

**STATEMENT OF
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**BEFORE THE
U.S. SENATE COMMITTEE ON ENERGY AND NATURAL RESOURCES**

JULY 15, 2014

WILDLAND FIRE AND THE FOREST SERVICE FISCAL YEAR 2015 BUDGET

Chairwoman Landrieu, Ranking Member Murkowski, and members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today to provide the status of wildland fire program efforts as it pertains to the Fiscal Year (FY) 2015 President's Budget Proposal for the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) Forest Service. The April 2, 2014 testimony regarding the entire Forest Service FY 2015 Budget Request is appended to my statement today.

The FY 2015 President's Budget for the Forest Service focuses on three key areas: restoring resilient landscapes, building thriving communities, and managing wildland fires. It calls for a fundamental change in how wildfire suppression is funded. It proposes a new and fiscally responsible funding strategy for wildland fire, contributes to long-term economic growth, and continues our efforts to achieve the greatest benefits for the taxpayer at the least cost. This budget will enable us to more effectively reduce fire risk, manage landscapes more holistically, and increase resiliency of the Nation's forests and rangelands as well as the communities that border them.

Increases in large fires in the West have coincided with an increase in temperatures and early snow melt in recent years. These factors also contribute to longer fire seasons. The length of the fire season has increased by over two months since the 1970s (Westerling, 2006). Contributing to the problem of large fires is severe drought, increased levels of hazardous fuels and a changing climate. Some experts anticipate future fire seasons on the order of 12 to 15 million

acres burned each year. Extreme wildfire threatens lives and the natural resources people need and value, such as clean, abundant water; clean air; fish and wildlife habitat; open space for recreation; and other forest products and services.

The Forest Service Missoula Fire Lab completed an analysis in 2012 that showed 58 million acres of National Forest System (NFS) lands with a high, or very high, potential for a large wildfire that would be difficult for suppression resources to contain (Dillon, 2012). At the same time, landscapes are becoming more susceptible to fire impacts, and more Americans are choosing to build their home in the Wildland Urban Interface (WUI). In the conterminous United States, some 32 percent of housing units (i.e. homes, apartment buildings, and other human dwellings) and one-tenth of all land with housing units are situated within the WUI (Radeloff et al., 2005). The Forest Service estimates that 464 million acres of all vegetated lands are at moderate to very high risk from uncharacteristically large wildfires (Dillon 2012). The National Association of State Foresters estimates that over 70,000 communities are at risk from wildfire.

REDUCING HAZARDOUS FUELS

Excess fuels often include leaf litter and debris on the forest floor as well as the branches and foliage of small trees. These provide ladder fuels that often allow surface fires to transition to high intensity crown fires. Fuel treatments result in more resilient and healthier ecosystems that provide the many benefits society wants and needs, including clean water, scenic and recreational values, wood products, biodiversity, communities that are better able to withstand wildfire, and safer conditions for firefighters. Unlike other natural disasters such as earthquakes or hurricanes, where the intensity of the natural event cannot be influenced, the intensity of wildland/wildland-urban interface fires can be reduced through responsible fuel management. Fuel treatments can change fire behavior, decrease fire size and intensity, divert fire away from high value resources, and can result in reduced suppression costs. When a wildfire starts within or burns into a fuel treatment area, an assessment is conducted to evaluate the resulting impacts on fire behavior and fire suppression actions. Of over 1,400 assessments conducted to date, over 90 percent of the fuel treatments were effective in changing fire behavior and/or helping with control of the wildfire (USFS, Fuels Treatment Effectiveness Database).

There are many programs within the Forest Service that can reduce the risk of catastrophic wildland fires. These include Integrated Resource Restoration (IRR), Collaborative Forest Landscape Restoration, Hazardous Fuels, Federal and Cooperative Forest Health programs, Stewardship Contracting, Good Neighbor Authority, State Fire Assistance, and others.

Approaches to restoring fire-adapted ecosystems often require treatment or removal of excess fuels (e.g., through mechanical thinning, prescribed fire, or a combination of the two) that reduce tree densities in uncharacteristically crowded forests, and application of fire to promote the growth of native plants and reestablish desired vegetation and fuel conditions.

Through our Hazardous Fuels Program, the Forest Service controls fuels by removing buildups of dead vegetation and by thinning overly dense forests that can be hazardous to lives, homes, communities, and wildland resources. From FY 2001 to FY 2013, the Forest Service treated about 33 million acres, an area larger than Mississippi. For FY 2015, we propose \$358.6 million for our Hazardous Fuels program. We also propose performing non-WUI Hazardous Fuels work within the IRR line item in order to accomplish work more efficiently. With more than 70,000 communities in the WUI at risk from wildfire, the Forest Service is working through cross-jurisdictional partnerships to help communities become safer from wildfires. Through the Firewise program, the number of designated Firewise communities rose from 400 in FY 2008 to nearly 1,000 in FY 2013.

The agency has the capability to protect life, property, and natural resources while assuring an appropriate, risk-informed, and effective response to wildfires that is consistent with land and resource management objectives. However, we cannot do this alone. Wildland fires are managed by the Federal Government, State, Tribal and local governments. The Forest Service and Department of Interior (DOI) alone cannot prevent the loss of life and property. Research demonstrates that the characteristics of a structure's surroundings within 100 feet principally determine the potential for ignition from the thermal radiation emitted by a fire. To improve the survivability of structures, the Forest Service and DOI work with State and local governments to develop and implement community protection plans. In addition, the Forest Service targets hazardous fuels funding to areas with the highest impact which often includes near communities that have already taken steps to reduce fire risk. Forest Service programs, including the State

Fire and Volunteer Fire Assistance programs, and the Federal and Cooperative Forest Health Protection programs provide important assistance to States, local communities and non-Federal landowners in responding to, preparing for, and mitigating the threat of wildland fire.

IMPACTS OF INCREASED FIRE COSTS

In FY 1991, fire activities accounted for about 13 percent of the total agency budget; in FY 2012, it was over 40 percent. In the 1980s and 1990s, the 10-year average of suppression costs remained relatively stable, as did the number of acres burned nationwide. This was an abnormally wet period in the United States and fire activity was relatively low. However, beginning in the extreme fire season of 2000, which cost \$1 billion in suppression, this trend started to change. The cost of the FY 2000 fires alone caused the 10-year average to rise by over \$80 million – a 16 percent increase. Wildland Fire Management now makes up almost half of the agency’s discretionary budget. Funding fire suppression has presented budgetary challenges for the Forest Service including the need to budget less for non-fire programs in an effort to maintain funding for fire suppression.

Fire transfers from non-fire accounts occur when the agency has exhausted all available fire resources from the Suppression and FLAME accounts. From FY 2000 to FY 2013, the Forest Service made fire transfers from discretionary, trust, and permanent non-fire accounts to pay for fire suppression costs seven times, ranging from \$100 million in FY 2007 to \$999 million in FY 2002, and totaling approximately \$3.2 billion. Of the total transferred funds, \$2.8 billion was repaid, however, the transfers still led to disruptions within all Forest Service programs. In FY 2013, the Forest Service transferred \$505 million to the fire suppression and preparedness accounts for emergency fire suppression due to severe burning conditions and increasing fire suppression costs. We greatly appreciate the repayment of these transferred funds provided by Congress as part of the Continuing Appropriations Act, 2014.

Each time the agency transfers money out of non-fire accounts to pay for fire suppression there are significant and lasting impacts across the entire Forest Service. When funding is transferred from other programs to support fire suppression operations, these non-fire programs are impacted because they are unable to accomplish priority work and achieve the overall mission of

the agency. Often this priority work mitigates wildland fire hazards in future years. In addition, transfers negatively impact local businesses and economies, costing people jobs and income as a result of delayed or cancelled projects.

The FY 2010 Appropriations Act, Public Law 111-88, Title V-FLAME Act requires the Forest Service to report estimates of anticipated wildland fire suppression costs for each fiscal year. The July 2014 forecast predicts that with 90 percent confidence fire suppression costs will be between \$924 million and \$1.61 billion for FY 2014, with a median forecast of \$1.27 billion. If the FY 2014 fire season tracks those from the past, we would expect to transfer money from critical mission delivery activities, including fuels reduction and forest thinning projects that reduce the threat of wildfires as well as several of our permanent and trust funds. In his request for emergency supplemental appropriations for the humanitarian situation in the Southwest, the President has included \$615 million to provide for the necessary expenses for wildfire suppression and rehabilitation activities this fiscal year in order to avoid transferring funds from other wildfire treatment and protection activities. In addition, the President's supplemental request includes language to support a discretionary cap adjustment to allow the Federal Government to respond to severe, complex and threatening fires or a severe fire season similar to how other natural disasters are funded.

FIRE SUPPRESSION FUNDING PROPOSAL

The FY 2015 Budget proposes a new funding strategy that recognizes the negative effects of funding fire suppression as we have historically. The budget proposes funding catastrophic wildland fires similar to other disasters. Funded in part by additional budget authority provided through a budget cap adjustment for wildfire suppression, the budget proposes discretionary funding for wildland fire suppression at a level which reflects the level of spending associated with suppression of 99 percent of wildfires. In addition, the budget includes up to \$954 million to be available under a disaster funding cap adjustment to meet suppression needs above the base appropriation. This proposed funding level includes the difference between the funds appropriated and the upper limit of the 90th percentile range forecast for suppression costs for FY 2015. This additional funding would be accessed with Secretarial declaration of need or imminent depletion of appropriated discretionary funds. This strategy provides increased

certainty in addressing growing fire suppression needs, better safeguards non-suppression programs from transfers that diminish their effectiveness, and allows us to stabilize and invest in programs that more effectively restore forested landscapes, treat forests for the increasing effects of climate change, and prepare communities in the WUI for future wildfires.

WILDLAND FIRE AVIATION ASSETS

Airtankers are a critical part of our response to wildfire. Their use plays a crucial role in keeping some fires small and greatly assists in controlling the large fires. Accordingly, we are implementing a Large Airtanker Modernization Strategy to replace our aging fleet with next-generation airtankers. Our strategy, reflected in our budget request, would fund both the older aircraft still in operation and the next-generation airtankers currently under contract.

The Forest Service expects to have a sufficient number of large airtankers available through exclusive use contracts this fire season. This includes a total of up to nine Next Generation airtankers and eight Legacy airtankers. The Forest Service will also have 15 to 17 other airtankers available through agreements with cooperators, including eight military C-130s equipped with Modular Airborne Fire Fighting Systems, eight CV580s through agreements with the State of Alaska and Canada, and one Very Large Airtanker (DC-10) through a Call When Needed contract.

CHALLENGES FOR THE FUTURE

Our evolving approach to managing wildland fire is integral to meeting our goals of safety, landscape-scale restoration, cross-boundary landscape conservation, and risk management. We continue to learn more about wildland fire, and we continue to apply what we learn through fire and risk management science in partnership with States, communities, and other Federal agencies. We strive to maximize our response capabilities and to support community efforts to reduce the threat of wildfire and increase ecosystem resilience. The agency has made great progress in its continued focus on risk-based decision-making when responding to wildfires, and in 2015 will continue this important work to better inform decision makers on the risks and trade-offs associated with wildfire management decisions.