

**TESTIMONY of
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UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE—FOREST SERVICE
BEFORE THE
UNITED STATES SENATE
COMMITTEE ON ENERGY AND NATURAL RESOURCES
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Concerning
2019 WILDFIRE OUTLOOK**

Madam Chairman, Ranking Member and Members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today to discuss the outlook for wildland fire and management programs for 2019. My testimony today will forecast the anticipated wildfire activity this summer as well as provide an update regarding implementation of the wildfire technology provisions in the recently enacted public lands package. I will also discuss the ways the Forest Service is working with its many partners to improve forest conditions and help communities prepare for wildfire.

RECAP OF 2018 AND OUTLOOK FOR THE 2019 WILDFIRE YEAR

Last year was another devastating and costly year related to wildland fire. Tragically, dozens of Americans were killed, including 19 wildland firefighter fatalities. Over 58,000 fires were reported nationally, burning approximately 8.8 million acres. A total of 25,790 structures were destroyed by wildfires last year, including 18,137 residences, 6,927 minor structures, and 229 commercial/mixed residential structures. This ranked 2018 as the worst structure loss year since data collection began in 1999. In California, the 459,123 acre Mendocino Complex was the largest wildfire complex in California history. The 229,651 acre Carr Fire impacted the city of Redding, California with significant structure loss. The Camp Fire destroyed 18,804 structures and tragically claimed 85 lives in the Town of Paradise, California.

The Forest Service spent \$2.6 billion in fire suppression in Fiscal Year 2018. The agency was forced to transfer \$720 million from non-fire programs to cover these costs through the end of the fiscal year. We greatly appreciate the repayment of these funds through enactment of the recent disaster aid legislation. We look forward to the fire funding fix being in place in Fiscal Year 2020 to reduce the likelihood of transferring funds from non-fire programs to cover fire suppression costs.

The outlook for 2019 indicates the nation will experience another challenging wildfire year. So far this year, we have experienced less than average fire activity due to wetter weather conditions and slower than average snowpack melting rates. However, above normal potential exists for significant large fires this summer across California and the West Coast where a heavy crop of grasses and fine fuels has developed and the wildfire risk will increase as conditions become drier. In addition, the area of Washington State near the Canadian border has been drier than normal. Other areas with above normal potential in the Western States include Oregon, Idaho, Montana, Nevada, Arizona, New Mexico, Utah and Hawaii, as well as in the Southeast, including North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia and Florida. Meanwhile, August marks peak

fire activity where most of the country can expect normal conditions. The Forest Service will have up to 32 airtankers and 200 helicopters, more than 900 engines and about 10,000 firefighters available to manage wildfires.

DEPLOYMENT OF NEW TECHNOLOGY IN WILDLAND FIRE

The John D. Dingell, Jr. Conservation, Management, and Recreation Act (Dingell Act) became public law on March 12, 2019. The Forest Service has chartered a team to implement all provisions of the Dingell Act including those provisions focused on wildfire technology modernization. Since enactment, the agency has been diligently working with our interagency partners to begin implementation of the provisions related to Unmanned Aircraft Systems (UAS), location systems for wildland firefighters, decision support systems, smoke projections and others. Many of these provisions leverage the work of wildfire technology modernization efforts already underway. Interagency staff have industry engagement sessions scheduled later this month with the intent of developing and evaluating collaborative solutions for increased use of UAS and location of wildland firefighters.

REDUCING FIRE RISK AND IMPROVING FOREST CONDITIONS

The Forest Service estimates a total of nearly 80 million acres are at risk from uncharacteristically severe wildfires. Many of these forests are fire dependent, requiring fire as a critical process for tree species regeneration and for maintaining health and resiliency. Yet, we are experiencing larger and more intense fires along with expanding development within our nation's forests. Across much of the United States, fire activity has lengthened by as many as 20 days per decade over the last four decades. Actively managing these fire-dependent landscapes and implementing fuel reduction projects can reduce the frequency and the impact of severe wildfire events.

Last August, USDA launched a Shared Stewardship approach to our work. It brings states and other stakeholders together to prioritize cross-boundary investments in management and monitoring to improve forest conditions. The aim is to do work in the right places with the right resources to make a difference on the landscape. We are engaging with states, tribes, fire associations, and non-governmental organizations in landscape level work to reduce wildfire risk. States are also uniquely positioned to convene stakeholders to evaluate the wildland fire environment, agree on cross-jurisdictional planning areas, use scenario planning tools to assess fire risks and alternatives for managing the risk, and set priorities that will provide the greatest return on investment. To date, there have been five Shared Stewardship agreements signed including with the Western Governors' Association as well as with the states of Idaho, Utah, Washington, and Montana. Several other agreements are under development as there is great interest and synergy occurring to manage outcomes on the landscape in order to make a difference.

On December 21, 2018, President Trump issued Executive Order 13855, *Promoting Active Management of America's Forests, Rangelands, and Other Federal Lands to Improve Conditions and Reduce Wildfire Risk*, whereby the President has directed federal agencies, including the Forest Service, to actively manage our forests "with the same vigor and commitment that characterizes our efforts to fight wildfires." To accomplish this, we are working to implement the following policy direction:

(a) Shared Management Priorities through agreements with Federal land managers, States, tribes, and other landowners to manage fire risk across landscapes.

(b) Coordinating the deployment of Federal, State, tribal and local assets to restore our landscapes and communities after damage caused by fires and to help reduce hazardous fuels to protect communities, critical infrastructure, and natural and cultural resources.

(c) Prioritizing treatments for fuel reduction and forest-restoration projects that protect life and property, and to benefit rural economies through encouraging utilization of the by-products of forest restoration.

We are also directed in this EO to develop performance metrics to better capture the efficacy of our fuels management efforts in reducing wildfire risk, and to collaboratively develop a wildfire strategy by December 31, 2020 to support Federal land managers in project decision-making and to inform wildfire management decisions.

In recent legislation, the Forest Service has acquired additional capacity for shared stewardship across broad landscapes. We will capitalize on the authorities created by last year's Omnibus Bill and Farm Bill. We will use all the active management tools we have, including the right kind of fire at the right time in the right places. In addition, on March 28th, the Departments of Agriculture and the Interior jointly transmitted the Administration's Forest Management legislative reforms package, which includes various categorical exclusions from the National Environmental Policy Act for forest and rangeland management activities to help mitigate the risk of catastrophic wildfire. If enacted, this legislation will provide unprecedented capacity to improve forest conditions and make communities more resilient to wildfire.

The Forest Service, through its Hazardous Fuels management program, continues to focus on wildfire risk through prescribed burns, timber sales and mechanical treatments with the principal aim of mitigating the spread and severity of wildfire, and promoting resilient ecosystems. Hazardous fuel treatments include any vegetation manipulation, removal, or modification of wildland fuels to reduce the likelihood of ignition, reduce potential fire intensity and rate of spread, lessen potential damage, or limit the spread of invasive species and diseases. These treatments promote the natural role of fire by reducing the likelihood of uncharacteristically intense wildland fire. These activities also reduce potential impacts to communities and increase opportunities for wildland firefighters to safely and effectively engage wildfires. Since 2006, over 4,900 fuel treatment effectiveness assessments have been completed on National Forest System lands. About 86% of the fuel treatments were effective in changing fire behavior or helping with control of the wildfire or both.

Nearly three million acres of hazardous fuel treatments are accomplished on National Forest Systems lands each year. Of these, 700,000 acres are treated mechanically, and two million acres are in the wildland-urban interface (WUI)—i.e. the areas where wildlands and communities intersect. So far this year, we have treated more than 1.05 million acres to reduce hazardous fuels and we continue to work towards our target of 3.4 million acres. Most of these treatments are in the WUI. These accomplishments include naturally-ignited wildfire acres that, in our assessment, would help meet land management goals. Managing wildfires in favorable conditions continues to be an important method to reducing risk and severity of catastrophic wildfire.

The Forest Service has more than \$5.2 billion in deferred maintenance on infrastructure that includes over 370,000 miles of roads, 13,400 bridges and trails, dams, and both administrative and wildfire facilities that impact every aspect of the Forest Service mission. Addressing this deferred maintenance is a critical issue affecting the agency's ability to achieve its mission including wildland fire suppression and actively managing the National Forests. The President's FY 2020 Budget request includes a Public Lands Infrastructure Fund (PLIF) that would provide an allocation of funds for deferred maintenance in the National Forest System. USDA welcomes the opportunity for further discussion with the subcommittee regarding the PLIF proposal to address the agency's deferred maintenance needs.

PROMOTING FIRE-ADAPTED COMMUNITIES

The National Association of State Foresters (NASF) identified more than 70,000 communities at risk from wildfire. NASF estimates that only six percent of these communities have reduced their risk due to mitigation actions, fire prevention ordinances, or reduction of high priority hazardous fuels identified in a Community Wildfire Protection Plan. Nationally, approximately 25 percent of communities at risk have a Community Wildfire Protection Plan. The Forest Service works together with our federal, state, tribal, local and non-government organization partners to help communities be prepared for wildfire and to further the goals and implementation of the 2011 National Cohesive Wildland Fire Management Strategy.

Building Capacity for Prevention, Mitigation, Control and Suppression of Wildfires

More than 46 million homes in the United States (representing 40 percent of the Nation's housing units) are in fire-prone wildland-urban interface (WUI) areas. The first responders on almost 75 percent of wildfires are local fire departments or state agencies. Collaboration between the Forest Service, the Department of the Interior, and non-federal government entities is important to an effective, all-lands approach to wildland fire management.

Through the National Fire Capacity program, the Forest Service supports and assists State Foresters and local communities in building capacity for the prevention, mitigation, control, and suppression of wildfires on non-federal lands. The program helps state agencies create more fire-adapted communities by implementing pre-fire prevention and mitigation programs described in State Forest Action Plans. The program emphasizes pre-fire planning in the WUI and hazardous fuels mitigation near communities at risk of catastrophic wildfire. Training funded by the program provides for effective and safer initial response to wildfire. In Fiscal Year 2018, the program assisted nearly 13,000 communities, implemented hazardous fuels treatments on nearly 50,000 acres and trained 97,210 firefighters.

Aiding Local Volunteer Fire Departments

The Forest Service, through the Rural Fire Capacity Program, is focused on providing technical and financial assistance to rural fire departments in communities of less than 10,000 people. There are more than 26,000 rural and predominantly volunteer fire departments nationwide. Through this program, the Forest Service supports local fire preparedness and suppression efforts and provides funding for equipment, training, and expansion of volunteer fire departments where little or no fire protection is available. Recipients match grants dollar-for-dollar to maximize the value of the federal investment. In Fiscal Year 2018, the Rural Fire Capacity programs assisted

approximately 14,000 volunteer fire departments, trained 22,000 firefighters and assisted in acquiring or rehabilitating nearly \$11 million worth of equipment.

Assisting Communities and Homeowners Prepare for Wildfire

The National Fire Capacity program also assists communities to become fire adapted using programs such as Firewise USA, which provides a collaborative framework for neighbors to reduce wildfire risks at the local level. The Firewise program continues to assist communities in wildfire-prone areas. National Fire Capacity supports the Firewise program at both the national level through a grant with the National Fire Protection Association and at the state level with funding for state forestry agencies to use in program administration. In 2018, 141 new communities in 23 states were recognized as Firewise communities and 1,528 communities in 42 states retained their recognition.

The *Ready, Set, Go!* (RSG) program is an important component of the fire adapted communities' element of the National Cohesive Wildfire Management Strategy and results in reduced risk, damage, and response costs in a more aware, and alert population prepared for quick and safe evacuation during a wildfire. The Forest Service partners with the International Association of Fire Chiefs (IAFC) to administer this national program. The RSG Program works directly with local fire departments to help them educate local citizens to prepare their communities for evacuation due to wildfire.

Community Wildfire Mitigation

The Forest Service uses Community Mitigation Assistance Teams (CMAT) to collaborate with local communities on wildfire mitigation efforts before, during and after incidents when the awareness of the need for mitigation is the highest. CMATs work closely with incident management teams, the Forest Service or other land management agencies and community residents and leaders to identify mitigation opportunities before a fire impacts the community. Team members are highly proficient community wildfire mitigation specialists who have on-the-ground knowledge of collaboration and best practices. Team members represent interagency partners, insurance companies, non-profit partners, fire departments, and emergency management professionals. CMATs play an important role in providing additional support for mitigation education. A CMAT can assist a community by providing home assessments, train-the-trainer courses on home assessments, community level fire adaptation assessments and providing advice on adoption of WUI codes and ordinances.

The Forest Service also partners with *The Nature Conservancy* and *The Watershed Center* to support the Fire Adapted Communities Learning Network which promotes information sharing, training, and networking among communities engaged in mitigation. The Network includes more than 120 affiliated members who are dedicated to connecting people to resources, and to practitioners, to reduce wildfire risk and increase community resilience.

CONCLUSION

Nationally, nearly 9 out of 10 wildfires are caused by humans, including some of the costliest wildfires. I will conclude by recognizing Smokey Bear's 75th birthday this year. His signature phrase, "only you can prevent wildfires" is part of the American lexicon. Smokey is at the heart of the longest-running public service campaign in American history. Smokey's messages are

particularly important as more people choose to recreate and live in areas where wildlands and communities intersect. Though Smokey has been essential to the reduction of unwanted, human-caused wildfires, he still needs help: Doing our jobs to reduce fire risks and improve forest conditions, while redeeming our responsibilities to prevent fires.