

**Prepared Statement by Senator Chuck Grassley (R-Iowa)**  
**Ranking Member, Senate Committee on the Budget**  
**Hearing titled “A Burning Issue: The Economic Costs of Wildfires”**  
**March 8, 2023**

[VIDEO](#)

Mr. Chairman, tomorrow the President will submit a portion of his 2024 Budget to Congress. Like his first two Budgets, this one will arrive over a month late.

When the President’s budget is delayed the Congressional process is held up. A delayed process postpones when appropriators and authorizers commence hearings to review agency spending priorities. It also delays the Finance Committee’s review of the Administration’s latest package of tax hikes.

In fairness to the President, Congress doesn’t follow its own process.

Last year, Congress didn’t adopt a budget—nor did the majority attempt to write one. Not one appropriations bill was reported out of committee. And, Congress didn’t complete appropriations until December 23<sup>rd</sup>. What an irresponsible way to go about spending nearly \$2 trillion.

Adopting a budget was once considered an essential part of good governance. Now it’s barely an afterthought.

Between 1981 and 2000, Congress adopted a budget every year but one. Individual appropriations bills were also regularly debated and amended on the Senate floor. We didn’t sit around twiddling our thumbs until December.

Since 2008, we’ve adopted a budget only eight times. Moreover, we’ve only debated one or more individual appropriations bills on the Senate floor 5 times. The American people deserve better from the legislative body of this great country.

What’s most concerning is that as our budget and appropriations process has deteriorated, so has our fiscal outlook. Where deficits averaged 2.7 percent of our economy between 1974 and 2000, they’ve averaged 4.8 percent since 2001. And deficits only grow larger moving forward.

According to CBO, over the next ten years deficits will consistently exceed levels once reserved solely for periods of global war or recession. To top it all off, in six years our public debt will exceed 106 percent of our economy. A level we’ve only previously exceeded one time—at the end World War II.

Needless to say Mr. Chairman, things must change. Unfortunately, President Biden and Senate Democrat leadership are uninterested in getting back to regular order or addressing our dire fiscal outlook.

President Biden has refused to engage Speaker McCarthy in good faith negotiations to reduce our unsustainable debt and deficits.

In the Senate, we've been in session for two months with the Majority offering no legislative agenda. What's more, our exceedingly light work schedule begs the question of what we'll have time to accomplish. This suggests both the President and Democrat leadership are content with continuing to govern crisis to crisis.

First up, the debt ceiling. Inevitably, they'll put off raising it until the last minute. That will allow them to use the threat of default as leverage to avoid the reality of our grim fiscal outlook.

Next comes passing appropriations in the final weeks of December. This time presenting members with the dilemma of either voting for a multi-trillion dollar spending bill they haven't read or causing a government shutdown. Neither is an acceptable choice.

It doesn't have to be this way. This and every other committee should do its part to help us avoid the eleventh-hour brinkmanship that now defines how Congress works.

To kick things off, next week's hearing on the President's budget should be the first of many hearings focused on getting our fiscal affairs in order.

But now, on to today's Budget Committee hearing on wildfires.

First, it's important to note that forest fires are a natural part of succession and are essential to ecological health. In the early 1900s, about 4.2% of land world-wide burned every year. A century later, this has dropped to around 3%. While wildfires have become less expansive, the average annual acreage burned by wildfires in the United States has increased over the past 30 years. The question is why?

Yes, changes in the climate are a part of the story, but there are more important factors. It's high time we start listening to forestry experts on the root causes of the current trends we are experiencing.

A 2018 study conducted by U.S. Forest Service scientists found forest fuel load to be the single largest factor driving high-severity fire in the West from 2002-2015. Fuel load accounted for 53% of the average relative influence. In comparison, climate only accounted for 14%.

Few understand the need for better forest management more than Dr. Morgan Varner. He is joining us virtually from Tallahassee, Florida. He's dedicated his career to fire management. He's the one witness who's actually managed forests. He currently works for Tall Timbers conducting prescribed burns in Florida and previously led a Forest Service team in the state of Washington.

I also look forward to hearing the perspective of Nick Loris, an economist, who will speak to the economic impacts of wildfires and the regulatory hurdles impeding effective forest management.

