STATEMENT OF
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UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE
FOREST SERVICE

Before the
Committee on Resources
Subcommittee on Forests and Forest Health

Concerning Western National Forests:
A Cohesive Strategy is Needed to Address Catastrophic Wildfire Threats

June 29, 1999

MADAM CHAIRMAN AND MEMBERS OF THE COMMITTEE:

Thank you for the opportunity to be here. I am Janice McDougle, Deputy Chief for State and Private Forestry, with responsibility for the fire management programs of the Forest Service. Accompanying me is Denny Truesdale, Assistant Director for the Fire and Aviation Management staff.

I would like to cover the following key points today:

1) Many forest ecosystems have changed structurally over the last 100 years to a point where they are now at high risk to catastrophic wildfire;

2) Increased population in the rural and forest environment has increased the risk of fire threat to life and property;

3) The recommendations identified in the final General Accounting Office report (GAO Report RCED-99-65), and;

4) The Forest Service response to those recommendations and challenges.

Forest Ecosystems and Risk of Catastrophic Fire

The General Accounting Office (GAO) report systematically and accurately lays out the seriousness and magnitude of the problem that now exists with the threat of catastrophic wildfires to forest resources and communities. We agree with the assessment made in the report, and have discussed this issue on several occasions in testimony before this subcommittee. Briefly, I can outline the nature of the problem as follows.

We estimate that approximately 39 million acres of National Forest System lands, primarily in the inland West and the Atlantic coastal states, are at high risk from damaging, high-intensity, wildland fire. Many of these stands are dense and over-crowded with high mortality rates due to bark beetle and other insect outbreaks. For instance, in eastern Oregon and Washington, forest inventories show that mortality has been above average over the past decade on all forest ownerships.

The success of fire suppression efforts for the last 100 years has also had a profound influence on the composition and structure of natural fuel conditions, and the function of those ecosystems where frequent and low-intensity fires historically occurred. Fire is part of a natural, ecological cycle and, over a long enough period, all forests will eventually burn. Fire suppression has increased the fuel load and the risk of higher intensity fires. Unless we address current forest conditions, the risk and severity of high intensity fires will continue to grow, threatening the health of our watersheds and larger ecosystems.

Over time, other values have taken on added importance. Americans have wanted to protect resources and habitat for federally-listed threatened and endangered species, protect air quality, especially near urbanized areas of the country, and allocate lands to wilderness and other special designations. These are values that the agency agrees with, but they also provide more challenges in putting fire back into ecosystems. This results in the need to balance putting fire into the ecosystem with these other values. Therefore, as we acknowledged before, treating the entire 39 million acres is not possible for a multitude of reasons. However, we are engaged in prioritizing areas needing treatment, and those areas literally should start at home. Additionally, fire is a necessary tool for managing and improving habitat for many wildlife species, including critical habitat for some threatened or endangered species.

The Wildland Urban Interface

In addition to changes in forest conditions, the increasing number of people moving from urban areas to rural areas near public lands has resulted in more homes and other structures being built in wildland environments near national forests. We commonly call these wildland urban interface areas. Because of their location, these structures are extremely vulnerable to fire should a wildland fire occur. This trend,

coupled with the increased hazard from fuels accumulation discussed above, is resulting in a volatile situation that must be addressed.

GAO Report Recommendations

GAO recommends that the agency reduce and maintain accumulated fuels on national forests of the interior West to acceptable levels. They recommend a formal report to Congress on a cohesive strategy, which would include the following:

1) Specific steps for: (a) acquiring the data needed to establish meaningful performance measures and goals for reducing fuels; (b) identifying ways to better reconcile different fuel reduction approaches with other stewardship objectives, and; (c) identifying changes in incentives and statutorily defined contracting procedures that would better facilitate the accomplishment of fuel reduction goals;

2) A schedule indicating dates for completing each of these steps, and;

3) Estimates of the potential and likely overall and annual costs of accomplishing this strategy based on different options identified in the strategy as being available to do so.

Forest Service Response and Plan of Action

As noted in the GAO report, the Forest Service began to address the issue of increased fire risk in the early 1990's. In 1998, the Forest Service treated nearly 1.5 million acres for fuels reduction. By the year 2005, the goal is to treat at least 3.0 million acres per year in order to address the most critical high fire risk areas.

The Forest Service anticipates completing a cohesive strategy by the end of 1999. An existing forest health interdisciplinary team representing programs in fire, forest health, forest management, watershed, fire research and development, and wildlife and fish management, with fire management taking the lead, will work together to develop the strategy. We will use the strategy to guide the implementation of the hazardous fuels reduction program into the future. The strategy will be updated annually to account for treatments, wildfire occurrence, insect and disease outbreaks, and inclusion of new scientific information developed under the Joint Fire Sciences Plan and other research initiatives. We will address these problems with an aggressive program to use fire in a more natural ecological role, integrating our many related activities into a cohesive strategy. The full range of tools will be brought to bear on the problem: timber sales, where appropriate; thinning; watershed improvement projects; wildlife habitat treatments; as well as a full range of mechanical and prescribed fire treatments, to name just a few.

Data Needs and Performance Goals

We have an ongoing effort to develop a database that will help identify and define risks to forest ecosystems. A team is coordinating our efforts to define and map risks and develop procedures for using risk information in decision making. The insects and disease risk map is completed. The fire and wildland urban interface risk maps will be completed by February of the year 2000, if not sooner.

There is a strong partnership with research to define and map fire risks. Last year, funds were allocated through the Joint Fire Sciences Program to expand the scope of the project to include additional risk factors such as fire occurrence, expected fire danger, and the wildland urban interface. Prototype maps were delivered in February, 1999, and we are currently validating them with our regional experts, cooperating federal agencies, and state partners.

By developing sets of maps and databases to display areas at highest risk in critical ecosystems, and then combining or overlaying that information for broadscale assessments, we will assure that areas of high risk will receive priority for planning, funding, and implementation at the regional level. This analysis will provide the basis for programmatic assessments that focuses national priorities balanced with regional and local capabilities and the needs of local communities.

The Forest Service is also concurrently developing a strategic plan and annual performance plan as directed by the Government Performance and Results Act. We are in the process of developing both strategic plan objectives, as well as annual performance plan indicators for fuels treatment. While the strategic planning and annual performance planning is not yet finalized, we will use it when completed along with the risk mapping effort so that accomplishments can be meaningfully tracked. This will improve upon our current reporting systems.

Reconciling Fuels Reduction With Other Stewardship Objectives

The hazardous fuel reduction program has always been approached in an interdisciplinary fashion. Even though the primary purpose is to reduce the threat of catastrophic fire and damage to life, property, and resources, in almost all situations, the treatments produce benefits for other resources.

For example, a very successful effort is the wilderness fire program. Both the Wilderness Act and agency policy recognizes the role that fire plays in maintaining and restoring natural environments such as wilderness areas. In 1995 the Forest Service developed a guide that provides a highly coordinated approach to re-establish the role of fire in the wilderness, meeting the intent of the Wilderness Act, and at the same time providing a much higher degree of protection from wildfires that may escape from a wilderness and threaten public lands or private property.

Challenges will remain in integrating programs. While prescribed fire may be one of the most cost-effective tools in some areas, protecting air quality is also a priority for states, therefore full application of this program may not be possible. Adequately protecting soil and water resources may also limit the amount and timing of mechanical treatments. Protecting habitat for threatened or endangered species may also limit the tools and extent of application of treatments, which will result in fewer acres treated. All of these factors point to the need to take a strategic approach toward ensuring the treated acres reflect the most efficient and effective use of limited resources. This is not impossible, as evidenced by a recent analysis on the Idaho Panhandle National Forest, where a 400,000 acre area was studied for treatment for forest health and fuels purposes. Through a focused analysis and prioritization process, a 25,000 acre project was developed based on site-specific information with full public involvement.

Identifying Changes in Incentives

Areas in need of high risk fuel reduction do not always coincide with the areas of highest priority for forest health, watershed restoration and protection, or timber production. In fact, a high proportion of the suitable timber base is outside of urban interface, wilderness areas, and other high priority fuel reduction areas. Producing timber and reducing fire hazards are both legitimate and critical resource objectives, but often with different desired outcomes. It is not always possible for the two to combine into a cohesive program that provides the optimum fuel treatment.

A number of options are available to help address this situation. Pursuant to section 323 of the Department of the Interior and Related Agencies Appropriations Act, 1999, commonly known as the Wyden Amendment, the Forest Service is authorized to integrate activities through cooperative agreements with private landowners. Using this new authority, several units are planning and implementing projects in 1999. The use will expand as more projects are completed successfully. The Wyden Amendment is seen as a useful tool to treat watersheds effectively.

The proposed fiscal year 2000 Forest Ecosystem Restoration and Improvement line item in the Forest Service budget will enable us to focus treatments, such as noncommercial thinning, on lands where noncommercial treatments are required to restore or maintain watersheds and forest health. This will give managers flexibility in planning and integrating projects that are outside of the timber production areas.

The wildland/urban interface assistance component within the state fire assistance program, helps communities at risk of wildfire by providing special competitive grants for planning and mitigation.

This approach can reduce insurance premiums for homeowners, prevent wildland fires from destroying homes, and reduce damage to federal, state, and private forest resources.

Not all funding in fuels management can or should be directed only at high fire risk areas. We must maintain areas that are already in a healthy situation--for example much of the South. Many areas are treated with prescribed fire on a regular cycle. These areas are a high priority for fuels funding in order to maintain the current health of the stands. These stands provide the least risk and the least cost for the total management options for the sites. They also result in the lowest fire suppression cost with the highest rates of suppression success. I invite you to visit forests such as the Francis Marion which have beautiful stands of long leaf pine that are burned on a 3 to 5 year cycle to maintain the excellent habitat for the Red Cockaded woodpecker.

Identifying Changes in Contracting Authorities

We are currently testing a broad range of new stewardship project processes and procedures pursuant to section 347 of the Department of the Interior and Related Agencies Appropriations Act, 1999. This provision authorized the Forest Service to enter into pilot contracts using special authorities to improve efficiency in achieving national forest land management goals while helping meet rural community needs. Some of the authorities expand current contracting mechanisms to allow removal of low value material to reduce fire hazard and provide products to community industries. Examples include: exchanging forest products for services, retaining receipts from product sales for related forest health activities, increased flexibility in the methods for appraising product value, and new ways of designating products to be sold. We will report to Congress annually during the testing period.

Our efforts to improve utilization of small diameter materials to reduce fire risks extends beyond the pilot projects authorized in the appropriations act. A team of representatives from fire, forest management, research (through the Forest Products Lab), and cooperative forestry program areas are working to expand utilization of small woody material on both public lands and private lands. Throughout much of the West tightly spaced small trees contribute to fire risks but this material often has little economic value. Improved technology, harvesting techniques, and market development are part of the small diameter utilization effort.

Schedule for Completion

The schedule for completion of each of these steps identified for the cohesive strategy will be developed. As it is early in the process, we have not yet developed a schedule.

Costs

The GAO report identified the high cost of treating fuels as a significant barrier. Current and projected budgets will not allow for treatment of all areas that have been identified as high fuel hazards. However, prioritization and strategic locations of treatments may significantly reduce the total number of acres that the Forest Service would need to treat. The challenge will be to use fuels treatment funding, as well as funding in wildlife, forest management, and watershed, to treat high fuel risk areas effectively. It is not possible at this time to know if there will be sufficient funds to accomplish this, but this will be thoroughly explored in the drafting of the cohesive strategy.

Summary

Clearly, we face great challenges in improving forest health and reducing high fire risk. We are moving ahead quickly to develop a cohesive strategy to address this issue and anticipate delivering a plan by December of 1999.

In closing, we do not agree that this is "too little, too late", as stated in the GAO report. We will develop a comprehensive, cohesive strategy that will address this important issue, and through innovative watershed scale approaches and the full use of all the tools available for this work, we believe we will achieve significant accomplishments in treating critical high risk areas. This problem did not develop overnight, and it will not be solved overnight. In fact, the next century's challenge is to restore these ecosystems to resilient ones where fire will be one of the tools used.

Thank you Madam Chairman, and I welcome any questions the Subcommittee may have.