

Testimony of Kelly Norris, Interim Wyoming State Forester
On behalf of Wyoming Forestry Division
Submitted to the Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources
Legislative Hearing June 8, 2023

Thank you, Chairman Manchin, Ranking Member Barrasso, and members of the committee for holding this hearing today and for the opportunity to testify on behalf of the Wyoming State Forestry Division. My name is Kelly Norris and I am the Interim Wyoming State Forester. It is an honor to have an opportunity to speak with you today and submit written testimony as the Committee on Energy and Natural Resources examines wildfire preparedness and response.

The integration and cooperation of federal, state, and county response to wildland fire has been a success for Wyoming. Our firefighting entities have adapted and evolved over decades to become a more effective and efficient alliance, whose main focus is protecting life and our valuable communities, infrastructure, grasslands, and forests. The most immediate problem facing our protection agencies is the recruitment and retention of our wildland firefighters. Long term, we need to address the maintenance and health of Wyoming's forests, to reduce the grave impacts wildfire can have to our forests, watersheds, wildlife habitat, and recreation. As a headwaters state, Wyoming's forests supply water to four of the country's main river basins, including the Missouri-Mississippi basin, the Green-Colorado River Basin, the Snake-Columbia Basin, and the Great Salt Lake Basin. We need to actively manage and maintain these vital systems.

How Wyoming Responds to Wildland Fire

Wildfire is an ever-challenging issue for state agencies that hold the responsibility for managing millions of acres of state lands. In Wyoming, State Forestry is tasked with wildfire suppression and management on 3.5 million acres of state trust lands and coordinating suppression on 29 million acres of private land. Forty-eight percent of the state is federally owned. The Bureau of Land Management (BLM) manages 18 million acres, the US Forest Service (USFS) manages approximately 9 million acres, and the Wind River Reservation manages 2.2 million acres, each having their respective suppression responsibilities. Wyoming State Forestry is an extremely small organization, and we depend almost exclusively on local county volunteers and our federal partners for initial attack. State Forestry supports the state's initial attack response with our Helitack, Single Engine Air Tankers, and inmate conservation crew.

If a wildfire starts on state trust lands, it is Wyoming State Forestry's responsibly as the jurisdictional agency to make suppression decisions for the wildfire. If that wildfire spreads onto other ownerships, a unified command is created to make decisions with all entities that have jurisdictional responsibility. This can get complex fast. In my experience, Wyoming has had wildfires that started to burn in one county on private lands and over the next several days, spread across three different counties, burning private, state, and BLM lands. It can get more complicated if the wildfire crosses state lines which can involve a different federally designated region, such as at the Montana state line. As the size of wildfires continue to increase across the landscape, so have the issues associated with managing a multi-jurisdictional wildfire.

Similar to other states, Wyoming has strong annual operating agreements in which the federal agencies, state, tribal, and county cooperators establish how protection agencies will suppress and manage wildland fire across our state. These agreements include specific information for financial management of an incident, including how and who will be billed based on jurisdictional responsibilities. There is not a single wildfire that is the same. Every fire has different complexities, ownerships, resources threatened, cause of ignition, and response tactics that play into a final cost share between all the jurisdictions involved. Bottom line, we are all in the wildfire suppression game together.

Interagency Cooperation is Key to Wyoming's Success

Federal, state, and county cooperators work closely together to provide timely and efficient initial attack response with a primary goal of stopping fires while they are small. We believe in the "closest resources response" concept. Typically, that means our county cooperators, who are most likely made up of volunteer firefighters, will be the first firefighters arriving to a wildfire. Other times it might be federal BLM or USFS firefighters who are responding first to a wildfire. Everyone coordinates to suppress wildfire, no matter the jurisdictional responsibility. As a wildfire grows, more resources are ordered, which tend to be our state or federal resources such as aviation, hand crews, or more engines.

The Casper, Cody, Great Plains, and Teton interagency dispatch centers are a mix of BLM and USFS employees. The state and county cooperators provide funding to directly support the facilities' needs. If a wildfire in Wyoming requires the support of a Complex Incident Management Team, that team is composed of federal, state, and county fire personnel. In fact, forty-nine percent of the Complex Incident Management Teams in the Rocky Mountain area are made up of non-federal employees and county cooperators. The wildland fire suppression community within our region is a strong and dedicated network of interagency firefighters.

A great example of interagency cooperation is the Wyoming State Forestry's aviation program. The Wyoming State Forestry's helitack program is currently in its 20th season of operation. We contract our helicopter and manage our program with one permanent and four seasonal employees. The Medicine Bow-Routt National Forests and Thunder Basin National Grassland supports our helitack program by providing a trained employee to assist in managing the program. Two detailers are also provided by local national forests to help support the program. These federal detailers are given the opportunity to be trained in wildfire aviation response by our state helitack staff, which broadens their wildland fire knowledge, and helps our overall fire suppression readiness.

Wyoming's Single Engine Air Tanker or SEAT program is its 4th season. The two aircraft are contracted through State Forestry with state funds. The SEAT base managers come from across the United States to help manage the program and are funded by our federal partner, the Rocky Mountain Area Coordination Center or RMACC. We believe having these two SEATs available for response within Wyoming is a huge benefit to helping meet the need for suppression resources. This program is a win-win for the state and our federal partners.

When it comes to wildland fire suppression it is imperative to discuss the importance of wildland firefighter training. This training is critical for the safety and effectiveness of our firefighters. We host numerous wildland fire training courses across our state. These can be at a local district level or large interagency events. Approximately 85 percent of the training given to firefighters across the state is given by federal personnel. Time commitments have become too great for our volunteer force to teach and train our state and volunteer firefighters. Our federal partners have stepped up over the years to become the glue that keeps our training efforts together. Federal agencies continue to struggle to fill all their open vacancies across our state. We recognize that these vacancies may eventually result in a loss of training capacity for our firefighters.

As a representative of Wyoming, I would like to express our sincere gratitude for the support Congress has provided through the State Fire Assistance (SFA) and Volunteer Fire Assistance (VFA) programs. These two Budget Line Items (BLI) have become integral in supporting our state's firefighting programs. Wyoming has utilized these funds to help support wildfire training and preparedness as well as the purchasing and maintenance of equipment. The Federal Excess Personal Property (FEPP) and Firefighter Property Program (FPP) make up the majority of the equipment used in our rural wildfire response. State Forestry operates a maintenance and fabrication facility that employs five mechanics and an equipment ordering manager. Their main mission is to prepare the FEPP and FPP equipment with fire packages for our counties who utilize these engines for wildfire response.

Recruitment and Retention Challenges

The Committee is aware of the issues with recruitment and retention for federal firefighters. This is also a challenge for our state and county fire districts. As our veteran firefighters age out and retire, they are not being replaced at the same rate. The need to effectively recruit within our county volunteer fire districts is a big concern that Wyoming is looking to address. As small as our firefighting community is, it only takes a few veteran leaders to retire to have a negative impact on our fire response.

We can all collectively recognize the shift in our firefighter culture and the need to address this immediate problem. We need to work together to find solutions that meet the needs of our wildland fire community. There will not be a one-size-fits all solution, as the need will have to be addressed at all levels – federal, state, county, and tribal. We will never be able to increase the number of acres that require treatment with prescribed fire or complete all the acres of fuel treatments, both hand and mechanical, without having the firefighters to implement this necessary work.

Active Management and Fuels Treatments

A recent study¹ from The Nature Conservancy found that Wyoming's forests provide approximately 26 billion dollars of economic value every year. Investing in forest conservation and restoration is critical to retaining these benefits. Our headwater forests provide more than just board feet sold and need to be managed appropriately for the values they provide such as water supply and storage, wildlife habitat, recreation and tourism, and carbon storage.

¹ [TNC Ecosystem Service Valuation of Wyoming's Forests](#)

Wildfire and forest health threats know no boundaries and there is an urgent need for more active management on our forested landscapes. Active management, including intentional harvesting, hazard fuel treatments, and prescribed fire can better protect our forests and the communities that depend on them. Last year's Fish Creek Fire, located in the Black Hills, was stopped in a fuel break treatment area. The fuel break saved multiple homes, while helping to bring down the intensity of the fire. This gave our firefighters the opportunity to suppress and control the wildfire safely and effectively.

Three of Wyoming's National Forests start their Forest Plan revisions this year. We need the revision of these National Forest Plans to transpire concurrently with the rapid implementation of necessary project work within these National Forests. It is important that active management and maintenance continues, to ensure these forests are healthy and capable of withstanding the many forest health challenges the region faces. Utilizing established or newly developed partnerships can be a great way to get this accomplished. The Good Neighbor Authority (GNA) and Wyden Amendment Authority allow and encourage these partnerships and have already proven to be effective in Wyoming.

Wyoming's Success in Implementing Cooperative Programs

State agencies must be a part of the solution to getting more management done on our federal forests. Wyoming State Forestry has increased its Good Neighbor Authority (GNA) program and successfully sold 11 million board feet of federal timber across four National Forests and within two BLM districts in our 2022 fiscal year. However, GNA can be more than assisting our federal partners with timber sales. GNA can provide the flexibility needed through our state contracting systems to complete a project that would take our federal partners much longer to complete and at higher costs. State Forestry has contracted hundreds of acres of aspen enhancement treatments for the improvement of wildlife habitat, aspen monitoring, and thinning and fuels projects within our state's National Forests. Other Wyoming state agencies have implemented riparian restoration, beaver dam projects, and fence replacements post-wildfire.

Wyoming State Forestry works closely with private forest landowners through our cooperative assistance programs. Our foresters have the expertise to help develop successful cross-boundary treatments with our federal partners. Over the last decade, Wyoming has been very successful in the competitive Community Assistance Funds Adjacent (CAFA) to National Forests and Grasslands grants. We were recently awarded over a million dollars in fuels mitigation funds for critical cross-boundary projects this year. Much of this success comes from our ability to collaborate with our federal, state, county, and local partners.

Wyoming State Forestry is ready and willing to do more to help our federal partners, and this includes helping to get the necessary assessments for the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) completed. Our ability to contract assessments will help get decisions made and projects implemented faster. We want to help our federal partners expand upon and improve the important work they are trying to achieve. The more flexible the federal cooperative programs can be, the better we will be able to help.

I would like to thank Congress for the Forest Action Plan (FAP) funds that were appropriated through the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA). These funds have been utilized to meet our diverse needs because of their flexible application. We are utilizing them to expand forest health treatments on Wyoming's state and private lands. Thank you for the support to our agency and to the important programs we deliver.

Conclusion

Thank you for the opportunity to appear before the Committee today on behalf of the Wyoming State Forestry Division. Wildland fire response continues to be one of the most challenging problems our agency faces. This primary mission is further complicated by persistent challenges with the recruitment and retention of our wildland firefighters. The other side to the wildfire response problem is long term, as it relates to the health of our forests. We need to address how we continue to maintain and keep our forests healthy by making strategic investments in them. We must continue to implement more active forest management on all ownerships. Lastly, I appreciate the good work being done by this Committee to address the issues we are currently facing. Thank you for your continued leadership and support of efforts for wildland fire and active forest management.