

**Chairman Manchin's Opening Statement During
a Full Committee Hearing to Examine the
President's Budget Request for the U.S. Forest
Service for Fiscal Year 2025**

- The committee will come to order.
- This morning we are here to discuss the President's Fiscal Year 2025 Budget Request for the Forest Service.
- I'd like to begin by thanking Chief Randy Moore and the Forest Service Budget Director, Mark Lichtenstein, for being with us this morning.
- I look forward to hearing about the justification for the 6.5 percent increase requested over Fiscal Year 2024 enacted appropriations.
- Although May would normally be just the start of fire season, we've already had record-breaking wildfires, as is becoming all too common.

- In February, while it was still snowing, over one million acres in Texas burned, killing two people and destroying 130 homes.
- All signs point to an active fire year in the U.S., and I know my colleagues from Western states are on pins and needles watching for the next ignition that could devastate a community.
- Our Committee has considered several bills that would support an improved wildfire response network, from increasing the use of technology for wildfire detection to integrating the local community's loggers and volunteer firefighters into wildfire suppression efforts on federal land.
- In the meantime, Congress has tried to address this problem at the source, by investing heavily in hazardous fuels reduction.
- Between the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law and the *Inflation Reduction Act* (IRA), the Forest

Service has been given about \$12 billion on top of your annual appropriations.

- Now that we're a few years into those laws, today is a good opportunity for us to take stock of how the Forest Service is implementing those historic investments, as well as the proposed budget for Fiscal Year 2025.
- As I mentioned, the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law and the IRA will add a significant extra boost to the Forest Service's budget—around 30% extra for forest management each year.
- To be honest, Chief Moore, I'm frustrated by how little those extra investments have moved the needle on the agency's performance metrics.
- I do appreciate that last year was a banner year for the Forest Service in terms of the acres treated—more than 4.3 million acres.
- That's a million acres more than the previous year and an agency record.

- Some of your other performance metrics were less encouraging.
- For example, your timber target for last year was 3.4 billion board feet – you missed that by about 260 million board feet.
- You had a target of 16 improved watersheds – you only managed 6.
- You've told us before that it takes time to develop these projects and that we should be patient.
- Instead of continuing to ramp up in treatments, however, the agency's target is actually going down over the next two years.
- So one of the issues I hope we'll explore today is why the historic funding provided by the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law and the *IRA* aren't translating better into on-the-ground action.
- The backdrop to our discussion, beyond the impending fire season, is a rash of sawmill

closures this year, including six in my home state.

- I know that the wood products market has been especially volatile since the pandemic.
- We've heard a number of reports, however, that longstanding sawmills are simply running out of nearby material and need to haul logs in from farther and farther, which significantly cuts into their already-thin margins.
- More consistent and reliable offerings from local federal forests would undoubtedly help these struggling operators.
- What's also concerning to me about these mill closures is that the Forest Service's Wildfire Crisis Strategy is fundamentally dependent on a robust network of mills that can process the material from our nation's forests.
- As we recently heard at our hearing with the Wildfire Commission, revenue-generating timber harvests are critical to pay for more

complex treatments, prescribed fire, and reforestation.

- If done right, timber harvests can provide a return to the federal taxpayer, increase the health of our forests, and support our critical industry partners.
- The Forest Service has used some innovative models in the past.
- For example, last year the agency piloted a timber transport project to salvage burned timber in California and ship it to struggling sawmills in Wyoming.
- That makes all the sense in the world – we shouldn't just be letting salvageable timber rot.
- In the long term, Congress can also help develop markets for the small-diameter timber that often comes from wildfire mitigation projects.
- In fact, several of the provisions in a bill I introduced with Ranking Member Barrasso, the

America's Revegetation and Carbon Sequestration Act, would do just that.

- However, we simply cannot afford to lose all of our existing mill infrastructure while that market grows, and I hope that we will hear how the Forest Service can further expand on efforts like the timber transport project.
- Lastly, I know that fire and forestry often get the lion's share of attention, but I also want to highlight the tremendous role that our National Forests play when it comes to our outdoor recreation economy.
- Last year, the 159 million visitors to Forest Service lands generated billions in economic activity and supported nearly 180,000 jobs.
- Unfortunately, the Forest Service has a deferred maintenance backlog of more than \$7 billion, including \$5 billion in maintenance for roads alone.

- This should concern all of us – the roads don't just provide access to our recreation lands but are vital arteries for rural communities.
- Perhaps even more concerning, a road in poor condition threatens our ability to deploy firefighters where they're needed and stop a wildfire before it grows to catastrophic size.
- As we approach the expiration of the mandatory funding for facilities maintenance that we provided in the *Great American Outdoors Act*, it's worth asking what changes could be made to better address the next set of hurdles facing the Forest Service.
- Chief Moore, thank you again for being here today.
- I think I speak for all of us when I say that we don't just want you to succeed, we need you to.
- I look forward to hearing your perspective on these issues and your plans for the year ahead.

- With that, we'll turn to Ranking Member Barrasso for his opening statement.
- Thank you, Ranking Member Barrasso.
- Next we'll go to Chief Moore for your testimony.
- Thank you, Chief Moore. We'll now begin with questions.