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For Immediate Release

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No-Fee Coalition Calls for Repayment of Firefighting Funds

The Western Slope No-Fee Coalition has called on public land supporters and state and local officials to contact Congress and urge that funds borrowed for firefighting during 2002 be repaid.

The 2002 fire season was the second largest in the past fifty years, forcing the Forest Service and the Department of Interior agencies to borrow more than $1.3 billion from their non-fire accounts.

The Department of Interior borrowed $254 million, mostly from low-cost construction projects. The Forest Service situation is more extreme, as they were forced to borrow $1.014 billion. President Bush has called for partial repayment of $825 million for both agencies, and the House voted to appropriate $500 million. In the end, Congress adjourned last year without approving any repayment amount at all.

Programs that are threatened if these funds are not restored include $143 million in approved land acquisitions, $20 million worth of hazardous fuel reduction projects around rural communities, and over $600 million in reforestation and habitat projects funded by timber companies as a condition of their permits.

Of particular concern to the No-Fee Coalition is $10 million that was borrowed from the Forest Service’s already underfunded recreation budget, along with $27 million from the roads and maintenance budget.
According to WSNFC President Robert Funkhouser, “If these funds are not repaid the land managers will rely more heavily on supplementing recreation and maintenance budgets with fee revenues rather than appropriated funds.”

In a letter distributed to a wide variety of public land supporters, Funkhouser called on them to urge House appropriators to repay 100% of funds that were borrowed due to the firefighting emergency.

“Failure to repay these funds would result in establishing firefighting as the pre-eminent and perhaps sole function of the Forest Service,” Funkhouser said. “That will negatively affect all user groups, rural communities, and the very land itself.”

Encl: Letter to Public Lands Supporters from WSNFC President Robert Funkhouser