

**Statement of
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USDA FOREST SERVICE
BEFORE THE
ENERGY AND NATURAL RESOURCES COMMITTEE
UNITED STATES SENATE**

May 5, 2015

Concerning

The Federal government's role in wildfire management, the impact of fires on communities, and potential improvements to be made in fire operations.

Introduction

Madame Chairman and Members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to present the views of the USDA Forest Service regarding the Federal government's role in wildfire management, the impact of fires on communities, and potential improvements to be made in fire operations.

The United States and the rest of the world are experiencing heightened levels of wildfire activity. We are seeing wildfires in the United States grow to sizes that were unimaginable just 20 or 30 years ago. Many states including Florida, Georgia, Texas, Colorado, California, Oregon, Arizona, New Mexico, and Washington experienced either the largest and/or the most destructive fire in their history within the last seven years. Extreme wildfire threatens lives and the natural resources people need and value, such as clean, abundant water; clean air; fish and wildlife habitat; open space for recreation; and other forest products and opportunities impacting the daily lives of many Americans.

We expect 2015 to continue the trend of above average fire activity. Our most recent forecast developed by Forest Service researchers at our Southern Research Station indicates there is a 90% chance that this year's fire suppression costs will be between \$794M and \$1.657B for the Forest Service, with a median estimate of \$1.225B. The median is above the 10 year average and would certainly force us to transfer funding from other vital land management programs to support suppression operations.

The 2014 wildfire season was substantial, with over 60,000 wildfires in the United States that consumed over 3.5 million acres across all ownerships. Significant fire activity (fires over 40,000 acres) burned in Oregon, Washington, Alaska, Arizona, Idaho, and California. These fires affected watersheds for millions of people. Wildfire destroyed a total of 1,953 structures in 2014, including 1,038 residences. California accounted for the highest number of structures lost in one state in 2014 with over 300 dwellings destroyed.

The responsibility to respond to wildfire is not isolated to the Forest Service. We work extensively with our partners within the Department of the Interior (DOI) as well as State and local firefighting organizations to support wildland fire management operations. These cooperators are essential to ensuring that every wildfire receives an appropriate, risk informed, and effective response regardless of the jurisdiction. Not only does the Forest Service rely on our cooperators, but those cooperators rely on the Forest Service to meet their operational and land management objectives.

The entire wildland fire community has and will continue to utilize the National Cohesive Wildland Fire Strategy (Cohesive Strategy) to align priorities and define responsibilities across wildfire activities including prevention, fuels treatments and response. The Cohesive Strategy has three components that include: 1) restoring fire-adapted ecosystems, 2) building fire-adapted human communities, and 3) responding appropriately to wildfire.

Preparedness Resources

The Forest Service and the DOI have the capability and responsibility to protect life, property, and natural resources while assuring an appropriate, risk-informed, and effective response to wildfires that is consistent with land and resource management objectives. We do this in close cooperation with States, Tribal governments, local governments, contract crews, and emergency/temporary hires. Firefighter and public safety are the primary considerations for all operations. The agencies continue to suppress approximately 98 percent of the fires on initial attack. However, the few fires that escape initial attack tend to grow quickly.

Within the FY2015 appropriation for Wildland Fire Management, we will be able to sustain comparable levels of firefighting assets as we have in previous years. We are able to leverage Call-When-Needed (CWN) aviation and ground based assets as the situation requires. We also coordinate with other Federal, State and local partners to maximize the utility of the community of assets to ensure we are able to respond when levels of fire activity increase. Approximately 10,000 firefighters from the Forest Service and 3,200 DOI firefighters are available for the upcoming fire season.

An integral component of our readiness is aviation resources. This year, we will have up to 21 airtankers available for operations on exclusive use contracts including: six legacy airtankers, up to 14 next generation tankers, and one agency owned/contractor operated HC-130H. The Forest Service also expects to have airtankers available through CWN contracts as well as the capability to mobilize cooperator airtankers if available through agreements with the state of Alaska and Canada. In addition, in 2015, the Forest Service will have available for wildfire suppression nationwide one CL415 Water Scooper through an exclusive use contract and one Single Engine Airtanker available through a shared Bureau of Land Management/ Forest Service exclusive use contract. The DOI additionally has 70 Single Engine Airtankers and four Water Scoopers to support wildfire response in situations where a smaller aircraft is the most effective tool. In coordination with the military, there are up to eight Mobile Airborne Firefighting System (MAFFS) capable C-130H available to meet surge requirements. We also have an extensive fleet of over 100 helicopters available to support response operations and 42 providing support from the DOI agencies.

The Forest Service continues to implement the 2012 Large Airtanker Modernization strategy that identifies the need for next generation tankers that have expanded capability and increased retardant delivery capacity. We have made progress modernizing our airtanker fleet with the impending transfer of the seven HC-130Hs from the Coast Guard, the upcoming acquisition of a next generation airtanker and the exclusive use contracting of up to 14 next generation airtankers. We have implemented several initiatives including the Aerial Firefighting Use and Effectiveness Program (AFUE) to help us better understand the best mix and use of our aviation assets to meet the changing conditions and operational requirements of wildfire response. AFUE will assist in establishing performance metrics and operational guidelines to improve our response capabilities and safety of our operators.

It is just as important to have substantial pre-seasonal planning operations occur with our cooperators and adjacent communities as it is to have our assets trained and ready to respond. The goal of building fire-adapted human communities provides context for our relationship with our cooperators and the public. We work to establish reasonable expectations as well as how the community can help be better prepared for wildland fire by participating in programs like Fire Wise, Fire Adapted Communities, creating Community Wildland Fire Protection Plans and implementing other mitigation and resiliency projects to offset and minimize the inherent risk that wildfire poses.

Suppression

Over the last few decades, wildfire suppression costs have increased as fire seasons have grown longer and the frequency, size, and severity of wildfires has increased due to changing climatic conditions, drought, hazardous fuel buildups, insect and disease infestations, nonnative invasive species, and other factors. These trends are expected to continue. Over the last 10 years, adjusting for inflation, the Forest Service has spent an average of almost \$1.13 billion on suppression operations annually. The Department of the Interior agencies adjusted suppression obligations for the same period is \$383.7 million. This change is attributed to many factors including increased development in the wildland urban interface, degraded ecological conditions, and a changing climate. There has been an increase in frequency of large catastrophic fires in which we expend significant financial resources.

We manage suppression costs by utilizing the best available information and applying the right resource at the right place, at the right time, for the right duration with the right plan. The largest fires we manage often present extraordinary attributes that create risks to people and other high valued assets that are difficult and costly to manage. We believe that by continuing to apply risk management principles, decisions will be made that not only provide an appropriate, risk informed and effective response to all wildfires, but also ensure that costs are commensurate with the values at risk.

The Forest Service and the DOI determined that 1 percent of fires consume about 30 percent of the wildfire suppression budget. The Administration believes these types of wildfires should be considered natural disasters and treated as such for funding purposes. Unlike other Federal

agencies responsible for responding to natural disasters, the Forest Service is required to fund its entire emergency management program through its regular appropriated discretionary budget.

The President's FY 2016 budget includes a proposal to reform the way that wildfire suppression is funded. The Administration's proposal aligns with the Wildfire Disaster Funding Act introduced this Congress. The reforms contained in these proposals are necessary and vital to ensure the Forest Service and the DOI are able to continue to deliver the full scope of their missions. Since FY 2002, the Forest Service has transferred funds from non-fire accounts seven times. In the same time period, the DOI has had to transfer funds to cover suppression obligations six times. Transferring funds to cover the cost of wildfire suppression is disruptive and harmful to other critical Forest Service and DOI programs and services, including efforts to reduce wildfire risk through mechanical thinning, prescribed fires, and other means.

Even in years when the Forest Service does not transfer funds from other programs the uncertainty created by the possibility of "fire transfer" means key projects, including those that contribute to forest health and hazardous fuels reduction, are put on hold in anticipation of a high wildfire activity year.

Hazardous Fuels

Decades of fire suppression and other factors have led to increases of fuels in many forest types across the country. Treating these acres through commercial thinning, hazardous fuels removal, re-introduction of low-intensity fires and other means can reduce fuel loads, provide forest products to local mills, provide jobs to local communities, and improve the ecological health of our forests and rangelands.

Fifty-eight million acres of national forests are at high or very high risk of severe wildfire. Out of the 58 million "high or very high" risk acres, we have identified approximately 11.3 million acres for highest priority treatment. These acres are in proximity to the wildland-urban interface or are in priority watersheds or water sources, are in frequent fire return regimes, and are not in roadless or wilderness areas.

Together with our partners in fire management, including Federal, State, local, tribal, nongovernmental, academia and landowner organizations, the Forest Service and DOI have worked collaboratively to develop the Cohesive Strategy of which fuel treatment is an essential component. Fuel treatments result in better outcomes on the land: more resilient, healthier ecosystems that provide the many benefits society wants and needs.

We control fuels in the wildland/urban interface (WUI) by removing buildup of dead vegetation and thinning over dense forests. We focus on treating high-priority areas, including municipal watersheds to protect water supplies. In FY2014, the Hazardous Fuels program treated more than 2.5 million acres on National Forest System and adjacent lands both inside and outside the WUI. The Hazardous Fuels program utilizes a decision support system called the Hazardous Fuels Priority Allocation System (HFPAS) to inform allocation decisions. Within HFPAS an assessment is completed that determines the likelihood that high intensity wildfires will intersect with residential areas and municipal water supplies. The results of the HFPAS analysis are

combined with other treatment and ecological objectives to inform the allocations. In 2015, we funded nationally competitive projects that will reduce the risk to communities and firefighters and increase the resilience of the forests. In addition, these projects target areas of high risk near communities that are actively working to reduce the fire risk to their community.

There are many other programs within the Forest Service that also reduce the risk of catastrophic wildland fires including the Collaborative Forest Landscape Restoration Program (CFLR). The CFLR assists in the agency's work with partners to conduct hazardous fuel treatments and ecosystem restoration that encourage economic and social sustainability, leverage local resources with national and private resources, reduce wildfire management costs, and address the utilization of forest restoration byproducts to offset treatment costs and benefit local economies. The CFLR uses a competitive process to select projects which foster collaborative, science-based restoration on priority forest landscapes across the Nation. Although CFLR is not the only program that contributes to this goal, the relationships the agency builds through this program provides models for how community partnerships can help advance landscape restoration efforts. In FY 2014, CFLR projects delivered substantial progress in restoring ecosystem resilience and reducing the risk of uncharacteristic wildland fire.

Since the first CFLR projects began implementation, the Forest Service has worked with partners to accomplish over 1.45 million acres of hazardous fuels treatments in the 23 project areas to reduce the risk of catastrophic wildfire. Approximately 870,100 of these acres treated were within the wildland-urban interface and 509,200 acres were outside of the interface.

The Forest Service's wood utilization program develops markets to reduce the cost of hazardous fuels treatments, forest management, and restoration activities. The USDA Wood to Energy Initiative is an interagency effort to expand renewable wood energy development and use. In FY 2015, the Forest Service awarded over 40 Wood Innovation Grants to communities, businesses, Tribes, States, and other organizations to help expand and accelerate wood energy and wood products markets through the country. The National Forest System is an important source of woody biomass and many of the CFLR projects are actively pursuing the development of woody biomass utilization opportunities. The National Forest System made 2.2 million tons of woody biomass available through the use of stewardship, logging, and other contracting authorities in FY 2014.

In the past four years, the USDA Wood to Energy Initiative resulted in more than 270 projects, roughly \$1 billion in USDA loans and grants, and increased private sector leverage for wood energy projects. In FY 2014, State and Private Forestry awarded \$1.25 million in grants for wood energy projects and \$2.5 million in cooperative agreements to establish 11 Statewide Wood Energy teams. The Forest Service also invested \$3 million in strategic alliances that successfully leveraged substantial non-Federal funding for wood energy initiatives in FY 2014.

The DOI is appreciative of the \$10 million in funding appropriated by Congress in FY 2015 to pilot the Resilient Landscapes program. The new program is a place-based, collaborative approach critical to the Interior agencies in meeting the Cohesive Strategy goal of restoring and maintaining landscapes across all jurisdictions that are resilient to fire related disturbances in accordance with management objectives. Interior received 29 proposals representing a variety of

ecosystems across the United States and inclusive of many different, agencies, tribes, and partners. The selection process should be concluded by the end of May. Selected proposals will begin restoring fire resiliency across landscapes this year, leveraging wildland fire management funds and efforts with agency resource management programs and partners.

In closing, we anticipate another active fire year as above normal wildland fire potential exists across the north central United States this spring while above normal wildland fire potential continues to threaten many parts of the West this summer. We look forward to the safe return of the brave men and women who serve on the front lines of protecting life and property during this year's fire season. We appreciate the introduction of the Wildfire Disaster Funding Act that will help the Forest Service and DOI avoid the need to transfer funds from other agency programs to pay for suppression. Finally, we welcome the opportunity work with the committee to identify ways to accomplish additional work to reduce the threat of fire by restoring the Nation's forests and rangelands.