent, providing security for wildland firefighters and strengthening the workforce needed to address the wildfire crisis.



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Fire Ready Nation Act (S. 4237/H.R. 8449)

The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) already provides a variety of services related to wildfire and is critical for wildfire planning and response across the nation. The Fire Ready Nation Act would formalize and improve NOAA's role in wildfire preparedness by providing clear statutory authority for the agency's wildfire programs. The bill would establish a fire weather services program within NOAA to support wildfire readiness through forecasts, ignition detection, models, and other tools to support sound decision-making around wildfire and wildfire smoke nationwide. The bill would also create a Fire Weather Testbed to develop and improve wildfire technologies. Finally, the bill would codify the Incident Meteorologist Service, which provides important meteorological services to help fire managers predict fire behavior during wildfire events.

* * *

Thank you for your work to advance the goals of the Bipartisan Wildfire Caucus. The outdoor recreation community stands ready to work with you to make America's landscapes and communities resilient to wildfire.

Best regards,



Louis Geltman
Vice President for Policy and Government Relations
Outdoor Alliance

cc: Jamie Ervin, Senior Policy Manager, Outdoor Alliance

Adam Cramer, Chief Executive Officer, Outdoor Alliance
Heather Thorne, Executive Director, Access Fund
Beth Spilman, Executive Director, American Canoe Association
Clinton Begley, Executive Director, American Whitewater
Kent McNeill, CEO, International Mountain Bicycling Association
David Page, Executive Director, Winter Wildlands Alliance
Tom Vogl, Chief Executive Officer, The Mountaineers



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Ben Gabriel, Executive Director, American Alpine Club

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Madeline Bachner Lane, Chief Executive Officer, Colorado Mountain Club

Chad Nelsen, Chief Executive Officer, Surfrider Foundation

