

The Rural Disaster Recovery Act of 2016

The Problem: Federal disaster assistance does not meet the needs of small and rural communities recovering from wildfires and other natural disasters

In recent years, large wildland fires have increased in severity and frequency across the Western United States. Fires that exceed 100,000 acres are now near-annual occurrences throughout the West, placing considerable strain upon state and local governments. For many of the small, rural communities affected by these fires, federal assistance is essential to recovery and mitigation against future disasters. Ensuring that these communities are able to quickly access and utilize federal assistance programs is of paramount importance.

Currently, federal recovery programs are insufficient to address the needs of wildfire-impacted communities. Unlike other disasters which can be measured in minutes or hours, wildfires can stretch on for weeks at a time, complicating damage assessments and compressing application timelines for federal assistance. Furthermore, the diffuse nature of wildfires can make it harder for affected communities to meet the Federal Emergency Management Agency's (FEMA) Individual Assistance (IA) program approval criteria, which favor damage concentrated in smaller areas.¹ Taken together, the individuals, families, and communities hardest hit by wildfires are all too often left to recover on their own.

The Solution: The Rural Disaster Recovery Act of 2016

The Rural Disaster Recovery Act of 2016 would expand and modernize key disaster recovery programs within FEMA, the Farm Service Agency (FSA), and the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), as well as create new programs and authorities to fill gaps in the disaster safety net.

- *Expanding the Disaster Safety Net:* The Rural Disaster Recovery Act would create a new program modeled off of the highly successful Emergency Food and Shelter Program to help resource-strained communities recover from a major disaster in the event that IA is not approved. The program would provide emergency funds to proven non-profit partners like the American Red Cross and the United Way to assist with shelter, food, and other recovery services in affected communities. The Rural Disaster Recovery Act would also incentivize the creation of state IA programs by expanding the federal cost-share for IA activities like medical care, child care, and transportation.
- *Modernizing Recovery Programs:* The Rural Disaster Recovery Act would increase FSA's Emergency Conservation Program grant award limit, which has remained unchanged since 1981,² in line with other disaster recovery programs administered by the Agency. The Rural Disaster Recovery Act would also create a new pilot program within the NRCS' Emergency Watershed Protection Program to provide applicants in wildfire-affected regions additional time to apply for and utilize recovery grants.
- *Targeting Mitigation Assistance:* The Rural Disaster Recovery Act would make permanent a pilot authority that allowed for FEMA Hazard Mitigation Grants to be awarded to areas that were issued fire management assistance grants but did not receive a major disaster declaration.³ This authority would allow wildfire-prone areas to more easily and reliably access federal funds to defend against future fires.

¹ [44 CFR 206.48\(b\)\(1\)](#)

² 46 FR 937-01

³ ["Department of Homeland Security Appropriations Act, 2015" \(P.L. 114-4, March 4, 2015\). Section 570](#)