

Addressing Gaps in Water Infrastructure for Fire Amending the Community Wildfire Defense Grant



Updated: July 5, 2023

This briefing provides an overview of efforts to address community gaps in adequate water infrastructure for firefighting in the wildland-urban interface and includes a discussion guide. This is **not** a handout.

Background: Addressing Community Gaps in Adequate Water Infrastructure for Firefighting

NSDC began examining community gaps in water infrastructure for firefighting following a number of fire protection and water district inquiries into assistance opportunities to address the issue. Unfortunately, existing federal programs that are otherwise popular for fire and water infrastructure either have limitations or restrictions preventing many local agencies from addressing these local gaps in public health and safety.

A working group of special district leaders providing fire and water services across nine states convened to study, discuss, and consider approaches to address this issue. A nationwide survey open to all local agencies providing fire and water services followed the conclusion of working group discussions. NSDC found that both types of public service providers expressed major concerns in providing robust, maximum community fire protection. The agencies acknowledged the systematic deficits and are widely interested in offering solutions to meet needs of public health and safety, but they experience hardships to provide critical fire suppression resources.

Highlights of this issue include:

1. Steep construction and maintenance costs of water infrastructure for firefighting along with inflation and supply chain concerns.
2. Grant barriers exist – primarily because there is no single, reliable source of financial assistance for projects with fire suppression infrastructure objectives. Smaller, more rural agencies experience staff capacity hardships in searching for, applying for, and executing grant programs.
3. Water and fire agencies have two different missions and are often unable to efficiently communicate with each other. Fire agencies usually have a heavier burden on interagency communications with more territory falling under their jurisdictions. However, NSDC research indicates these two types of agencies would be willing to collaborate with each other to improve access to fire suppression resources if cost share funding opportunities existed.
4. Rural water and fire agencies often operate on very lean budgets, which exacerbates the above issues. Furthermore, rural and wildland-urban interface communities may not have good access to *any* water resources and may not have a water agency with which to collaborate. In these communities, any water is sufficient for fire suppression needs, whereas water quality matters much more in urban communities.

Formal NSDC Working Group Recommendations

A national working group of special districts providing fire protection and water services convened to examine this public policy issue and issued a [full report](#) with legislative and stakeholder recommendations [see: QR code].



Share Your Community's Story

NSDC continues to collect special district and other local governments' stories of community gaps in adequate water infrastructure for firefighting. Please use the QR code below to share your story.

Taking Action: Amend the Community Wildfire Defense Grant Program

The National Special Districts Coalition is partnering in efforts to amend the Community Wildfire Defense Grant (CWDG) to expand eligibility to include water infrastructure for fire suppression projects. Ideally, this concept would be included in Farm Bill reauthorization legislation, which would include U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) forestry programs.

CWDG was established with the *Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act* to assist at-risk communities with the development of or revisions to community wildfire protection plans or to execute projects included in community plans that have been active 10 years at most. USDA prioritizes program funding for communities located in high or very high wildfire hazard zones, have been disaster-impacted, and are considered disadvantaged or underserved.

The Ask: Support amending the USDA-Forest Service State and Private Forestry's Community Wildfire Defense Grant Program (CWDG) to consider water infrastructure for fire suppression projects as eligible Planning, Prevention, Education and Outreach Projects

Combined Talking Points & Discussion Guide

- Combined, more than 10,000 special districts provide fire protection and water services to millions of Americans every day – many in the wildland urban interface, in rural communities distant from a central water source, or experiencing drought.
- Many communities lack access to water resources adequate for fire suppression needs. This is an issue in all types of communities, including urban, suburban, and rural.
- While we are grateful for the historic infrastructure investments recent years, there remains no single reliable source of funding to assist with solutions to this problem, such as projects to store water for central access and to pressurize systems, meet waterflow standards for fire hydrants, develop open water sources, strategically install water tanks as a water access point, co-locating water and fire facilities, and more.
- Aside from public health and safety concerns, addressing community gaps in water infrastructure for firefighting will have financial impacts on shared constituents, as a community's ISO rating for insurance purposes is 40 percent dependent water access – impacting affordability of our community.
- A donut hole exists among major federal water and fire programs, such as EPA Drinking Water State Revolving Funds and FEMA Assistance to Firefighter Grant, where practical solutions for communities in need are ineligible or heavily limited.
- **With the forthcoming Farm Bill reauthorization, there is an opportunity for Congress to take steps to address this serious policy issue – at least in the Wildland-Urban Interface (WUI).**
- **ASK:** Please support amending the USDA-Forest Service State and Private Forestry's Community Wildfire Defense Grant Program to expand the program's planning and prevention project eligibility to include water infrastructure for firefighting projects.
- **Is your district located in the WUI and in need of upgrades to water infrastructure to ensure firefighting needs are met? Share this story – how could expansion of this program be applied for your district/in your community?**
- Making these investments in our communities will also have a long-term financial impact on our shared constituents, as greater water coverage paired with quality fire protection will reduce home insurance rates, delivering cost savings in all types of communities – especially in rural, suburban, urban-wildland interface, and disadvantaged communities.
- Please support greater flexibility in the CWDG to invest in water infrastructure for firefighting as a critical element of a community's defense and prevention of wildfire.