

**Statement of  
Joan Mooney  
Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary  
for  
Policy, Management and Budget  
U.S. Department of the Interior**

**Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources  
Hearing to Examine the Wildland Fire Mitigation and Management Commission Final  
Reports to Congress**

**March 12, 2024**

Chairman Manchin, Ranking Member Barrasso, and members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony on the Wildland Fire Mitigation and Management Commission's (Commission) Reports to Congress and the Department of the Interior's (Interior) ongoing efforts to address the Commission's recommendations. We appreciate the Committee's interest in the Commission's reports and Interior's collaborative efforts to improve Federal wildland fire management policy.

**Background**

The wildfire crisis in the United States is urgent, severe, and far reaching. Across the globe, climate change is leading to increasingly destructive wildfires that are posing threats to communities and ecosystems. Reminders of the urgent need to address this crisis are all too frequent, from the recent fires in Texas and Hawai'i, to the smokey skies many of us experienced last summer. These increasingly intense and destructive wildfires have profound impacts on our natural landscapes, communities, and public health. They also have fiscal consequences, such impacts on local economies and costs associated with post-wildfire rehabilitation and community recovery. Wildfire is also becoming an emergent threat in areas that have little or no history of wildfire and during times of the year when landscapes typically have not burned. Wildfire frequency, size, and severity is projected to continue to increase along with the multitude of associated impacts, from smoke emissions to postfire recovery. The Fifth National Climate Assessment underscores that these trends are expected to continue.

In the face of this national crisis, Congress took action to pass the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (Bipartisan Infrastructure Law or BIL), which supports strategic efforts to better understand this new dynamic, fund mitigation and restoration efforts, and develop a new vision for Federal wildland fire management. The BIL provides a once-in-a-generation investment in wildland fire management that is helping to address the climate crisis and improve the wildfire resiliency of our nation's lands. The investments support the implementation of the Interior's "[Five Year Monitoring, Maintenance, and Treatment Plan](#)," which provides a roadmap for addressing wildfire risk and building resilience on Interior-managed and Tribal lands. The overall strategy identified by Interior builds on the [National Cohesive Wildland Fire Management Strategy](#)'s vision of safely and effectively extinguishing fire, when needed; using fire where allowable; managing natural resources; and, as a nation, living with wildland fire.

In addition to investing nearly \$1.5 billion in wildfire risk reduction through 2026, the BIL also identified a need for new policy solutions to address the growing wildfire crisis. To formalize this effort, the BIL authorized the creation of the [Wildland Fire Mitigation and Management Commission](#) (Commission). The Commission’s work builds on existing interagency efforts, such as the [Wildland Fire Leadership Council](#) and the White House Wildfire Resilience Interagency Working Group, which continue to pursue a collaborative all-of-government approach to wildfire risk reduction and resilience.

As envisioned by the BIL, the Commission was deliberately created as a nonpartisan body, including representatives from Federal agencies; state, local, and Tribal governments; non-governmental entities; academia; and the private sector. In addition, Commission members represent a multitude of interests, lived experiences, geographical areas, and communities of practice.

The Commission is co-chaired by the Secretaries of the Interior and Agriculture and the Administrator of the Federal Emergency Management Agency. The 50-member Commission possesses a broad range of expertise in wildfire, including operational firefighting, prescribed fire, cultural burning, pre-fire mitigation, public health, post-fire recovery, and more.

The Commission was charged with making recommendations to improve Federal wildland fire management policies related to the prevention, mitigation, suppression, and management of wildland fires and the rehabilitation of land in the United States devastated by wildland fires. Specifically, the Commission was charged with developing two reports for Congress: the first report outlined a strategy to meet aerial firefighting equipment needs through 2030, and a second report provided a comprehensive set of recommendations to help reform Federal wildland fire management policy.

The Commission urges an “all of the above” approach and for supporters to view the two reports released by the Commission as a package of recommendations that should be advanced as a whole. The scale of the problem requires broad, integrated solutions like those recommended in the final report.

### **The Wildland Fire Mitigation and Management Commission’s Aviation Equipment Strategy Report to Congress**

As wildfire seasons increase in duration and intensity, there is a compelling need to reexamine existing approaches to aviation fleet procurement, use, composition, and quantity. Aerial resource management and coordination is complex, involving multiple agencies operating at multiple levels of government, each with their own programs, authorities, equipment, and scopes of work. While the statutory charge of the Commission included looking out to the year 2030, concepts like greater cooperation and coordination between the various parties that make up the national interagency wildland fire aviation community is a critical and perennial goal, and one worth keeping as a guiding principle well past 2030.

The “[Aviation Equipment Strategy Report](#)” focused on the nation’s aviation needs and was submitted to Congress in January 2023. The Commission’s 19 recommendations in the aviation report address multiple broad themes, including:

- (1) The need for the development of new or updated aviation resource benchmarks and national procurement models and the need for greater coordination with partners in those efforts.
- (2) Improvements to appropriations, contracting, staffing, and military interoperability to improve the use and availability of new and existing resources.
- (3) Improvements and limitations to the military surplus process and equipment.
- (4) Additional considerations, including aviation resource use in beneficial fire and the emerging importance of Uncrewed Aerial Systems (UAS) – also known as “drones.”

In response to the recommendations in the report, Interior has made progress in its aviation services. First, Interior recognizes the potential benefits of longer exclusive-use aviation contract periods and continues to evaluate extended contract term feasibility. There are some limitations with extending the length of aviation contracts, but the potential benefits of longer contract periods include increased assurances of aircraft availability to the Federal government, certainty for industry, and potential long-term savings. We continue to examine the potential impacts of adapting our contracting terms.

In general, Interior does very limited aircraft procurement; however, we acknowledge the many challenges of using former military aircraft due to their age and the costly conversion requirements to meet Federal wildland fire needs. Finally, we are supportive of the expanded use of UAS in the wildland fire space. The President’s 2025 Budget includes funding increases for additional UAS program enhancement. UAS are significantly beneficial in aiding wildfire response activities and mitigation work and they are an increasingly important safety tool for firefighters.

### **The Wildland Fire Mitigation and Management Commission’s Final Report to Congress**

The Commission was also charged with the ambitious task of creating recommendations that address nearly every facet of wildland fire management. Reflecting the urgency of the wildfire crisis, the Commission had one year to complete this work. The Commission’s [final report](#), which was submitted to Congress on September 27, 2023, reflects one of the most sweeping and comprehensive reviews of the nation’s wildland fire management framework to date and contains 148 recommended actions.

The Commission identified seven overarching themes that underpin and unite the body’s recommendations. None of these underlying tasks or recommendations can be completed by a single entity and need to be addressed collectively by the interagency wildland fire management community. Each of the Commission’s specific recommendations reflect one or more of these themes, demonstrating the interrelated nature of the Commission’s work and wildfire issues at large, including:

- (1) The need for urgent new approaches to address the wildfire crisis.
- (2) Supporting collaboration to improve partner involvement at every scale.
- (3) Shifting from reactive to proactive in planning for, mitigating, and recovering from fire.
- (4) Enabling beneficial fire to reduce the risk of catastrophic wildfire.
- (5) Supporting and expanding the workforce to hire and retain the wildland firefighting staff needed to address the crisis.

- (6) Modernizing approaches for informed decision-making to better leverage available technology and information.
- (7) Investing in resilience through increased spending now to reduce costs in the long run.

Many of the recommendations that are included in the Commission’s report are actions that Interior is currently undertaking and are fundamental to the administration of Interior’s Wildland Fire Management program. However, to reach the broad desired outcomes that are envisioned by the Commission, this work needs to be scaled-up and addressed through a unified and collaborative process with all partners. This can be achieved in part by leveraging the support and partnerships that are currently in place, particularly through collaborative organizations such as the Wildland Fire Leadership Council (WFLC), capitalizing on existing agreements and memoranda of understanding, and working across boundaries to carry out meaningful change.

The following sections highlight some of Interior’s ongoing and planned work and strategies that are consistent with the Commission’s recommendations.

### ***Commission Theme 1. Urgent New Approaches***

The Commission recommends a need for a shift toward systems and structures that are more comprehensive and that better address the interrelationships between communities and landscapes across pre-fire mitigation, response, and post-fire recovery efforts. This includes greater integration between wildfire-related programs, procedures, policies, and workforces and incorporation of issues and sectors that have traditionally been set apart from the wildland fire discourse or handled disparately.

The “National Cohesive Wildland Fire Management Strategy,” originally developed in 2014 as a national collaborative vision for wildland fire management strategy, was [updated](#) in 2023 to better reflect today’s wildland fire management challenges. The updated strategy considers a broader approach beyond individual, organizational, and historical silos and promotes the need to collectively define and understand risk, set landscape-level and community-wide priorities, share and co-manage risk across boundaries and jurisdictions, accept some short-term risk for long-term benefit, and collectively invest in outcome-based approaches and activities rather than outputs.

In alignment with Commission recommendations, Interior supports the principles of the Cohesive Strategy as a national framework for living with wildfire. The Commission recommends that the Wildland Fire Leadership Council (WFLC), of which Interior is a co-chair, serve as the official custodian of the Cohesive Strategy to drive greater alignment across organizations and sectors. These efforts will help fuel collaboration and help guide how we plan, implement, and evaluate work in wildfire across the entire wildland fire management community going forward.

### ***Commission Theme 2. Supporting Collaboration***

As noted previously, wildfire mitigation and management affects, involves, and depends on a wide range of entities well beyond Federal agencies, to include states, Tribes, local governments, the private sector, non-governmental organizations, and academia. The Commission highlighted

the need for greater support for partnership programs, collaborative groups, and collaborative wildfire planning and management initiatives.

Funding provided by the BIL is facilitating these efforts. For example, the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA), Bureau of Land Management (BLM), Bureau of Reclamation (BOR), National Park Service (NPS), and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) are leveraging funding to facilitate collaborative efforts with partners across landscapes to increase the pace and scale of fuels management treatments and to rehabilitate lands damaged by wildfires on landscape-scale approaches. The U.S. Geological Survey (USGS) is conducting research into priority wildland issues before and during fires, including the impacts of climate change on wildfire, fuels management, wildfire risk and post-fire recovery.

Through BIL, Interior received \$10 million for an agreement with the Department of Commerce, National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) for improvements to satellite-based detection and monitoring of wildfire starts in all areas in which Interior has statutory responsibility for wildland fire protection and prevention. The agreement will also support weather forecasting and facilitate efforts to increase warning times for incident responders and those communities that are threatened by natural disasters, like wildfire. The two agencies plan to complete the agreement this year. USDA received a similar BIL appropriation for improving satellite-based detection and monitoring

The interagency wildland fire management community is using the Commission’s roadmap to collaborate with additional Federal partners beyond the traditional land management agencies to leverage their knowledge and expertise to help address important wildland fire management policy issues. For example, in December 2022, the Department of Defense joined the [National Wildfire Coordinating Group](#) (NWCG), which provides national leadership to enable coordinated wildland fire operations among Federal, state, local, Tribal, and territorial partners. In February 2024, [NASA joined the NWCG](#) in an effort to further increase interagency collaborative efforts. NASA’s technological capabilities will allow the NWCG to leverage the combined contributions of research and development, data gathering and distribution, and technology transfer from three NASA mission directorates in the areas of earth science, space technologies, and aeronautics.

Interior has also set aside more than \$5 million in BIL funding to support cross-boundary implementation with the USDA Forest Service to help reduce wildfire risk. This funding supports the Commission’s recommendation to increase the flexibility of Federal funds to move across boundaries by implementing the first of its kind national mechanism to share resources across the Federal land management agencies for these purposes.

### ***Commission Theme 3. Shifting from Reactive to Proactive***

Wildfires do not respect jurisdictional boundaries: a fire that starts on one type of land ownership may—and often does—spread to others. This means that managing wildfire risk requires an “all-hands, all lands,” or cross-boundary, approach to prioritization, planning, and implementation of risk reduction treatments. The Commission highlights the need for greater flexibility of Federal funds to be used across jurisdictional boundaries, increased use of cross-boundary authorities, and cross-boundary restoration work.

As a byproduct of the additional funding provided by the BIL, Interior has increased its hazardous fuels treatments by approximately 20 percent from 2021 to 2022 and 30 percent from 2022 to 2023. By increasing fuels treatments, Interior is taking consequential steps to mitigate its wildfire management challenges and advance wildfire resiliency, improve firefighter and public safety, protect communities, and boost local economies. Our goal for this year is close to two million acres of treatments and to improve our collaborative mitigation efforts.

In order to achieve this objective, the President's 2025 Budget includes a legislative proposal to permit the use of Fuels Management and Burned Area Rehabilitation program funds for work on non-Federal or non-tribal lands that are not adjacent to Federal lands but where work benefits resources on Federal lands. Current authorities limit the use of these funds for work on Interior-administered lands and adjacent non-Federal or non-tribal lands where the work benefits resources on Federal lands. This limitation constrains cross-jurisdictional landscape treatments and post-wildfire recovery activities. Expanding the authority as described above will help promote coordinated multi-jurisdictional wildfire risk-reduction and recovery efforts, while simultaneously expanding opportunities to implement the Cohesive Strategy in alignment with the Commission's recommendations.

As noted by the Commission, proactive planning and mitigation actions before a wildfire can significantly reduce impacts and costs in the postfire period. This front-end work can also lay the groundwork for more effective postfire response, reduced postfire impacts, and generally streamline the provision of technical support and other resources after a wildfire. The Commission recommends the creation of organizational and financial structures to better integrate national response to pre- and postfire impacts across agencies and to scale-up the accessibility and timely deployment of support. To reduce complexities and increase resources for pre- and postfire priorities, Interior is working with partners across the interagency wildland fire community through WFLC to develop a coordinated agreement that will institutionalize these efforts.

#### ***Commission Theme 4. Enabling Beneficial Fire***

The Commission stressed the importance of dramatically increasing the amount of beneficial fire on our landscapes as an essential component to addressing the wildfire crisis. Wildfire is both a natural and inevitable process, and the use of fire is vital to both fire-adapted ecosystems and fire-adapted communities. Fires serve to reduce flammable materials that fuel undesirable high-severity wildfires, thus mitigating risk to communities and fire-adapted landscapes.

Congress has repeatedly recognized the importance of cross-jurisdictional and landscape scale management in laws such as the Good Neighbor Authority and the Tribal Forest Protection Act. Indigenous stewardship is necessary to achieve wildfire resilience and ecosystem restoration goals. Tribes are well positioned to coordinate and implement the increased use of beneficial fire, which includes prescribed burning, cultural burning, and wildfire managed for resource benefit. Interior works with Tribes under the Indian Self-Determination and Education Assistance Act to deliver co-stewardship on the land. In recognition of the importance of increased Tribal capacity to allow for more equitable engagement of Tribes, Interior has invested in building Tribal capacity for co-management in support of Commission recommendations.

However, expanding the use of beneficial fire faces many challenges. A key complicating factor is that all forms of fire, including the use of beneficial fire, produce smoke that can be harmful to human health. Like wildfires, smoke does not recognize jurisdictional boundaries. This causes tensions between land management objectives that reduce wildfire risk to communities, and public health objectives that reduce smoke exposure to communities. The GAO's March 2023 report on "[Wildfire Smoke: Opportunities to Strengthen Federal Efforts to Manage Growing Risks](#)" provided several recommendations for better collaboration, including for Federal agencies to align air quality and land management goals for wildfire risk mitigation.

Using the GAO report and the Commission's work as a guide, in November 2023, Interior signed a [memorandum of understanding](#) (MOU) with the USDA, the Environmental Protection Agency, and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention for wildland fire and air quality coordination. The MOU facilitates Federal agency efforts to further their joint work to protect communities from the impacts of wildfire smoke, while promoting land management practices that reduce the risk of large, severe wildfires. This MOU represents a major step forward toward the Commission's vision of greater coordination and collaboration among agencies working on wildfire.

### ***Commission Theme 5. Supporting and Expanding the Workforce***

As recognized by the Commission, the demands on the wildland fire workforce continue to grow as wildfire is now a year-round occurrence and the increased complexity of fires is demanding more active management. Federal and Tribal wildland fire wages have not kept pace with some state governments and other industry competitors. Housing costs have also risen rapidly across the West; in certain geographic areas many wildland fire personnel may find it difficult to afford rent or to purchase a home on their current wages. These issues are compounding wildland fire workforce challenges, including the ability to recruit and retain employees.

Interior received \$120 million through BIL to provide temporary supplemental payments to wildland firefighters, but this funding was exhausted by the end of FY 2023. DOI is continuing to provide these temporary supplemental payments through FY 2024 using regular appropriations pursuant to limited authority provided by Congress, but the specter of a pay cliff will return in FY 2025 without further Congressional action. Only a permanent pay fix can alleviate the significant financial uncertainty that wildland firefighters increasingly face with each extension of the temporary supplemental payments.

The Administration continues to urge Congress to authorize and fund permanent and comprehensive pay reform, as proposed in the President's 2025 Budget. The Budget also includes funding for Interior to hire additional wildland firefighters, enhance mental health and wellbeing services, and improve government housing. As the Department requires new authorities to fully implement the proposed workforce reforms, the Budget also carries forward the legislative proposal that accompanied the President's 2024 Budget, which would:

- (1) Establish a special base rate salary table for wildland firefighters;
- (2) Create a new premium pay category tied to incident response;
- (3) Establish a streamlined pay cap that provides waiver authority to the Secretary using specific criteria; and

- (4) Provide permanent authorization to grant paid rest and recuperation leave to employees returning from certain multi-day incidents related to wildland fires.

Implementation of the full suite of workforce reforms proposed in the Budget would help address long-standing recruitment and retention challenges and further the Administration’s commitment to build a more robust and resilient wildland firefighting workforce.

Training for Interior’s firefighters remains a high priority—BIA, BLM, NPS and USFWS are working collaboratively to increase Interior’s support for the National Prescribed Fire Training Center and the interagency Fuels Academy, to enhance training efforts with a focus on Interior administered lands. Further, Interior has used BIL funding to develop firefighter internships. Interior recognizes the valuable training and experience gained through building a skilled workforce that will contribute to Interior’s efforts to reduce wildfire risk to communities.

Using BIL funding and regular appropriations, Interior and the USDA Forest Service, have initiated work to establish a program to address firefighter mental health needs, including post-traumatic stress disorder care, for permanent, temporary, seasonal, and year-round wildland firefighters. By streamlining and expanding existing mental health programs, Interior is working to better support firefighter resilience, improve mental preparedness, and address the effects from cumulative stress. This initiative will create a bridge between existing programs, consider additional prevention and training program needs, enhance Critical Incident Stress Management capacity, and further develop early intervention trauma support services.

#### ***Commission Theme 6. Modernizing Approaches for Informed Decision-Making***

A high priority Commission focal area, that is also a stated goal of the MOU for wildland fire and air quality coordination, is the translation of science into practice, or the use of applied science, to inform decision-making across all phases of fire.

WFLC and the National Science and Technology Council, Subcommittee on Disaster Reduction are co-hosting a workshop in June 2024. The USGS and USDA Forest Service are working with other key fire science organizations to plan and host the workshop, including the Joint Fire Science Program, National Science Foundation, NASA, NOAA and others. The workshop, titled “Meeting Science and Technology Needs for Wildland Fire Risk and Resilience,” will bring together numerous fire science and management organizations to discuss and recommend potential actions to address science, data and technology gaps and needs.

Further, the Commission noted that various predictive services and decision support functions are fragmented across multiple agencies and suffer from both limited interoperability and dissipated priority-setting and purchasing power. The Commission believes that predictive services and decision support functions would greatly benefit from increased integration. Last year, the President’s Council of Advisors on Science and Technology (PCAST) [released a report](#) on wildland firefighting which also gives reference to improved integration and modernizing technologies to enhance situational awareness and accelerating the improvement of predictive modeling tools by expanding research communities.



To address emerging opportunities and challenges in this space, the President's 2025 Budget requests a total of \$5 million, split evenly between Interior and the USDA Forest Service, for the establishment of a new joint office for wildfire science and technology. The Joint Office will lead the strategic development, deployment, and sustainment of technology, science, and data to be used to improve safety, effectiveness, and cost efficiency of U.S. wildland fire management. It will be responsible for facilitating the availability of sound science-based data, products, and technology to support our interagency wildland fire management partners.

Interior is also using BIL funds to increase wildfire intelligence and provide real-time fire environment analysis and decision support through the addition of new FTEs. Interior will use three term positions, one hosted by the USFWS and two hosted by the NPS, to support Interior's ability to use data acquired by sensors, such as cameras, smoke monitors, remote automatic weather stations (RAWS), and others across our shared boundaries.

One of the recommendations made in the Final Report to enhance the use of science is to fund and support Innovation Landscape Areas. USGS in partnership with the Department of Defense, the USFWS, USDA Forest Service, and BIA have initiated pilot innovation landscape networks in the Southwestern and Southeastern U.S. that bring together researchers and managers to develop, test, and apply new science in an adaptive management framework.

### ***Commission Theme 7. Investing in Resilience***

The Commission stressed the urgency of addressing the wildfire crisis through adequate funding and authorities for agencies to continue building on the progress achieved through the historic BIL funding package. In short, the Commission stated that the wildfire crisis needs to be funded, staffed, and acted upon like the national emergency that it is. To do less would resign ourselves to accepting incredible costs and losses as a result of future catastrophic events. The Commission's recommendations emphasize the need for Federal funding that is sustained and predictable, keeps pace with the escalating crisis, incentivizes investments across all levels of government, and includes a focus on the mitigation of risk and impacts both before and after wildfire.

For Interior to continue advancing and building on the collaborative progress that we've outlined in this testimony, we will require sustained support from Congress to maintain the investments we've made while expanding our efforts to reduce the risk of catastrophic wildfires.

### **Conclusion**

Thank you for the opportunity to share feedback on the Commission Reports and Interior's ongoing efforts to address the recommendations in both reports. The Commission's reports serve as foundational analytical tools to guide our efforts and drive our successes in managing and reducing wildfire risk in the United States. We appreciate Congress' support and look forward to continuing to work with you as we address critical wildland fire management issues.

This concludes my statement. I welcome any questions from the Committee.