

INCREASE STATE FIREFIGHTING CAPACITY



TEXAS A&M
FOREST SERVICE

Background

As the state agency responsible for wildfire suppression in Texas, the Texas A&M Forest Service, or TFS, delivers wildfire response and protection through the Texas Wildfire Protection Plan. This plan emphasizes ongoing analysis and aggressive emergency response as wildfires exceed local response capabilities. It also provides the framework for the delivery of all-hazard emergency response.

Increasing risk

- Continuing population growth and development as cities and towns expand into previously rural areas place more Texas citizens at risk of wildfire every year.
- With over 90% of all Texas wildfires caused by human activity and 86% occurring within two miles of a community, the human impact is tremendous.
- Over the last five fiscal years, Texas reported 45,424 wildfires for nearly 2 million acres and 23,336 homes saved.
- The total impact of the Texas Wildfire Protection Plan for FY 2005-FY 2019 is **\$16.4 billion** in property values saved.

Organized response

Because of TFS emergency management skills developed in wildfire response, the Texas Division of Emergency Management, or TDEM, calls on the agency to support state response efforts. TFS is involved in various disasters and emergency events, such as floods, tornados, ice storms, hurricanes and COVID-19. At TDEM's request, TFS mobilized 2,004 agency personnel to non-wildfire disasters since 2015.

REQUESTED AMOUNT (BIENNIAL)

FY **2022-23** EXCEPTIONAL ITEM

\$20 million/biennium

\$10 million/year

50 firefighters

Objective

Strengthen Texas' firefighting and emergency response capacity to better serve the needs of the state.



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Growing Need for More Resources

Availability of volunteer firefighters

Volunteer firefighters are the first line of defense for wildfires, covering 76% of the state. The number of volunteer firefighters in Texas has dropped 21% in the last two decades. The availability of TFS firefighters and other response resources is even more critical as the size, scope and impact of disasters continue to grow.

All-hazard response

Demand for TFS emergency responders has increased to the point where the agency often finds itself responding simultaneously to multiple types of disasters. For example, in April 2020, TFS staffed a 25,958-acre wildfire in West Texas, operated the state COVID-19 supply warehouse in San Antonio, supported disaster districts for COVID-19 operations across the state, and provided storm cleanup, damage assessment and mapping services in Polk, Jasper and Newton counties following a tornado.

Federal aerial resource expenses

Federal-source aircraft, particularly airtankers that drop fire retardant, are essential resources on large wildfires. Some of these expenses can be carried to the next legislative session for supplemental appropriations to reimburse the U.S. Forest Service, but an increasing number cannot. Aircraft support costs that must be paid immediately were not factored into the previous Texas Wildfire Protection Plan funding requests, impacting TFS operating and equipment replacement funds.

Benefits to Texans

Increasing the state's wildfire and incident response capacity will help provide more timely and effective response to meet growing demands and further reduce reliance on costly out-of-state resources.

Funding Impact

With additional funding of \$10 million per year, TFS can better meet the state's growing wildfire and emergency response demands. This funding will:

- Add a total of 50 fire/emergency response positions to maintain effective statewide wildfire/all-hazard response and wildfire mitigation capacity.
- Fund federal contract costs (such as aviation support) that can no longer be deferred under federal agreement.
- Adjust pay scales to be more competitive, improve retention and strengthen wildfire/all-hazard response capacity.
- Add and replace suppression equipment.



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