



[The Brainless Frog, Episode 98: Out of Funds To Fight Wildfires, U.S. Shifts Money From Fire Prevention Programs](#)

By [Joe Romm](#) on Oct 8, 2012 at 4:16 pm

The Washington Post reports this [jaw-dropper](#) about the species [homo "sapiens" sapiens](#):

In the worst wildfire season on record, the U.S. Department of Agriculture Forest Service ran out of money to pay for firefighters, fire trucks and aircraft that dump retardant on monstrous flames. So officials did about the only thing they could: take money from other forest management programs.



But many of the programs were aimed at preventing giant fires in the first place, and raiding their budgets meant putting off the removal of dried brush and dead wood over vast stretches of land — the things that fuel eye-popping blazes, threatening property and lives.

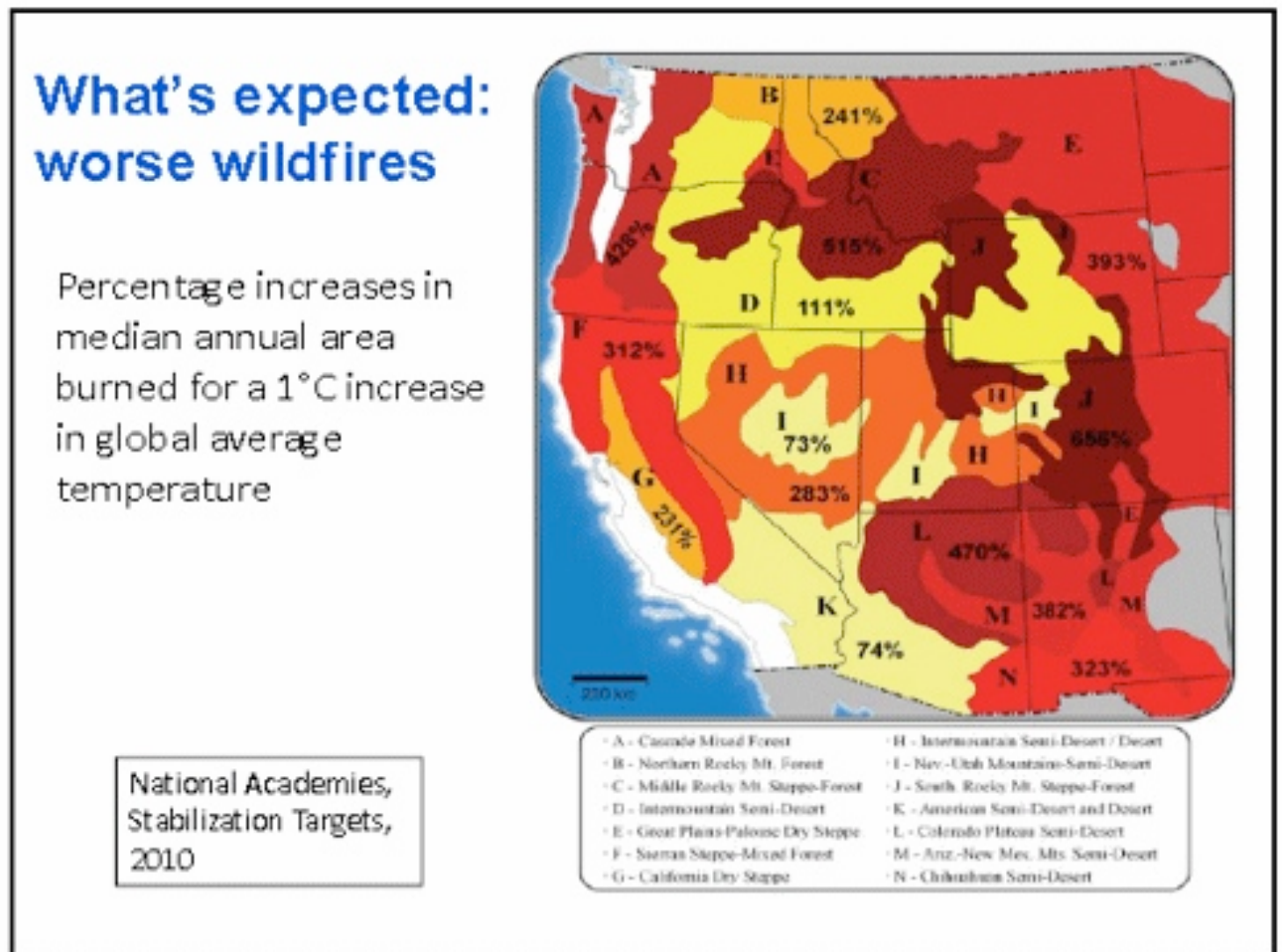
In the words of the [patron saint of bad ideas](#), d'oh!

Can you imagine a species this insane? This would be even less frog-worthy than cutting the wind energy tax credit while continuing to subsidize oil drilling. Then again, as the overwhelming evidence makes clear, out, "[Humans Are Not Like Slowly Boiling Frogs ... We Are Like Slowly Boiling Brainless Frogs.](#)"

You'll be fascinated, but not surprised, to know just how nonsensically the wildfire budgeting for the Forest Service is done by Congress: The "traditional method that members of an appropriations conference committee use to fund wildfire

suppression” is “averaging the cost of fighting wildfires over the previous 10 years.”

Forestry experts argue that this approach “is inadequate at a time when climate change is causing longer periods of dryness and drought, giving fires more fuel to burn and resulting in longer wildfire seasons.” Duh!



Remember global warming is already contributing to the worst wildfires “[since the last ice age](#).” And here’s a figure from a 2010 [presentation](#) made by the President’s science adviser Dr. John Holdren, about conditions projected for mid-century:

So providing a budget based on “averaging the cost of fighting wildfires over the previous 10 years” is going to fail in increasingly spectacular fashion, particularly since it has already begun to fail spectacularly:

Once running from June to September, the season has expanded over the past 10 years to include May and October. It was once rare to see 5 million

cumulative acres burn, agriculture officials said. But some recent seasons have recorded millions more than that.

This year's wildfire burn was nearly 8 million acres at the end of August, about the time that the budget allocated to fight them ran dry.

"They knew they were running out of money early on, in May," said Chris Topik, director of North American Forest Restoration for the Nature Conservancy. "They were telling people in May, **'Be careful, don't spend too much [on prevention].'**"

Over seven years starting in 2002, \$2.2 billion was transferred from other accounts for fire suppression when the budget came up short, according to records provided by the Forest Service. Congress at times reimbursed a fraction of those funds....

Each year that money was removed from brush disposal and timber salvage programs, the Forest Service's efforts to prevent fire fell "further and further behind," said Jake Donnay, senior director of forestry for National Association of State Foresters. "Even with the appropriations they get, they're not able to catch up."

Whoever said an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure? In Congress, the saying goes, it is better to pay for the pound of cure with the money you were going to spend on the ounce of prevention. *[And yes I know this isn't real, long-term prevention aka CO2 mitigation: That's what I testified about in the July ["House Hearing Today On Bark Beetles, Drought And Wildfires."](#)]*

Now it turns out this year Congress did eventually make up the difference. It provided "at the start of the fiscal year only about half of the \$1 billion dollars it actually cost to fight this year's fires," but then did reimburse "\$400 million from the 2013 Continuing Resolution, allowing fire prevention work to continue."

The good news is that Congress understands that this sort of budgeting makes no sense. Heck they even created an emergency fund that the Forest Service could put funds into in the (increasingly) rare year they didn't spend their original allocation for battling wildfires: Federal Land Assistance, Management and Enhancement fund, or FLAME. Get it? We fight wildfires with FLAME. Congress is just so clever ... or not:

Congress allocated \$415 million for FLAME's first fiscal year, 2010 — a mild fire season, it turned out. As luck would have it, the following season also presented fewer fires, and a small budget surplus went into FLAME.

But in 2011, Congress went right in after it, taking at least \$200 million from the fund and placing into the general treasury to use for other expenditures.

“It defeats the purpose of FLAME,” Topik, a former staff member for the House Appropriations Committee, said of the Forest Service.

So, the bad news is that Congress is run by brainless frogs — that’s why we call it a representative democracy:

Staff members on the committee acknowledged that using the 10-year average cost of wildfire suppression to determine the budget is not ideal. The spokeswoman, Jennifer Hing, said the committee will continue to operate as it has....

I repost this Toles sketch in honor of the committee:



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