

STATEMENT OF  
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UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE  
FOREST SERVICE

Before the  
Committee on Energy and Natural Resources  
Subcommittee on Forests and Public Land Management  
United States Senate

Concerning Preparedness for Wildfire Season of 1999

June 29, 1999

MISTER CHAIRMAN AND MEMBERS OF THE COMMITTEE:

I am Larry Payne, Assistant Deputy Chief for State and Private Forestry, Forest Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture. I have responsibility for fire and aviation, forest health and cooperative forestry programs. With me today is Dennis Pendleton, Assistant Director, Fire and Aviation Management for State and Private Forestry with responsibilities for Applied Operations.

In my testimony today I will emphasize three points. One, the Forest Service is fully prepared for the 1999 fire season and we stand ready to meet any foreseeable challenge with an efficient appropriate response. Two our methods of informing and involving the public about fire management is a dynamic process that is continually evolving and becoming more effective. And three, discuss some of the research being explored through the Joint Fire Science Program (JFSP).

As we discuss fire suppression and management, we should keep in mind that fire is an integral part of managing national forests. How a fire is managed depends on where it is located, the type of fire, who is affected by the fire, and what resources are at risk.

## PRESENT SITUATION

The 1999 fire season has been driven by changeable weather attributed to La Niña, which has brought drought to some areas and unseasonable showers and spring snow to others. More than a million acres have burned in the United States as of June 28. As of this date, compared to the 10 year average, the number of fires are up 19 percent, while burned acres are approximately 34 percent higher.

Drought in Florida has contributed to an active spring fire season. Alaska presently has large fire activity and we expect it to continue. The Southwest has been moderately active, with large fires since May. The most destructive fire so far this year happened June 12, on the Ft. Apache Indian Reservation in Arizona. Twenty-nine structures, including 12 homes were burned and 100 families evacuated.

The Forest Service is staffed at a normal level for the 1999 fire season. In conjunction with our national cooperators, we have adequate resources available for effective suppression. In the event of catastrophic fire, the Forest Service is the lead agency to direct firefighting operations, under the Federal Response Plan. In addition, the Forest Service responds to all disasters under the Federal Response Plan to support any need where the agency's expertise can be utilized, such as the Northridge, CA earthquake, of 1994.

Fire protection is a responsibility with growing demands. Increasing numbers of people are establishing their homes in the wildland-urban interface, where they may be at risk from large, damaging wildfires. As a result the Forest Service is working with the National Association of State Foresters, other Federal agencies and the National Fire Protection Association through cooperative community programs to help homeowners protect their homes from wildland fire.

## PREPAREDNESS

Like all federal agencies, states and most rural fire departments, the Forest Service operates under the Incident Command System (ICS), a system that uses standard terms, techniques, and methods that enable us to integrate diverse resources easily into an effective, rapid response team.

All national forests are funded to provide adequate fire protection, based on average fire conditions over a five-year period. During periods of unusually extreme fire conditions, forests may request severity funding authorization to increase their level of fire protection; the Forest Service has authorized five

regions an additional \$9,240,816 for fire severity this season. These funds are being used to increase availability of aircraft, contract for additional ground equipment such as engines, dozers, and tractor plows, supply additional prevention modules, and hire additional fire crews and associated support personnel.

We learned some valuable lessons during the 1998 Florida wildfire campaign. Some of these lessons caused us to change our operations, while others reaffirmed that many aspects of our wildland firefighting techniques are right on target; for example:

- the Incident Command System (ICS) enables wildland fire agencies from across the country to come together and work efficiently during a crisis,
- the Forest Service's use of severity fund authorizations to increase staffing and preparedness during abnormally high fire danger conditions helped forest managers conduct effective operations.
- prescribed fire will lessen the intensity of wildfires, and make them easier and less expensive to control;
- the wildland/urban interface assistance component within state fire assistance, 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;
- unified command at the statewide level was initiated as soon as the 1999 fire activity started and has provided better coordination by abolishing jurisdictional constraints on resources;
- incoming incident management teams receive a comprehensive briefing from both Federal and state agencies to make them aware of differing policies and concerns shared by state and local government.

The Forest Service predicts future fire conditions based on recent and historic data. One such indicator is the Keetch-Byram Drought Index (KBDI), another tool is the Palmer Drought Index which compares the amount of moisture that has actually occurred to an average or normal amount.

## COOPERATIVE PROGRAMS AND INFORMING THE PUBLIC

The Forest Service Cooperative Fire Protection program, within the state and private forestry branch, includes financial and technical assistance and equipment loans of excess federal property. We have excess property partnerships with all 50 states and six territories. Through these partnerships we have nearly \$1 billion of excess property currently on loan. Each year over the last six we have been able to acquire an average of \$138 million worth of excess property to loan to our partners.

In addition, we emphasize informing the public about fire risks and prevention activities, through fire prevention programs with national public service advertising, education, and partnerships. For example:

- In Arizona and New Mexico, nearly 600,000 acres of forest land adjacent to expanding communities, subdivisions, and private lands are identified as high risk for catastrophic wildfires. Cooperative fire protection and education agreements involving the Forest Service, state forestry, Bureau of Land Management, Bureau of Indian Affairs, volunteer and municipal fire fighters, law enforcement, and business and property owners are being used in 200 plus interface communities;
- A variety of community based fire protection programs are being used in California where more than 2.5 million people and 1 million structures are at risk of destruction from wildland fire. Building contractors and insurance agencies have joined with the Forest Service and other federal and state agencies in support of community efforts to protect lives and reduce property loss from destructive wildfire. They are offering public fire awareness education, educational materials, and a reduction in construction and insurance costs to homeowners as an incentive to build and maintain fire safe homes and property;
- Florida had 35 active local fire prevention teams working with the homeowners and agencies across the state in May and early June of this year. The Forest Service is one of the federal, state, and municipal agencies working with the local property owners to reduce human-caused fires. Also, the

field teams have expanded opportunities to provide more people with education on prescribed fire and building fire safe zones in the wildland-urban interface;

- In recognition of the high risk of fires in the southwest, we activated a national fire prevention team in the region. Since 1996, national fire prevention teams have served federal and state agencies in Florida, Texas, Arizona, New Mexico and Utah. Their mission is to assist fire managers in developing and implementing an interagency wildfire prevention program that emphasizes public awareness. Prevention team deployments have repeatedly resulted in significant decreases in human-caused wildfires.

Keeping pace with public expectations, fire managers are taking advantage of technology such as the internet, to post and receive fire data and to keep the public informed. There are growing numbers of fire related web pages the public can easily access to obtain daily fire reports, weather conditions, fire risks, and fire management policy, as well as phone numbers of officials to contact for more information. In the event of a fire, we provide information through print and broadcast media, internet, signing, public meetings, and other appropriate means.

## NATIONAL INTERAGENCY PROGRAM

NIFC, the heart of the fire suppression program, serves as a coordination, dispatch, communications, and warehouse center for all wildland fire agencies. At the center, the Forest Service, Bureau of Land Management, Fish and Wildlife Service, National Park Service and Bureau of Indian Affairs are co-located and work closely with state and tribal foresters. At any one time during the fire season the center may have 35,000 people dispatched in response to fire.

## RESEARCH THROUGH THE JOINT FIRE SCIENCE PROGRAM

In 1998, Congress directed the Department of the Interior, including the Bureau of Land Management (BLM), Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA), National Park Service (NPS), Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS), US Geological Survey (USGS), and the Forest Service to establish the Joint Fire Science Program (JFSP). When established, the JFSP will be made up of 15 federal and 15 non-federal members who will bring a broad spectrum of opinion and knowledge from the public, private and

federal sectors whose principle research is to study. JFSP's principal research purpose is to study: fuels inventory and mapping, evaluation of fuels treatments, scheduling of fuel treatments, and monitoring and evaluation.

JSFP funds twenty-four research projects in 1999 and 16 more will be coming on line in the next sixty days. Topics of research varied from fire risk mapping to smoke from residential combustion and a photo series on fuel models.

Cooperators include six Forest Service research stations, six Forest Service regions, two national forests, the USDA Agriculture Research Service, along with four other federal agencies, four state and local government agencies, five conservation organizations, three private companies and nine universities.

The Joint Fire Science Program will improve the overall effectiveness of federal wildland fire management by providing scientific information and tools necessary to integrate fire into land and resource management plans. This will expand the agencies' ability to improve firefighter safety, control wildland fire suppression costs, protect the public, and sustain healthy ecosystems.

## CLOSING

The Forest Service fire management program is professional, responsive to the concerns and needs of partners and based on the continuous study of historical fire occurrence and risk. We are very proud of the program, its value to the public, and the firefighters, and the great satisfaction of protecting people and resources.