

**STATEMENT OF  
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UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE**

**Concerning  
The Effectiveness of the National Fire Plan and the 10-Year Comprehensive Strategy**

**Before the  
SUBCOMMITTEE ON PUBLIC LAND MANAGEMENT AND FORESTS  
COMMITTEE ON ENERGY AND NATURAL RESOURCES  
UNITED STATES SENATE**

**September 25, 2001**

MR. CHAIRMAN AND MEMBERS OF THE SUBCOMMITTEE:

Thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today to talk about the effectiveness of the National Fire Plan and the recently released 10-Year Comprehensive Strategy. I am Lyle Laverty, Associate Deputy Chief, State and Private Forestry and National Fire Plan Coordinator of the Forest Service. I am here today to bring you up to date on what has been accomplished thus far and what we plan to do next in implementing the National Fire Plan.

The severe fire season of 2000 captured the attention of the American people and highlighted the need to find ways to protect life and property and minimize losses of natural resources. On September 8, 2000, the Secretary of Agriculture and the Secretary of the Interior issued a report entitled "*Managing the Impact of Wildfires on Communities and the Environment.*" The report, referred to as the National Fire Plan, contains recommendations to reduce the impacts of wildland fires on rural communities, reduce the long-term threat from catastrophic fires, and ensure sufficient firefighting resources in the future.

For the past century we have been very successful at preventing and suppressing unwanted fire. This work was accomplished with the best intentions to protect our growing communities and valuable forest and rangeland resources. In some locations an unintended consequence of this success, however, was the buildup of unprecedented amounts of dense vegetation that now, in times of drought and wind, fuels devastating wildfires. These uncharacteristically intense fires threaten homes, communities, watersheds, wildlife habitat, and the lives of firefighters and the public. Each year, more vegetation grows and the problem becomes incrementally worse. There is no short-term solution to this problem. Now, more than ever, we must continue to prevent and suppress unwanted fires and reduce these unnatural fuel conditions. They have the potential to be more destructive to communities and the environment than ever before.

While we continue with our best efforts to protect communities and forestlands from the effects of unwanted fire, we must focus our attention to treating the hazardous buildup of vegetation that fuels these fires. An aggressive fuel treatment program and adjusting land and fire management priorities are the long-term solutions to reduce the effects of unwanted wildland fire, restore our forests to ecologically healthy conditions, and protect our communities on a longer-term basis. As we continue to find common ground and work in partnership with other federal agencies, states, tribes, local communities, and Congress, we leverage our resources and skills, increasing our ability to solve this national problem. We are at a turning point. The National Fire Plan is the beginning of the solution.

Mr. Chairman, less than eleven months have passed since the Forest Service, Department of the Interior, and our State partners undertook the giant task of implementing the National Fire Plan.

It is a monumental task. In that brief time, we've learned many lessons, and we realize we have many areas in which we can improve. We are dedicated to expediting collaboration, providing common performance measures and budget planning models, and analyzing and managing interagency landscape scale projects.

The rehabilitation and restoration efforts in Montana's Bitterroot Valley are a testament to community and agency partnerships. The Forest Service is working with the State to mitigate the extent and impact of invasive plants on National Forest System lands and private lands that may grow in after an area has been burned. Funding for this treatment is coming from the National Fire Plan and State and Private Forestry. Research and feasibility studies in bio-energy and biomass production are underway in Colorado, California, and the Pacific Northwest, as we look for alternative ways to improve utilization and reduce hazardous fuels. Contracting Officers are working on a national contract to provide engines and crews from the private sector to assist us with wildland fire suppression and fuel treatment projects. Today, there are unprecedented examples of interagency and governmental cooperation occurring to meet these goals. The accomplishments so far are from a program only eleven months old. The list of accomplishments is long, and I am proud of the progress we have made in such a short time.

### **10-Year Comprehensive Strategy**

Before I focus on implementation of the National Fire Plan, I would like to briefly discuss the 10-Year Comprehensive Strategy – A Collaborative Approach for Reducing Wildland Fire Risks to Communities and the Environment. Congress directed the Secretaries of Agriculture and the Interior to work with the Governors to develop this strategy in the FY 2001 Interior and Related Agencies Appropriations Act. The direction requires “close collaboration among citizens and

governments at all levels.” In developing this strategy, we worked with a geographically diverse group of people, representing all levels of government, tribal interests, conservation and commodity groups, and community-based restoration groups. The multi-faceted nature of the issues and jurisdictions addressed by this strategy necessitates broad communication and collaboration. While the line officers of the land management agencies are the principal decisionmakers concerning public lands, the collaborative framework, with clear roles and responsibilities, will assist in the implementation of this strategy across all ownerships and jurisdictions.

The comprehensive strategy was completed and released to the public on August 13, 2001. The Western Governors’ Association, the National Association of Counties and the National Association of State Foresters endorse the Strategy. The key points are:

- ✓ The Comprehensive Strategy emphasizes measures to reduce the risk to communities and the environment from wildland fires for the long-term.
- ✓ The Comprehensive Strategy emphasizes a collaborative, community-based approach to address wildland fire issues and the importance of making key decisions at the local level.
- ✓ The primary goals of the Comprehensive Strategy, which are consistent with those contained in the National Fire Plan, are: to improve prevention and suppression, reduce hazardous fuels, restore fire-adapted ecosystems, and promote community assistance.
- ✓ A set of core principles, including collaboration, priority setting, and accountability will help guide the major themes of the comprehensive strategy.

Successful implementation of the National Fire Plan and the 10-Year Comprehensive Strategy requires a commitment among the federal and state partners to integrate their programs, to the maximum extent practicable, to ensure that implementation proceeds in a standard, consistent, and cost-effective manner across agencies. By May 1, 2002 a detailed implementation plan will be developed in collaboration with the Governors to establish detailed and consistent operational ways of doing business between Federal and State agencies and tribal entities to ensure the Core Principles and Goals are met; financial and other resources are available and utilized in an integrated, targeted, and cost effective manner; legal and technical requirements are met; and a system is established to identify and promptly address implementation issues.

We are working with the Department of the Interior to integrate priorities, develop accomplishment timeframes, identify performance measures, and report on procedures that outline efforts to work with states and communities to reduce the threat and risk in areas that need fuels treatment. Although we have made progress in some of these areas, Secretary Veneman and Secretary Norton have discussed the need for much more thorough integration of program activities between the two Departments.

Because the five land management agencies listed in the National Fire Plan have different missions and authorities, planning requirements vary. All National Forests in the Forest Service have action plans that guide fire suppression actions on initial attack fires and larger fires that escape initial attack, and prescribed fires. National forests that don't have fire management plans have adequate direction for tactical fire suppression initial attack and fuel treatment and are in the process of updating their plans. By December 2003, we expect that each national forest will

have a fire management plan that meets guidelines established in the 1995 Federal Wildland Fire Management Policy.

### **The National Fire Plan**

I would like to focus on 5 key points dealing with the National Fire Plan:

- **Firefighting**
- **Rehabilitation and Restoration**
- **Hazardous Fuel Reduction**
- **Community Assistance**
- **Accountability**

**Firefighting:** The National Fire Plan made funds available to increase initial attack capability, increase extended attack support, and provide more resources during large fire episodes. These additional firefighting resources have facilitated control of more fires during initial attack, thereby reducing wildland fire threats to communities at risk. Through workforce hiring and employee development efforts, the Forest Service has hired approximately 3,300 new firefighters for the 2001 fire season. In bringing on these new people to fill vital firefighter positions, the Forest Service has provided training to every individual involved in the fire programs.

Additional equipment purchased under the National Fire Plan has enhanced the organizational capacity of the fire management organization. For example, in Oregon and Washington, Forest Service units have added 58 fire engines, 4 bulldozers, and 10 water/foam tenders. In the state of California, units have added 251 new pieces of equipment, including 216 vehicles.

The cornerstone of the Forest Service wildland fire program is safety and adhering to fire qualification standards for all wildland firefighters. This fire training is reinforced with daily, weekly and monthly safety meetings and annual fire safety refresher training. In addition, safety briefings are given at the beginning of each shift on an incident.

To enhance our readiness and attack capabilities, our scientists are conducting research to improve monitoring of fuel conditions, enhance fire risk assessments, improve fire weather and behavior predictions, and increase the accuracy of long term prediction of fire severity, fire weather, and climatic conditions. Twenty-two research and development projects related to these improvements have been funded using the Joint Fire Sciences and National Fire Plan programs. Managers will use the information collected from these research projects to implement fire plans.

While these efforts will help reduce threats to communities at risk, large wildland fires will not be eliminated. Long term and comprehensive programs in fire prevention, fire suppression, and fuel treatment, involving the States, tribes, communities, and other federal agencies, will be necessary before the current fire environment is changed to one that is less destructive and costly. To this end, we are currently working on improvements to wildland fire planning systems, focusing fuel treatment in areas where communities are at risk, working with other State and federal agencies to plan interagency landscape level fuel treatment programs, and expanding fire prevention programs like FIREWISE.

Mr. Chairman, enhanced readiness and attack capabilities have other important advantages beyond wildland firefighting. For example, two of the Forest Service hotshot crews established under the aegis of the National Fire Plan are now assisting with the World Trade Center and Pentagon emergencies. The Augusta Hotshots from Virginia and the Midewin Hotshots from Illinois are working with Incident Management Teams assigned by the Federal Emergency Management Agency to support Mobilization Center operations.

**Rehabilitation and Restoration:** Rehabilitation and restoration efforts are focused on lands that are unlikely to recover naturally from wildland fire damage. These efforts are in addition to the emergency stabilization efforts that have already taken place, and are funded with Burned Area Emergency Rehabilitation (BAER) funds. For FY 2001, 437 rehabilitation and restoration projects are underway. This includes watershed restoration on 840,000 acres; more than 3,000 miles of road and trail restoration; fish and wildlife habitat restoration on 500,000 acres; treatment of invasive plants, insects and diseases on 280,000 acres; and planting over 650,000 trees. Much of this project work is being contracted to utilize local businesses in the restoration work. Additionally, a large amount of planning has been accomplished to prepare for future projects. For example, an environmental impact statement (EIS) is being prepared on the Bitterroot National Forest to cover restoration and rehabilitation activities on over 300,000 acres of burned land.

In FY 2001, nine research projects and two new applications of technology were funded through the fire plan in support of rehabilitation. The agency is working with State and local agencies to set priorities for lands scorched in last year's fires and to reduce hazardous fuels.

In New Mexico, restoration efforts are ongoing on the Cerro Grande Fire that occurred in May 2000. The Forest Service worked with the Department of Energy, the Santa Clara and San Ildefonso Pueblos, the National Park Service, and private citizens to stabilize high risk sloped areas after the fire was contained. These treatments were successful in protecting the watersheds and reducing post fire damage from flooding and hazardous pollution. Implementation of treatments began in early June after the fire and was completed prior to the mid-July storm season. Some additional emergency treatments were identified and accomplished in 2001 along with long-term restoration measures using funds from the National Fire Plan.

In addition to National Fire Plan rehabilitation work, emergency stabilization teams have surveyed 27 large fires on 209,000 acres of National Forest System land; 60,000 acres of which are classified as severely burned. So far this year, the Forest Service has allocated \$6 million for emergency stabilization on these burns. Treatments include grass seeding on 20,000 acres.

The Forest Service recently signed a five-year agreement with American Forests, a national non-profit conservation organization, entitled "Add a Dollar to Plant a Tree for Wildfire ReLeaf." This cooperative effort and expenditure of approximately \$4 million dollars will expand our tree planting activities all over the country on private and National Forest lands, and will help to provide important information to the American people about wildfire restoration.

**Hazardous Fuel Reduction:** We are investing to reduce fire risk in communities, municipal watersheds, and other areas where conditions favor uncharacteristically intense fires. As of September 15<sup>th</sup>, treatment projects have been completed on more than 1,000,000 acres. About 80 % of these acres were treated with prescribed fire. The remaining 20% were treated either

mechanically or by hand labor. Estimates of accomplishments projected through the end of the year continue to vary due to unseasonably dry conditions in many regions. In Florida, the state with the largest program, a third year of drought cancelled most planned prescribed burning activities. A lower than normal snow pack in the interior West also left much of that part of the country at high fire danger earlier in the season than normal. Currently, national program managers anticipate that actual hazardous fuels accomplishment will be less than the 1.8 million acres target.

The most important aspect of hazardous fuels reduction is reducing the threat to local communities. When it comes to reducing threat, we need to protect communities and help the communities to help themselves through changing the landscape from high risk to low risk. We will accomplish that by working closely with communities concentrating on major projects that reduce risk.

On the Sandia Ranger District of the Cibola National Forest in New Mexico, 2 ½ miles of wildland-urban interface boundary with subdivisions were treated for fuels reduction and the construction of a fuelbreak. This fuels reduction project in the Cienega Canyon and Armijo Canyon were treated by prescribed fire, and are adjacent to the Sandia Park subdivision and Ponderosa Pine Estates. The burning will help decrease the accumulation of vegetation to minimize the risk of a catastrophic wildfire in the neighboring communities. Other benefits to this project include improved forest health and wildlife habitat.

In certain areas, the Forest Service has used the “Wyden Amendment” (Watershed Restoration and Enhancement Agreements authorized in section 323 of P.L. 105-277) to enter into

cooperative agreements to use Federal funds on non-Federal land when a project benefits the greater watershed. Under this authority, the Agency is allowed to protect watersheds that consist of lands under multiple ownership, including lands in the wildland-urban interface. In addition to the value of work performed, significantly enhanced relationships have occurred through these partnerships.

Our work on the ground this year is based on planning done in previous years when there was less emphasis on mechanical treatment and increased hand treatment in the wildland-urban interface. Planning underway this year and in the future reflects our emphasis on the interface and ecosystem restoration. There will be increased costs for treatment in the wildland-urban interface.

The Forest Service, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and National Marine Fisheries Service are working together at national, regional and local levels to accomplish consultation under the Endangered Species Act of 1973, thanks to swift Congressional action to clarify the Department of Agriculture's authorities.

Our scientists are conducting research in ranking areas for fuel reduction efforts, determining impacts of these treatments on wildlife, fish and riparian areas, and developing new uses and systems for harvesting forest undergrowth and small diameter trees. Through the National Fire Plan, 24 research projects in support of hazardous fuels reduction are funded in 2001.

**Community Assistance:** We are just completing a successful interagency effort with the States and tribes to better define the communities in the wildland urban interface across the United

States. Using State Fire Assistance funds, we have helped states increase firefighting capability, and establish a significant new hazard mitigation program. Over 290 mitigation projects have received grants in 2001, and over 128,000 homeowners in the Western U.S. will receive benefits from treatments. The Cooperative Fire Program has also funded 10 national FIREWISE workshops; educating 870 community leaders from 450 communities in 41 states about methods to increase protection for their communities. In New Mexico, every community that requested funding to complete a fire protection plan received funding from the Community Assistance Grants Program under the National Fire Plan.

To date, Volunteer Fire Assistance funds in the amount of \$13.2 million dollars are being delivered through grants to rural Volunteer Fire Departments providing training and equipment for small fire departments that are often the first line of defense in the interface. The Economic Action Programs are in the final stages of awarding grants for biomass energy systems, small diameter market development, and community economic development and fire planning.

Other examples of Community Assistance funding include:

- 1) The Oregon Department of Forestry is using State Fire Assistance grant funds to provide rebates to landowners who implement FIREWISE concepts on their property and to their homes.
- 2) The Idaho Department of Lands (IDL) is working on seven hazardous fuel reduction projects across the State with grant funds received through the National Fire Plan. To date, IDL has awarded over \$180,000 in cost-share grants to rural fire departments in Idaho to help them acquire equipment and training.

3) Many Southern states have joined together to use National Fire Plan grant dollars to fund an extensive assessment to evaluate the areas of the states that have the highest wildfire risk combined with the value of homes and improved property. The project will fund GIS mapping to display the most at-risk communities. The assessment will serve as a tool for growth planning, the determination of fire resource allocations, and as an important source of information for community leaders and the public.

4) The Concerned Resource Environmental Workers (C.R.E.W.) received a \$161,000 National Fire plan grant to construct approximately 25 miles of fire breaks throughout the foothills of Ojai, CA, over eighteen months. C.R.E.W. will contribute \$49,000 to the project as part of the grant cost-sharing agreements with the Forest Service. At-risk youth and other kids will be the workers on the project to protect the community. As many as 45 youths are planned to be employed through this project.

**Accountability:** Oversight, coordination, program development and monitoring for performance are critical for the National Fire Plan. We are conducting a series of regional reviews to assess progress. We are committed to demonstrating sound accountability for the funds provided by Congress in support of the National Fire Plan. We have implemented a new financial management system that better tracks federal funding and expenditures. We are currently developing new budget planning models and performance standards with the Department of the Interior. We continue to use existing and new information systems to track program performance and by December 31, 2001, we will have an Annual Status Report on our accomplishments, as mandated by Congress. The agency is using a new system to pilot an automated accomplishment reporting system for fuels, rehabilitation and restoration, and community assistance functions. Reporting under this system is enabling prompt assessment of

output accomplishments. If deemed successful, this reporting system will be expanded for agency-wide use as early as fiscal year 2003. The output measures reported under the National Fire Plan are a key aspect of the broader agency performance measure accomplishment now being incorporated in the Annual Performance Planning process.

The Forest Service, Department of the Interior, and the National Association of State Foresters have jointly established an interagency website for the National Fire Plan where people can find out more about National Fire Plan Implementation and ways they can participate in making their homes safer from wildfire. Additionally the Forest Service and the Department of the Interior have cooperated in development of the Action and Financial Plans required by Congress. We will continue such cooperative efforts in preparation of the fiscal year 2003 program that will improve the consistency of information.

### **Summary**

Mr. Chairman, we have accomplished a lot in a short time. While we continue with our best efforts to protect communities and forestlands from the effects of unwanted fire, we will focus our attention on treating the hazardous buildup of vegetation that fuels these fires. The National Fire Plan is the beginning of the solution. We are hiring and training personnel to improve future fire management capabilities. We are stabilizing and rehabilitating many of the sites damaged during the fires in 2000, and looking at the work to be done in response to the 2001 fire season. The reduction of hazardous fuels reflects an expanded scale of action and extensive planning is underway for 2002 and 2003. We have come a long way and we recognize there are many areas in which we can improve. In cooperation with the States, the list of communities at risk has been revised, and will be an important tool to plan future projects. My staff and I will continue to

## Final Testimony

work closely with the Department of the Interior team, State Foresters, communities, and the Congress to restore and maintain healthy ecosystems and to minimize the losses from future wildfires.

This concludes my statement; I would be happy to answer any questions you or Members of the Subcommittee might have.