

## Altmire, Casey try to help fire departments with fuel costs

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"Nobody's been hit harder," said Altmire, D-4, McCandless Township. "It's critical to their survival because the fuel prices have increased the burden on them, and they were struggling to begin with."

Casey, D-Scranton, and Altmire introduced the Supporting America's Volunteer Emergency Services (SAVES) Act, which would reimburse volunteer departments up to 75 percent of the difference between their fuel costs and the average price of fuel in 2007.

"I'm going to push this very hard," Casey said in a telephone press conference. "It's a problem that goes well beyond our state."

Volunteer fire departments have been decimated by dwindling membership, and now fuel prices are hurting them, Casey said. About 9 million of Pennsylvania's approximate 12 million residents are served by volunteer departments, he said.

Gasoline has surpassed \$4 per gallon, and diesel fuel is averaging more than \$5 per gallon. Departments would have to submit fuel receipts to receive reimbursement. While Casey and Altmire proposed legislation that's almost exactly the same, Casey would have the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development administer the program, while Altmire calls for the Federal Emergency Management Agency to run it.

Tess Mullen, spokeswoman for Altmire, said any differences would eventually be settled during House and Senate negotiations.

Altmire estimated the annual cost of the program at \$35 million, but Casey said he thought it would cost about \$50 million. "There is a cost," Altmire said, "but, again, we just have to do something."

Money for the program could easily be found in the enormous federal budget, said Casey, who warned that inaction could lead to people dying because firetrucks run out of gas on the way to fires.

&ldquo;That&rsquo;s the tragic reality of what could happen if we don&rsquo;t start getting serious,&rdquo; he said.