

# House approves bill to help West fight wildfires, drought

BY MATTHEW DALY

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The House on Friday, July 29 approved wide-ranging legislation aimed at helping communities in the West cope with increasingly severe wildfires and drought — fueled by climate change — that have caused billions of dollars of damage to homes and businesses in recent years.

The measure combines 49 separate bills and would increase firefighter pay and benefits; boost resiliency and mitigation projects for communities affected by climate change; protect watersheds; and make it easier for wildfire victims to get federal assistance.

“Across America the impacts of climate change continue to worsen, and in this new normal, historic droughts and record-setting wildfires have become all too common,” said Rep. Joe Neguse, D-Colo., the bill’s chief co-sponsor. Colorado has suffered increasingly devastating wildfires in recent years, including the Marshall Fire last year that caused more than \$513 million in damage and destroyed nearly 1,100 homes and structures in Boulder County.

“What once were wildfire seasons are now wildfire years. For families across the country who have lost their homes due to these devastating wildfires and for the neighborhoods impacted by drought, we know that we need to apply a whole-of-government approach to support community recovery and bolster environmental resiliency,” Neguse said. “This is a bill that we believe meets the moment for the West.”

The bill was approved, 218-199, as firefighters in California battled a blaze that forced evacuation of thousands of people near Yosemite National Park and crews in North Texas sought to contain another fire.

It now goes to the Senate, where Sen. Dianne Feinstein, D-Calif., has sponsored a similar measure.



Noah Berger/AP file

A firefighter extinguishes flames as the Oak Fire crosses Darrah Road in Mariposa County, California, on July 22, 2022. Crews were able to stop it from reaching an adjacent home.

Both the House and Senate bills would permanently boost pay and benefits for federal wildland firefighters. President Joe Biden signed a measure last month giving them a hefty raise for the next two years, a move that affects more than 16,000 firefighters and comes as much of the West braces for another difficult wildfire season.

Pay raises for the federal firefighters had been included in last year’s \$1 trillion infrastructure bill, but the money was held up as federal agencies studied recruitment and retention data to decide where to deliver them. The raise approved by Biden was retroactive to Oct. 1, 2021, and expires Sept. 30, 2023.

The House bill would make the pay raises permanent and sets minimum pay for federal wildland fire-

fighters at \$20 per hour, or nearly \$42,000 a year. It also raises eligibility for hazardous-duty pay and boosts mental health and other services for firefighters. The bill is named after smokejumper Tim Hart, who died fighting a wildfire in New Mexico last year.

“The West is hot — hotter than ever — it is dry, and when it is windy, the West is on fire,” said Rep. Kim Schrier, D-Wash. “And we are seeing this every year because of climate change. That’s why this bill is so important.”

House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, D-Calif., called the bill “a major victory for Californians — and for the country.” The Oak Fire, the largest wildfire so far this year, “is ravaging our state,” she said. “At the same time, countless of our communities reg-

ularly suffer lack of rainfall that can kill crops and further fuel fires.”

The House bill would deliver “urgently needed resources” to combat fires and droughts, “which will only increase in frequency and intensity due to the climate crisis,” Pelosi said.

Republicans denounced the measure as “political messaging,” noting that firefighters’ hourly pay has already been increased above \$20 in most cases. The House bill does not appropriate additional money for the Forest Service or other agencies, and without such an increase, the Forest Service says it would have to lay off about 470 wildland firefighters.

Rep. Bruce Westerman of Arkansas, the top Republican on the House Natural Resources Committee, called it “egregious” that Democrats would seek to enact provisions that could

lead to firefighter layoffs in the midst of a devastating wildfire season.

“Democrats are finally waking up to the wildfire and drought crises, exacerbated by years of forest mismanagement and a lack of long-term water storage. Unfortunately, Democrats’ proposals are anything but solutions,” Westerman said. He accused Democrats of failing to follow science showing the need to manage forests before fires begin, and said Democrats “fail to construct the kind of long-term infrastructure needed to make communities resilient to drought” while prioritizing “liberal talking points” about climate change.

Neguse called that accusation outrageous and noted that many of the bills included in the wildfire/drought legislation are Republican proposals.

House Majority Leader Steny Hoyer, D-Md., said the bill was important to the whole country — not just the West, where wildfires and drought are a daily reality.

“We are one nation indivisible and if one part of us is burning, we are all burning,” Hoyer said.

Besides boosting firefighter pay, the bill enhances forest management projects intended to reduce hazardous fuels such as small trees and underbrush that can make wildfires far more dangerous. It also establishes grant programs to help communities affected by air pollution from wildfires and improve watersheds damaged by wildfire.

Republicans called the thinning projects — which also include prescribed burns and removal of vegetation — meaningless without waivers of lengthy environmental reviews that can delay forest treatment by years.

The White House said in a statement that it supports efforts to address climate change, wildfires and drought, but wants to “work with the Congress to ensure the many provisions in the (bill) avoid duplication with existing authorities and administration efforts.”

## House Jan. 6 panel interviews Mnuchin, pursues Trump Cabinet

BY MICHAEL BALSAMO, MARY CLARE JALONICK AND NOMAAN MERCHANT

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The House Jan. 6 committee has interviewed former Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin and is in negotiations to talk to several other former members of Donald Trump’s Cabinet as it scrutinizes the days after the Capitol insurrection and discussions about whether to try and remove the then-president from office.

The negotiations come as the committee was interviewing Trump’s one-time chief of staff, Mick Mulvaney, on Thursday. The former South Carolina congressman held that job until 2020 and later was special envoy for Northern Ireland, a post he resigned immediately after the riot on Jan. 6, 2021.

The interviews and negotiations were confirmed by three people familiar with the committee’s work who were not authorized to discuss the developments publicly and spoke on condition of anonymity.

The committee asked Mnuchin about discussions among Cabinet secretaries to possibly invoke the constitutional process in the 25th Amendment to remove Trump after the attack on the Capitol, according to one of the peo-

ple, and is in active talks to interview former Secretary of State Mike Pompeo. Pompeo is likely to appear in the coming days, the person said.

The committee had already interviewed former acting Attorney General Jeffrey Rosen, former Labor Secretary Eugene Scalia and former acting Defense Secretary Christopher Miller as it focuses on Trump and what he was doing in the days before, during and after the riot.

Lawmakers also are in discussions with John Ratcliffe, former director of national

*“There is no mistaking the impact your rhetoric had on the situation, and it is the inflection point for me.”*

— Betsy DeVos, President Trump’s education secretary, in her resignation letter

intelligence, according to two of the people, and are seeking interviews with several senior intelligence officials who had contact with the White House around that time.

Ratcliffe delivered a classified briefing on election security in late December 2020 at the request of Jeffrey Clark, a Justice Department

official who promoted Trump’s false claims of election fraud.

A person familiar with the matter said Ratcliffe summarized the findings of an election security report that said intelligence agencies had “no indications that any foreign actors attempted to alter any technical aspect of the voting process in the 2020 U.S. elections, including voter registration, casting ballots, vote tabulation, or re-

porting results.”

Trump and outside advisers who were pushing the false fraud claims had suggested that Venezuela had somehow tried to alter the count through voting machines.

The focus on the Cabinet is one of several threads the committee is pursuing after laying out much of its evidence in eight hearings this summer. After a yearlong investigation and more than 1,000 interviews, committee members say there is much more they want to learn.

The committee is expected to convene additional hearings in September.

Investigators have also reached out to former Homeland Security Secretary Chad Wolf, who resigned in the days after the riot, and lawmakers could call in other Trump Cabinet officials.

Betsy DeVos, Trump’s education secretary at the time, previously told USA Today that she raised with Vice President Mike Pence the question of whether the Cabinet should consider invoking the 25th Amendment, which would have required the vice president and the majority of the Cabinet to agree that the president could no longer fulfill his duties.

DeVos resigned the day after the attack, blaming Trump for inciting the mob.

“There is no mistaking the impact your rhetoric had on the situation, and it is the inflection point for me,” she wrote.

At a rally on the morning of

Jan. 6, Trump had told a crowd of his supporters to “fight like hell” as Congress met to certify Joe Biden’s election victory, and the rioters were repeating Trump’s false claims as they broke into the Capitol and violently pushed past police.

Elaine Chao also quit as transportation secretary on Jan. 7. Chao, who is married to Senate GOP leader Mitch McConnell of Kentucky, said the attack had “deeply troubled me in a way that I simply cannot set aside.”

Pompeo, who is now considering a 2024 presidential run, and Mnuchin were reported to have discussed the possibility of invoking the 25th Amendment, according to Jonathan Karl of ABC News in his book “Betrayal.”



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