

**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
WILDFIRE MANAGEMENT DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC**

Madam Chairman, Ranking Member and Members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today to discuss Wildfire Management during the COVID-19 pandemic. My testimony today will outline the current status of USDA Forest Service preparation for the wildfire year, the protocols put in place to keep communities and our firefighters safe, and the ways the Forest Service is working with its many partners to improve forest conditions and help communities prepare for wildfire.

WILDFIRE MANAGEMENT

This is an unprecedented year. We will adjust, as necessary, how we fight fire to protect our firefighters, but these adjustments will not alter our commitment to protect the American people and the public lands that we manage. The Forest Service, together with tribal, federal, state and local partners, stand ready to respond to wildfire during the 2020 fire year.

We will continue our focus, using local area resources from all partners, on aggressive initial attack where we can be most successful. Every wildfire response will be based on a careful evaluation of human safety and risk to other important values to ensure smart decisions are made as we determine how to attack each fire. Our goal is rapid containment to minimize the number of large wildfires.

To identify issues related to how the COVID-19 pandemic will affect wildland fire response in the United States, the National Multi-Agency Coordinating Group has tasked the three national area command teams and one incident management team to coordinate with federal, state, county, and tribal officials. This group has worked directly with each geographic area coordination group, the National Multi-Agency Coordinating Group, and appropriate external affairs staff to develop a Wildland Fire Response Plan for each geographic area. They worked in concert with the geographic area coordination groups and member agencies to develop a standardized national template that tiers to local units. Each of these plans provide guidance for maintaining wildland fire response continuity, continuing to sustain the highest degree of resource availability, and enhancing the safety and protection of all wildland fire response personnel at all levels across the country. The plans are considered living documents the geographic areas can continue to update as we collectively learn more about our current operating environment.

Specific areas of focus among the plans include maintaining capability for initial attack, extended attack and large fire response, and coordination and support function capabilities such as dispatch and supply caches. These plans provide general strategies, implementation considerations, and best practices that are useful at all levels and across multiple disciplines.

Based on long-term weather forecasts and expected dry conditions, 2020 is projected to be a higher than average year for wildland fire. Aggressive initial attack, supported by airtankers and helicopters, will be used wherever possible to extinguish wildfires quickly and minimize the need to bring large numbers of firefighters together. The Forest Service will have up to 35 next generation airtankers, more than 200 helicopters, more than 900 engines, and about 10,000 firefighters available to manage wildfires. The Forest Service has restructured 50 call-when-needed aircraft contracts to ensure we have additional guaranteed availability periods. These contracts include helicopters, water scoopers, airtankers, and aerial supervision aircraft. This will guarantee 90-day availability periods from existing vendors. Approximately half began their 90-days on June 1, 2020, with the other half starting on June 15, 2020. Additional staffing will also be hired to manage these resources.

We know there will be wildfires that will escape initial attack due to unfavorable conditions. Gathering and supporting large numbers of firefighters into concentrated fire camps will not be practical for this fire year. Large fire camps will not be the norm. Most firefighting efforts will be in small groups and dispersed into isolated camps to enhance social distancing among our firefighters. When large fires require firefighters to travel from outside the local area, crews will be mobilized and supported in a manner that provides social distancing and protection for local communities. Agencies will work with community leaders and local law enforcement to ensure that community needs are being met, and wildfire threats and capacity are clearly understood when planning firefighting strategy and evacuations.

Wildfire smoke is an unfortunate but inevitable part of the fire year. We will work closely with communities to assist with forecasting and preparation for wildfire smoke. The Interagency Wildland Fire Air Quality Response Program is developing approaches for early warning of wildfire smoke impacts with the Pacific Northwest Research Station and other partner agencies. A community that may be at risk will be able to plan in advance to mitigate potentially adverse smoke impacts on vulnerable individuals and facilities.

As we continue through the fire year, land managers across the country are constantly assessing fire conditions and risk factors, which may impact our ability to respond to wildfires. In some cases access and fire restrictions may be implemented to reduce the likelihood of human-caused fires.

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 wildland-urban interface and hazardous fuel mitigation near communities at risk of catastrophic wildfire. We are

urging the public, now more than ever, to do their part during the 2020 fire year to prevent human-caused fires.

A new public service advertisement campaign developed by the Forest Service, the National Association of State Foresters, and the Ad Council will promote safe and responsible outdoor recreation. This new campaign includes wildfire prevention and safe recreation tips for families and individuals to keep in mind while enjoying public lands or their own backyards. The new campaign will also encourage viewers to visit [BeOutdoorSafe.org](https://www.beoutdoorsafe.org) for additional safe recreation resources, including tips to consider *before* taking a trip outside – like checking for park and trail closures, packing soap or hand sanitizer and confirming that the destination park or trail offers enough space for social distancing. BeOutdoorSafe.org also highlights the ways we can all help prevent wildfires while recreating, including by following fire restrictions, properly extinguishing campfires and avoiding parking on tall, dry grass – even if the parking lot is full.

HEALTH AND SAFETY

The interagency wildland fire community is committed to promoting and protecting the health and wellness of all wildland firefighters and support personnel. The Fire Management Board has the responsibility for formulation of federal wildland fire response policy to protect life, property, and resources. The Fire Management Board has carefully analyzed the risk of responder exposure to COVID-19 and the medical, physical, and training requirements of wildland firefighters as part of annual fire management preparedness. Our goal is to reduce impact and exposure to our employees while maintaining our ability to respond to incidents and carry out mission critical wildland fire activities.

The wildland fire community's greatest resource is our personnel, and ensuring our personnel are healthy is the first step in meeting the wildland fire mission. We have established interim standard operating procedures and protocols for screening of wildland fire personnel at duty stations and during wildfire incident management activities to identify and insulate individuals with potential COVID-19 infection and thereby reduce exposure. Consistent and continual monitoring of personnel will be a crucial step in preventing the movement of potentially infected individuals and the spread of COVID-19. A "Module as One" approach is being used for crews and modules to insulate as one unit and reduce exposure to the public and other crews.

When social distancing is not possible, fire personnel wear cloth face coverings that cover their mouth and nose. Based on guidance from the CDC, the personal protective equipment needed for wildland firefighters includes cloth face coverings, nitrile gloves, cleaning and disinfecting supplies, hand sanitizer, and soap and water. We continue to build inventories in the cache system to meet current national needs for wildland fire incidents throughout the 2020 fire year. In addition to the Cache system, we are building up an additional inventory of N95 and surgical masks and gloves, to cover normal operations for a 120-day period. This personal protective equipment has been provided for Forest Service law enforcement, firefighters, and frontline employees while we continue to order these supplies into the future. These remain high demand items, as deliveries are being prioritized to hospitals and other treatment facilities on a national level.

As we move further into the 2020 fire year and active wildland fire response across the country increases, we must be able to allow the current coordination system to work as it is intended. To help ensure this, the National Multi-Agency Coordinating Group has produced the Interagency Checklist for Mobilization of Resources in a COVID-19 Environment focusing on interagency mobilization, and pre-positioning of fire response resources. Additionally, we are working with the National Wildfire Coordinating Group's emergency medical committee to develop guidance and protocols for the care and transport of firefighters who exhibit COVID-19 symptoms while at a wildfire incident.

IMPROVING FOREST CONDITIONS

We continue to move forward with our shared stewardship approach to improving the conditions of our Nation's forests. Actively working with states, tribes and other partners is a priority to share decisions, risks and mutually beneficial outcomes. In 2019, the Forest Service sold 3.3 billion board feet of timber, the most in 22 years. That same year, we were able to conduct hazardous fuels treatments on 2.7 million acres. Over the last 5 years, more than 700,000 acres were treated annually with mechanical treatments, and more than 2.1 million acres were treated annually through prescribed fire or natural wildfires. Over the last 5 years, approximately 1.7 million acres have been treated annually within the wildland-urban interface. To date, we have treated more than 1.15 million acres to reduce hazardous fuels and continue to work towards our 2020 target of 3.4 million acres. While there is much work to be done, we remain committed to doing the right work, in the right places, at the right scale.

Last March, regions placed a pause on prescribed fire projects. These regional decisions were made in collaboration with partners amidst the concerns around COVID-19. These types of projects are key to reducing wildfire risk and improving firefighter safety. Regions are now beginning to lift the pause and are working closely with states and other partners on the right time and places to restart prescribed fire operations. Since March, the agency has shifted some resources from prescribed fire projects to mechanical thinning projects to reduce wildfire risk. We continue to take aggressive action to maximize opportunities to reduce wildfire risk to communities.

Forest Service hazardous fuels management continues to focus on reducing wildfire risk to communities and natural resources through prescribed burns, timber harvests, and other mechanical treatments. The principal aim is to mitigate uncharacteristically severe wildfire, and promote resilient ecosystems. Hazardous fuel management utilizes vegetation manipulation, removal, or modification to restore ecosystems to their natural range of variation and encourage fire to resume its natural role in the ecosystem. Our focus in treating hazardous fuel around communities is to reduce the potential wildfire risks to life and property, and to increase opportunities for wildland firefighters to safely and effectively engage wildfire. Since 2006, over 5,800 fuel treatment effectiveness assessments have been completed on National Forest System lands, and these assessments indicate that about 87% of the fuels treatments have effectively changed wildfire behavior and assisted with fire control efforts.

CONCLUSION

We are confident that we are ready to face the challenges of this fire year as a result of an extraordinary level of engagement and planning by our outstanding employees and partners.

I will conclude by recognizing the 50th anniversary of the National Interagency Fire Center (NIFC) this year. NIFC, located in Boise, Idaho, is the nation's support center for wildland firefighting. It houses eight different federal and non-federal agencies and organizations, and provides unified guidance for effective wildfire response. It definitively demonstrates that we are all in this together.