

**Statement of**  
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**Office of Wildland Fire**  
**Department of the Interior**  
**Before**  
**Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources**  
**Concerning**  
**Wildfire Budgeting, Response, and Forest Management Act of 2016**  
**(discussion draft)**  
**June 23, 2016**

**Introduction**

Chairman Murkowski, Ranking Member Cantwell, and members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony on the Department of the Interior's (Department) position on the Wildfire Budgeting, Response, and Forest Management Act of 2016 (discussion draft).

The Office of Wildland Fire (OWF) coordinates the Department's wildland fire program with Federal agencies, tribes, states and external partners to establish policies and budgets that are consistent and support the goals of the National Cohesive Wildland Fire Management Strategy and Secretarial Order 3336, Rangeland Fire Prevention, Management, and Restoration. OWF commits to, and provides, the strategic leadership and oversight to advance the three goals of the Cohesive Strategy, which are to: 1) restore and maintain fire-resilient landscapes; 2) create fire-adapted communities that will withstand the effects of a wildfire without the loss of life and/or property; and 3) safely and effectively respond to wildfire.

The vision of OWF is to significantly reduce the risk to wildland firefighters, communities, and landscapes. OWF's mission is to coordinate and provide the strategic leadership and oversight that result in a safe, cohesive, efficient, and effective wildland fire program for the Nation. We are excited that our partners in Congress recognize the value collaborative, resilient landscape activities add to the Department's overall fire and natural resource management programs. We are

thankful for the enhanced funding level afforded the Wildland Fire Resilient Landscapes activity from the overall Fuels Management budget in 2015 and 2016, and look forward to your continued support in the years to come.

While we feel that the draft bill clearly seeks to address the need for more sustainable funding for wildland fire suppression, the Department looks forward to having the opportunity to further review draft language and to work with the Committee to create a solution that meets the needs of carrying out mission activities across the public lands we are entrusted to manage.

After a statement on the 2015 fire season and the Department's general preparedness for the 2016 fire season, I will highlight primary areas of concern in sections of Titles I and II.

### **2015 Wildfire Season**

The greatest losses during the 2015 wildfire season involved the fatalities of 13 wildland firefighters who made the ultimate sacrifice to protect the lives of others and the lands and resources we are entrusted to manage. The 2015 wildfire season is now the costliest on record, with \$1.7 billion spent to manage over 68,000 fires that burned more than 10 million acres, the highest total since recordkeeping began in 1960. We anticipate the 2016 wildfire season to be another challenging year.

In 2015, we spent 24 days at National Preparedness Level 5 our highest level, with all available wildland fire assets fully engaged. Over half the acres burned during 2015 burned in Alaska, reflecting the increasingly difficult-to-manage impact of climate change on our northern boreal forests. The Pacific Northwest burned the most acres in the lower 48 states consuming nearly 2 million acres. Wildfires destroyed more than 4,600 structures, including over 2,600 residences across the Nation. California alone lost nearly 1,900 structures to wildfire.

The Department's available funding before transfers and reprogramming for suppression in FY 2015 was \$447.2 million, including the FLAME funding. The DOI obligations in FY 2015 were \$417.5 million, with no Section 102 transfers required by the Department.

As we begin the 2016 fire season, we will honor all firefighters who lost their lives in the line of duty by continuing to seek opportunities to keep our firefighters safe while they do the work they love, protecting our forests and rangelands. We fully evaluate risks with a broad perspective for both planned and unplanned ignitions, while considering the people we serve and landscapes we protect. In accordance

with the National Cohesive Wildland Fire Management Strategy, we seek to create resilient landscapes, fire-adapted communities, and safer, more effective wildfire response.

## **2016 Fire Season Outlook**

As in the past, the wildfire risk in 2016 will be highly dependent upon both weather and human factors. Extreme to exceptional drought conditions persist across the western United States, with the worst conditions in southern California and western Nevada. The National Significant Wildfire Potential Outlook, issued by the Predictive Services Unit at the National Interagency Coordination Center, predicts above-normal significant fire potential in Hawaii for the entire reporting period. Parts of Northern California will have above-normal significant fire potential in July, with the above-normal potential extending to parts of Southern California in mid-July, August, and September. Above-normal potential is also reported for the southwest portion of the Great Basin in June and the northwest portion in July and August. Above-normal significant fire potential through June and in early July is reported for the lower elevation portions of the southwest.

We have already seen some large fires early in the season in the southern Great Plains. As of June 20, over 23,000 fires had burned 1.9 million acres. While the number of fires to date this year is over 9,000 less than the 10-year average number of fires, the area burned exceeds the 10-year average (1.7 million acres).

The cumulative impacts of climate change, drought, and invasive species are creating a landscape more susceptible to devastating wildland fire. These impacts and declining forest health are exacerbated by an ever-expanding wildland urban interface, and the inherent complexities and dangers of fighting wildfire in and around these growing communities. We continue to be impacted by escalating emergency response requirements and increasingly dangerous and expensive wildfire response operations. Our partnerships with the Forest Service and other Federal agencies, tribes, states, communities, and even other nations are increasingly important as we continue to provide the best possible wildland fire management program and create a more resilient landscape where fire plays a natural role, occurring at the appropriate return intervals and intensities.

## **Fiscal Year 2016 Budget and Wildland Fire Resources**

This year, we continue to make pro-active investments in fuels management and resilient landscapes activities to better address the growing impact of wildland fire

on communities and the public lands. We do this by enhanced integration and coordination between the Department's four wildland fire management Bureaus, their natural resource program counterparts within the Department, across the Federal government, and with tribes, states, and local governments, and our non-governmental partners. Treatments to enhance resiliency are strategically placed across the landscape, including outside of the wildland-urban interface, where ecosystem structure and function are threatened by wildfire and other disturbances.

Examples of treatments include the use of prescribed fire, thinning of overstocked stands in areas with critical wildlife habitat, removing trees encroaching on meadows or wetlands with significant resource value, and controlling invasive weeds that degrade habitat, compete with native vegetation, and increase the risk of wildfire. The Resilient Landscapes activity is coordinated with and supported by the resource management programs of the Department's four, wildland fire management Bureaus. These Bureaus and their partners leverage funds and services to restore and maintain fire resilient landscapes.

Together with our partners at the Forest Service, we are prepared for the 2016 fire season. This season, the Department plans to deploy over 4,500 firefighters, including 145 smokejumpers and 16 Type-1 crews; more than 600 engines and 100 other pieces of heavy equipment (dozers, tenders, etc.); and we have approximately 1,300 support personnel ready to support wildfire and all-risk incidents (including incident management teams, dispatchers, fire cache); totaling nearly 6,000 personnel.

The Department is a leader in providing training and job opportunities for veterans who want to continue their service to our country; we will continue to emphasize the hiring of veterans to fill the ranks of our firefighting forces. Through the Department's partnership with Team Rubicon, since April 2015, the Bureau of Land Management has provided Wildland Firefighter Type I and II training and certification for veterans. In the past two years, over 400 Team Rubicon volunteers have been trained and over 100 have been deployed to incidents across the country in Alaska, Oregon, California, and Washington. We take great pride in the role these men and women play in our wildland fire community.

This year, 33 single-engine airtankers or SEATS have been contracted for exclusive use and an additional 67 are available through call-when-needed contracts. SEATs are a good fit for the types of fires that the Interior Bureaus experience. Many of these fires burn at lower elevations, in sparser fuels, on open terrain. In addition, we have small and large helicopters and water scooper planes

available. We will utilize Forest Service contracted heavy airtankers and, if necessary, Modular Airborne Fire Fighting System (MAFFS) equipped C-130 aircraft from the Department of Defense. Agreements are in place to use supplemental aircraft from our state and international partners.

Enacted funding for the 2016 wildland fire budget totals \$993.7 million, including \$468.7 million for suppression, which is split between the Wildland Fire Management account (\$291.7 million) and the FLAME account (\$177.0 million). While we believe these resources will allow us to continue to provide superior wildland fire preparedness and suppression across our more than 500 million acres of public lands, we continue to advocate for a sustainable approach to funding fire, an approach that treats unwanted and destructive wildland fires as disasters, an approach that promotes the thoughtful and collaborative landscape-scale restoration activities necessary to create a more resilient landscape.

The Administration continues to propose providing sustainable funding for wildland fire suppression using a budget cap adjustment to the Department's and Forest Service's discretionary budgets. We applaud our partners in Congress for their efforts to help us find a sustainable solution. Fixing how we pay for managing wildland fire is the single most important action Congress can take to ensure we have sufficient resources for restoration and to help us create a more resilient, fire resistant landscape. Regarding the discussion draft bill before us today, we have comments regarding sections of Titles I and II.

### **Title I: Wildfire Budgeting**

Similar to the bipartisan Wildfire Disaster Funding Act (Wyden, S. 235 and Simpson, H.R. 167) and the Administration's proposal, Section 101 of this discussion draft bill would allow the Department and the Forest Service to access additional new budget authority for wildland fire suppression. However, the discussion draft bill fully funds the rolling 10-year average, while the Administration's proposal funds 70 percent of the 10-year average. Requiring that the Departments fully fund 100 percent of the increasing 10-year average within current discretionary limits would result in less funding for the very restoration and risk reduction projects designed to create more resilient landscapes. Further, the requirement to notify Congress is inconsistent with the Administration's proposal that a Secretarial designation, based on clear criteria, is necessary to make cap adjustment funds available. To add this additional layer of review and approval is cumbersome and could reduce our decision space during active fire seasons.

This is not the comprehensive fire budget fix we need. The Administration continues to support an approach to fixing the fire budget that not only ends transfers, but that also recognizes that catastrophic fire is a natural disaster and ensures that our efforts to suppress those catastrophic fires does not diminish our efforts to create a more resilient landscape.

## **Title II: Wildfire Response and Preparedness**

Section 201 requires the Secretaries to develop and approve a single system of qualifications for all Federal and state wildland firefighting agencies, including pilot and maintenance inspector and firefighting support equipment. This section includes interim acceptance of state aviation asset standards until implementation of the single system. While we fully support the overall goal of interoperability and efficiency in the sharing of aviation assets among Federal and state entities, we strongly oppose section 201(c) as it compromises existing safety standards. If instituted, this language forces Federal and state agencies to accept the lowest level of standards related to pilot and maintenance inspector qualifications and qualified firefighting support equipment. The Department's aviation safety record since the establishment of the Office of Aviation Services in 1973 is due in large measure to the establishment of and adherence to high standards of pilot and maintenance inspector qualification and equipment specification and operating condition. The proposed language will force the Department to adopt every Federal and state agencies' standards, regardless of the stringency of the standard. This requirement will likely result in more firefighting aircraft accidents and loss of lives.

Additionally, the language does not incentivize agencies with low standards to collaborate in the development of a single standard system; rather, it has the opposite effect. Interim acceptance of state aviation asset standards as required in the bill is not recommended, as these standards can be problematic or potentially unsafe if those standards are lesser than those of the Department. We strongly oppose this language for safety reasons. We look forward to working with the committee on this issue.

Section 202 authorizes the use of unmanned aircraft systems (UAS) in managing wildland fires consistent with Federal Aviation Administration regulations and authorities. Through our Office of Aviation Services, we have done considerable work to advance the use of UAS in wildland fire management. We welcome further discussion with the Committee on this section that ensures the agency is empowered to deploy UAS in appropriate situations.

Additionally, per this legislation, unmanned aircraft equipment, training, and implementation costs may be substantial. This legislation would also require states to adhere to the same regulations with similarly expected implementation costs.

Finally, the Department would like to note that any forest management provisions aimed at expediting forest restoration activities to reduce wildfire risk must contain strong environmental safeguards, rely on collaboration among a broad group of stakeholders, and use the best available science.

### **Conclusion**

The Department of the Interior works closely with our Federal, tribal, state and local partners. Together, we will continue to provide a safe, effective wildland fire management program. We will continue our activities to improve interagency forest and rangeland management, working closely with all of our partners, to strengthen our response to and prevention of wildfires while upholding our tribal trust responsibility. Our wildland fire management program will continue to focus on firefighter and public safety, core values that govern every decision and activity. By keeping our employees and the public safe from harm or loss, by effectively suppressing unwanted fire, and by doing everything we can to improve the health of our landscapes, we will be successful.

This concludes my statement. Thank you for your support to the Department's wildland fire management program and for the opportunity to testify before this Committee. I welcome any questions you may have.