



**SUBCOMMITTEE ON RESEARCH AND TECHNOLOGY
HEARING CHARTER**

“Reauthorizing the U.S. Fire Administration and Fire Grant Programs: Evaluating Effectiveness and Preparedness for Modern Challenges”

**Thursday, May 11, 2023
2:00 p.m.
2325 Rayburn House Office Building**

Purpose: The purpose of the hearing is to review the effectiveness and priorities of the United States Fire Administration and the Assistance to Firefighters (FIRE) and Staffing for Adequate Fire and Emergency Response (SAFER) grant programs. The hearing will help inform legislation to address current program authorizations that expire on September 30, 2023.

Witnesses

- **Dr. Lori Moore-Merrell**, U.S. Fire Administrator, U.S. Fire Administration
- **Chief Donna Black**, President, International Association of Fire Chiefs
- **Mr. Kevin B. O’Connor**, Assistant to the General President, International Association of Fire Fighters
- **Mr. David Bullard**, Georgia Director, National Volunteer Fire Council
- **Mr. Kevin Reardon**, State Fire Marshall, State of Ohio

Overarching Questions

- What are the priority needs for the fire safety of the nation?
- What emerging fire safety issues should Congress be aware of and is the Fire Administration taking steps to address them?
- What is the proper role of the federal government, working with state and local governments, in addressing fire safety?
- How effective and efficient are the merit-reviewed FIRE and SAFER grant programs?
- How can the USFA and the fire grants programs be improved?
- How can the USFA facilitate information and data sharing regarding best practices and fire incidents?

Background

U.S. Fire Administration

The United States Fire Administration (USFA) is an entity within the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) of the Department of Homeland Security (DHS). Its mission is to provide leadership, coordination, and support for the nation's fire prevention and control, fire training and education, and emergency medical services activities, and to prepare first responders to react to all hazard and terrorism emergencies. USFA is located on the grounds of the National Emergency Training Center in Emmitsburg, MD.¹

The genesis of USFA and FEMA's fire prevention and control activities (and the House Science Committee's jurisdiction) was a 1973 report of the National Commission on Fire Prevention and Control, entitled *America Burning*. The commission recommended the creation of a federal fire agency to provide support to state and local governments and private fire organizations in their efforts to reduce fire deaths, injuries, and property loss.² In legislation developed by the Science Committee, Congress placed the agency in the Department of Commerce and with the passage of the Federal Fire Prevention and Control Act of 1974 (P.L. 93-498), the National Fire Prevention and Control Administration (NFPCA) was established. In 1978, Congress changed the name of NFPCA to USFA (P.L. 95-422), and in 1979, President Carter's Reorganization Plan placed the USFA within the newly created FEMA.³

The USFA fulfills its mission through four major activities:

- **Data Collection**—USFA's National Fire Data Center (NFDC) administers a national system (the National Fire Incident Reporting System or NFIRS) used for collecting, analyzing, and disseminating data and information on fire and other emergency incidents to state and local governments and the fire community.
- **Public Education and Awareness**—Through partnerships and special initiatives, USFA involves the fire service, the media, other federal agencies, and safety interest groups in the development and delivery of fire safety awareness and education programs.
- **Training**—USFA's National Fire Academy (NFA) offers educational opportunities for the advanced professional development of the mid-level and senior fire/EMS officers and allied professionals involved in fire prevention and life safety activities. The NFA also offers training to support the National Incident Management System Integration Center (NIC) and nationwide implementation of the National Incident Management System (NIMS).
- **Research and Technology**—Through research, testing, and evaluation, USFA works with public and private entities to promote and improve fire and life safety. Research and special studies are conducted on fire detection, suppression, and notification

¹ U.S. Fire Administration <https://www.usfa.fema.gov/about/index.html>

² “America Burning,” National Commission on Fire Prevention and Control, 1970. Available at: <https://www.usfa.fema.gov/downloads/pdf/publications/fa-264.pdf>

³ “United States Fire Administration: An Overview,” CRS Report, May 26, 2017. Available at: <http://www.crs.gov/reports/pdf/RS20071>

systems, as well as issues related to firefighter and emergency responder health and safety.

FIRE/SAFER Grants

Firefighting activities and funding for them are traditionally the responsibility of states and local communities. During the 1990s, shortfalls in state and local budgets, coupled with increased responsibilities of local fire departments, led many in the fire community to call for additional financial support from the federal government. Although federally funded training programs existed through USFA, and federal money was available to first responders for counterterrorism training and equipment through the Department of Justice, there did not exist a dedicated program exclusively for fire department needs.

In response, Congress created FIRE grants, established by the FIRE Act of 2001 (Title XVII of the FY2001 National Defense Authorization Act (P.L. 106-398)). The FIRE program provides federal grants directly to local fire departments and unaffiliated Emergency Medical Services (EMS) organizations to help address a variety of equipment, training, and other firefighter-related and EMS needs.

The SAFER program was created by the SAFER Act of 2003 (Section 1057 of the FY2004 National Defense Authorization Act (P.L. 108-136)) to provide grants for hiring, recruiting, and retaining firefighters.

The Fire Act statute was reauthorized in 2012 (Title XVIII of P.L. 112-239) and provided new guidelines on how fire grant money should be distributed. There is no set geographical formula for the distribution of fire grants—fire departments throughout the nation apply, and award decisions are made by a peer panel based on the merits of the application and the needs of the community.

Since 2007, the Grants Programs Directorate in FEMA has administered FIRE and SAFER grants. Congressional appropriations reports have consistently instructed DHS to maintain USFA involvement in the grant administration process for FIRE and SAFER grants.⁴

On January 3, 2018, the President signed the United States Fire Administration, AFG, and SAFER Program Reauthorization Act of 2017 (P.L. 115-98). P.L. 115-98 extended the authorization for the programs through FY2023 and sunsets the grant programs on September 30, 2023. The authorization levels remained level with the previous authorization.

Reauthorization and Program Sunset

USFA received \$58.3 million in FY2023. The FY24 Presidential Budget Request for USFA is \$60.3 million, an increase of roughly \$2 million.

USFA would use its budget increase to modernize IT infrastructure at the National Emergency Training Center (NETC). This upgrade would bring USFA in line with the Department of Homeland Security's "Strategic Goal 3: Secure Cyberspace and Critical Infrastructure," which is part of a department-wide IT modernization effort.

⁴ "Assistance to Firefighters Program: Distribution of Fire Grant Funding," CRS Report, May 26, 2017. Available at: <http://www.crs.gov/reports/pdf/RL32341>

USFA is also seeking to modernize the National Emergency Response Information System (NERIS). The modernized NERIS platform will provide the fire service with new, more reliable predictive analytics to support enhanced preparedness and response to incidents of all-hazards, Wildland Urban Interface (WUI) events, Community Risk Reduction (CRR) and associated resilience and mitigation efforts, and future pandemic emergency response resource preparedness. The goal of the new NERIS platform is to provide fire services with more reliable predictive analytic resources.

The Senate passed S. 870, the Fire Grants and Safety Act, on April 20, 2023. S. 870 would authorize \$95 million each year for fiscal years 2024 through 2030 for USFA, continue to authorize AFG and SAFER Grant programs at \$750 M + CPI (see note below), and extend the sunset of fire grant programs from 2024 to 2032.

Authorization of Appropriations and Appropriations History

A primary issue for reauthorization of USFA and the FIRE/SAFER grant programs is the difference between the current authorization of appropriations levels, which are at aspirational, and the recent history of actual appropriated funds. The USFA is currently authorized at \$76.5 million per year, while annual appropriations for the last five years have been approximately level funded at \$44 million.

For *each* of the FIRE and SAFER grant programs, the current authorization is \$750 million + CPI (“an amount equal to the amount authorized the previous fiscal year, increased by the percentage by which the Consumer Price Index for the previous fiscal year exceeds the preceding year.”). For FY24, CBO estimates that each grant program would be \$1.015 B using this equation⁵. In comparison, each grant program was appropriated \$360 million in FY23.

This chart shows the history of appropriations for the last 6 years:

Appropriations History FY18-FY23 for FIRE and SAFER

	FIRE	SAFER	Total
FY2018	\$350 million	\$350 million	\$700 million
FY2019	\$350 million	\$350 million	\$700 million
FY2020	\$355 million	\$355 million	\$710 million
FY2021	\$360 million	\$360 million	\$720 million
FY2022	\$360 million	\$360 million	\$720 million
FY2023	\$360 million	\$360 million	\$720 million

⁵ <https://www.cbo.gov/system/files/2023-03/s559.pdf>

For FY2024, the Administration requested \$60.33 million for USFA – slightly below authorized levels – and \$370 million for FIRE and \$370 million for SAFER, above the FY2023 appropriated levels.⁶

Fire Loss and Needs in the United States

(Note: Due to reporting structures, USFA fire event tracking has a one-year delay, so 2021 is the latest calendar year for a full accounting of fire events and needs nationwide.)

Table 1. Reported Fires in 2021 by Incident Type

Incident Type	Fires	Civilian Deaths	Civilian Injuries	Property Loss (In Millions) ¹
Fires in California Wildland-Urban Interface (WUI)				\$678 (4%)
Structure Fire	486,500 (36%)	3,010 (79%)	12,600 (86%)	\$12,751 (80%)
Residential structure fire	361,000 (27%)	2,880 (76%)	11,500 (78%)	\$8,949 (56%)
Home structure fire	338,000 (25%)	2,840 (75%)	11,100 (76%)	\$8,697 (55%)
<i>One- and two-family homes, including manufactured homes</i>	256,500 (20%)	2,440 (64%)	8,000 (54%)	\$6,972 (44%)
<i>Apartment or other multifamily housing</i>	81,500 (6%)	400 (11%)	3,100 (21%)	\$1,725 (11%)
Other residential structure fire	23,000 (2%)	40 (1%)	400 (3%)	\$252 (2%)
Non-residential structure fire	125,500 (9%)	130 (3%)	1,100 (7%)	\$3,564 (22%)
Vehicle Fire	208,500 (15%)	680 (18%)	1,500 (10%)	\$2,165 (14%)
Highway vehicle fire	174,000 (13%)	650 (17%)	1,100 (7%)	\$1,547 (10%)
Other vehicle fire	34,500 (2%)	30 (1%)	400 (3%)	\$618 (4%)
Outside and Other Fire**	658,500 (49%)	110 (3%)	600 (4%)	\$363 (2%)
Fire outside but no vehicle (outside storage, crops, timber, etc.)	79,500 (6%)	**	**	\$156 (1%)
Fires in brush, grass, or wildland (excluding crops and timber) with no dollar loss	269,500 (20%)	**	**	**
Outside rubbish fire	229,500 (17%)	**	**	**
All other fires	80,000 (6%)	**	**	\$207 (1%)
Total	1,353,500 (100%)	3,800 (100%)	14,700 (100%)	\$15,957 (100%)

** Casualty data is not reported for subcategories of outside and other fires. Property damage is not captured for brush, grass, or wildland with no dollar loss or outside rubbish fires.

Note: Sums may not equal totals due to rounding errors.

Source: NFPA's 2021 survey of fire departments for US fire experience and surveys of state fire authorities for large loss and catastrophic multiple-death fires.

In 2021, local fire departments responded to an estimated 1.35 million fires in the United States. These fires caused 3,800 civilian fire deaths and 14,700 reported civilian fire injuries. The property damage caused by these fires was estimated at \$15.9 billion.⁷ On average, a fire department responded to a fire somewhere in the U.S. every 23 seconds in 2021. A home structure fire was reported every 93 seconds, a home fire death occurred every three hours and eight minutes, and a home fire injury occurred every 47 minutes.⁸ While some year-to-year fluctuation is normal, from 2020 to 2021, the total number of fires decreased by 2.5 percent, civilian deaths rose by 8.5

⁶ “Department of Homeland Security Federal Emergency Management Agency Budget Overview”, Available at: https://www.dhs.gov/sites/default/files/2023-03/FEDERAL%20EMERGENCY%20MANAGEMENT%20AGENCY_Remediated.pdf

⁷ “Fire Loss in the United States During 2021”, available at: <https://www.nfpa.org/News-and-Research/Data-research-and-tools/US-Fire-Problem/Fire-loss-in-the-United-States#:~:text=Key%20findings,fire%20somewhere%20in%20the%20nation.>

⁸ Id.

percent, and civilian injuries fell by 3.3 percent. Meanwhile, direct property damage decreased by 30 percent compared to the property damage in 2020.⁹

Further Reading:

CRS Reports:

[United States Fire Administration: An Overview](#)

[Staffing for Adequate Fire and Emergency Response: The SAFER Grant Program](#)

[Assistance to Firefighters Program: Distribution of Fire Grant Funding](#)

NFPA's "Fire Loss in the United States During 2021":

[Fire Loss in the United States](#)

⁹ Id.