

Joint Statement of
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United States Department of Agriculture
Before
Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources
Concerning
Preparedness for the 2009 Fire Season and the Federal Land Assistance,
Management and Enhancement Act

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INTRODUCTION

Mr. Chairman, Ms. Murkowski, and members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify today on Federal wildland fire management and options for funding this activity. The Department of Agriculture and the Department of the Interior continue to work closely together in wildfire management. We have coordinated our statement to provide a well-rounded presentation of the management challenges we share, as well as our recent efforts to meet these challenges more effectively.

WILDLAND FIRE MANAGEMENT

The Departments take seriously the protection of people, property and valuable natural resources from wildfire. We are prepared for the 2009 wildland fire season and are staffed to provide safe, effective fire management. We have available firefighting forces – firefighters, equipment, and aircraft – comparable to 2008 with more than 18,000 firefighters, and we will have equal or greater numbers of aviation, engines and other equipment assets on the ground. Further, the Departments have expanded strategic centralized management and pre-positioned aviation assets in order to constantly improve management effectiveness and increase cost efficiency which will lead to even greater safety and community and resource protection.

We will continue our commitment to successful initial attack of wildland fire. For the last several years, the wildland fire agencies faced 18,000 or more wildfires a year with an average of 97% success on initial attack. This will be carried out, however, with full attention to firefighter safety as the foremost principle. Reduced exposure to unnecessary risk during fire incidents continues to guide fire management decisions and anchors our actions. Additionally, we continue to actively work with communities to expand their capacity to be safe from damaging fire. We continue to make fuels treatment in wildland urban interface areas a priority, assist localities to build their response capability, work collaboratively with local communities in wildfire prone areas to understand the role of fire in these landscapes and help find ways to take actions to mitigate risk, and help spread the knowledge of tools to foster individual responsibility to property protection.

Wildland fire and wildland firefighting are influenced by a complex set of environmental and social factors. Though there have been a decreasing number of wildfires on National Forest System lands over the past ten years, fires across jurisdictions in recent years have become larger, consuming more acres, and fire seasons have grown longer due to climate change¹, persistent drought and hazardous fuels accumulations² that reflect in part the results of previous fire management. In addition, the expansion of development has increased the complexity of fighting wildland fire. These trends are not expected to change. In fact, it is expected that climate change will continue to result in environmental responses that bring greater probability of longer fire seasons and bigger fire events in most regions of the country. Weather shifts and cumulative drought effects will further stress fuels accumulations and are predicted to result in more total fire on the landscape and potentially more large fires. Additionally, although current economic conditions have slowed, growth in wildland areas, regional shifts in population and demographic trends point to more seasonal recreational homes and full time residency in

¹ Joyce, L.A. et al. (2008) Chapter 3 National Forests in US Climate Change Science Program: Preliminary review of adaptive options for climate-sensitive ecosystems and resources> A Report by the U.S. Climate Change Science Program and Subcommittee on Global Change Research.[Julius, S.H., J.M. West (eds.), J.S. Baron, L.A. Joyce, P. Kareiva, B.D. Keller, M.A. Palmer, C.H. Peterson, and J.M. Scott (Authors)]. U.S.Environmental Protection Agency, Washington, DC, USA, 873 pp.

² Westerling, A.L., H.G. Hidalgo, D.R. Cayan, T.W. Swetnam. 2006. Warming and Earlier Spring Increase Western U.S. Forest Wildfire Activity. *Science*.313 (5789): 940-943.

areas adjacent to forested public lands. We believe these factors, as well as the management framework and decisions during some fire incidents, are the primary drivers behind rising costs and are the leading variables driving annual fire suppression expenditures to have frequently exceeded the ten-year average.

2009 WILDLAND FIRE SEASON OUTLOOK

The 2009 wildland fire season has been light to date in which we have seen the longest period at Preparedness Level 1 since 1990. June was a very wet and relatively cool month over much of the West. However, portions of Washington, northern Idaho and Montana were drier than normal and the Northwest and Southeast were persistently hot and dry. Although welcome short-term relief was provided in many locations, drought conditions in areas of the Northwest, California, Nevada, and Texas are expected to persist or worsen.

As the season progresses, below normal significant fire potential is expected across portions of the Great Basin, the Southwest, and Southeast. Conversely, significant fire potential is forecast to increase or persist across portions of Washington, California and the Appalachian Mountains during the leaf drop period in October.

As of July 15, 2009 over 51,000 fires have burned an excess of 2.5 million acres. Over 85 percent of the incidents to date have occurred on state and other non-federal lands and more than two thirds of the acres burned were non-federal lands.

WILDLAND FIRE PREPAREDNESS

To prepare for conditions anticipated in the 2009 fire season, the Departments are working to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of our firefighting resources. Fire managers assign local, regional, and national firefighting personnel and equipment based on anticipated fire starts, actual fire occurrence, fire spread, and severity with the help of information from the National Interagency Fire Center Predictive Services group.

Firefighting Forces

For the 2009 fire season, we have available firefighting forces – firefighters, equipment, and aircraft – comparable to those available in 2008. More than 18,000 firefighters are available, including permanent and seasonal Federal and State employees, crews from Tribal and local governments, contract crews, and emergency/temporary hires. This figure includes levels consistent with 2008 of highly-trained firefighting crews, smokejumpers, Type 1 national interagency incident management teams (the most experienced and skilled teams) available for complex fires or incidents, and Type 2 incident management teams available for geographical or national incidents. The Departments frequently work in unified command with State and local departments. They serve a critical role in our initial attack success and we could not be as effective as we have been without them.

The Forest Service hosts four interagency National Incident Management Organization (NIMO) teams staffed for 2009. These are four seven-member full-time Type I Incident Management Teams ready to respond to wildland fire incidents. In addition, the NIMO teams have worked with selected National Forests that are historically at higher risk of large fire prior to the season to work collaboratively to build capacity through strategic pre-season planning and training in risk management protocol for decision making and critical incident operations.

The National Interagency Coordination Center, located at the National Interagency Fire Center in Boise, coordinates firefighting needs throughout the nation. In the event of multiple, simultaneous fires, resources are prioritized, allocated, and, if necessary, re-allocated by the National Multi-Agency Coordinating group, composed of representatives of major fire organizations headquartered at NIFC. Prioritization ensures firefighting forces are positioned where they are needed most. Fire managers dispatch and track personnel, equipment, aircraft, vehicles, and supplies and are all managed through an integrated national system. If conditions become extreme, assistance from the Department of Defense is available under standing agreements, as well as firefighting forces from Canada, Mexico, Australia, and New Zealand, using established agreements and protocols.

Aviation

The wildland firefighting agencies continue to employ a mix of fixed and rotor wing aircraft. Key components of the Forest Service 2009 aviation assets include up to 20 civilian large air tankers on Federal contracts, along with up to 33 Type 1 heavy helicopters and 36 Type 2 medium helicopters on national exclusive-use contracts; 53 Type 3 helicopters on local or regional exclusive-use contracts, and 8 Modular Airborne Fire Fighting System units that will be available for deployment. Additionally, there are nearly 300 call-when-needed Type 1, 2 and 3 helicopters available for fire management support as conditions and activity dictate. Likewise, Interior, the lead contractor for Single Engine Air Tankers, will maintain a mix of aviation resources to include 21 SEATS, 44 Helicopters, and 13 Aerial Supervision Aircraft in 2009 similar to that used in 2008. This resource readiness is comparable to the past several years and we believe an effective approach. We do acknowledge, however, that we need to look at our long-term aviation needs, and the Departments are doing that now.

IMPACTS OF A CHANGING AND EXPANDING FIRE ENVIRONMENT

Currently, ecosystems across the country are out-of-balance with fire. The trends are for fire to expand across the landscape. A combination of mechanical treatment and managed fire can help return some fire adapted ecosystems to health and prevent heavy accumulations of highly flammable fuels. But, current conditions can mean more extreme fire that puts people and natural resources at risk. We must be prepared to cope with the potential for increasing acres burned over the next five years, more extreme fire behavior, and irregular fire patterns on the landscape. These factors could affect cost. For example, last year, although the wildland fire agencies successfully suppressed 97% of all wildfires on initial attack, forty wildfires grew to become “megafires” (.25 of 1%) representing more than half of the Forest Service expenditures on wildland fire. The agencies are working together and providing resources to address these problem areas.

This Administration makes the protection of communities, the environment, and firefighter safety a priority. The factors described above increase firefighting complexity and have contributed to increased expenditures by the agency. The inflation-adjusted

ten-year average for wildland fire suppression for two Departments, \$1.5 billion, is more than twice the FY 2001 level. These increases in turn elevate the 10-year average for wildland fire suppression used in the Budget formulation. Therefore, the Wildland Fire Management budget has grown significantly and now makes up over 48% of the Forest Service discretionary budget and Interior's suppression budget is now 41 percent of the fire program. Because the budget reflects the Administration's priorities within a constrained budget environment, escalating suppression and fuels treatment obligations—like all other resource management program obligations—have been absorbed within the wildland fire agencies' discretionary totals. In recent years lower amounts have been available for other mission critical programs across the agencies. The President's Fiscal year 2010 budget addresses this as discussed below.

We have spent over \$1.5 billion annually fighting wildfires in 5 out of the past 7 years. In addition to the increasing size of the Wildland Fire portion of the overall Forest Service budget, approximately \$1.9 billion has been transferred from non-fire agency programs to help cover fire suppression operations costs since FY 2002. Fire transfers have also impacted Interior as well, but to a relatively lesser degree. It should be noted that most, but not all, of these funds have been restored to the agencies through emergency supplemental appropriations. Interior has executed over \$800 million in transfers. Responding to these emergencies with transfers that typically occur in the final months of the fiscal year, coupled with the shifting of personnel resources from program work to work associated with wildfire suppression response have resulted in considerable work disruption, delay, postponement, and even cancellation of projects. This transfer authority is an important tool to ensure that there will not be a lapse in emergency firefighting activities due to a lack of funding. Responding to these emergencies have affected the wildland fire agencies' ability to deliver their programs of work, and has reduced accomplishments and impaired partnerships, even when the transferred funds were repaid through supplemental appropriations.

The Departments have adopted substantive management reforms to mitigate this cost trend. Along with us, our State and local partners have spent significant effort and resources over the past several years to coordinate capability, improve inter-governmental communication, and employ management controls to ensure effective

response, raise efficiency, and to manage operations within the amounts appropriated to manage wildland fire. We are expanding these efforts for the current fire season and beyond. For example, a number of Wildland Fire Decision Support Systems (such as FSPro, which models fire behavior, and RAVAR, which models values at risk from fire) provide real-time support to fire managers implementing Risk-Informed Management. These efforts are coupled with other program efforts such as strategic and operational protocols, improved oversight, and use of a risk management framework that ensure fire management resources are appropriately focused.

However, we recognize that despite our best efforts, circumstances may occur that lead obligations to exceed these appropriated amounts. We are pleased that the Administration has included a proposal in the Fiscal Year 2010 Budget that provides for a \$357 million Wildland Fire Management Contingency Reserve with the Departments' budgets. This proposal reflects the President's commitment to wildfire management and community protection by establishing a new contingent reserve funds dedicated to addressing catastrophic wildfires in addition to fully funding the ten year average of suppression costs adjusted for inflation at \$1.5 billion. This nearly \$1.9 billion in funding is coupled with program reforms that ensure fire management resources are focused where they will do the most good. Funds from the contingent reserve will be used only if needed and available upon issuance of a Presidential finding. By establishing a dedicated fund for catastrophic wildfires, fully funding the inflation-adjusted ten year average of suppression costs, and providing program reforms, the Budget reduces the need for agencies to transfer funds from non-fire programs to pay for firefighting when agency appropriated suppression funds are exhausted.

We must recognize that funding is only one part of the wildland fire management solution and we must re-double our efforts to manage the span of the wildfire problem by investing in not just suppression, but hazardous fuels reduction, restoration action, and community assistance. The President's Budget also reflects the commitment of this Administration to implement program reforms to allow wildfire to reassume its ecological function on the landscape and ensure fire management resources are focused where they will do the most good.

The President's Budget for FY 2010 provides funding at levels that equips the agencies to help restore and manage the Nation's forests and rangelands. It also recognizes problems with how fire suppression has been funded and addresses the fire transfer problem by adding a contingent reserve of \$282 million for the Forest Service and \$75 million for Interior, and provides funding increases commensurate with the increase in the ten-year average suppression costs. The Administration appreciates the strong support of the House in providing requested funding amounts for wildfire suppression operations and the new Wildland Fire Suppression Contingency Reserve of the Forest Service and Department of the Interior, and encourages the Senate to do the same. We are also aware of S.561, the FLAME Act, introduced by this Committee, and H.R. 1404, introduced in the House, that aims to accomplish the separation between routine wildland fire management and large, catastrophic fire events. We appreciate the efforts of the sponsors of the FLAME Act to address the current problems related to the way firefighting costs are funded. The Administration supports the FLAME Act if amended to provide for a contingency reserve, as outlined in the President's budget. We believe that the Administration's budget proposal can address the problem. The Administration looks forward to working with the Congress on safe, cost-effective, and accountable results in managing wildfire. We imagine a day when we have the opportunity to effectively address catastrophic wildfires, restore fire adapted landscapes, and have adequate resources for hazardous fuels, fire science, assistance to others, and preparedness. This will assist in the creation of new wood-based industries to create jobs, such as through the expansion of wood-to-energy and alternative fuels goals through wood, ethanol, and other bio-fuels to support our nation's independence from foreign oil.

FIRE MANAGEMENT IS EVOLVING TO A NEW ERA

The wildland fire program in the two Departments is strong and moving in a positive direction. We are committed to continued improvement to increase our effectiveness and maximize our efficiency. The Departments continue to face challenges that make management of wildland fire complex, demanding and expensive. However, we have taken steps to manage costs and are adopting techniques to apply before and during fire incidents that work assertively to advance risk-informed fire management, operational

efficiencies, utilization of research and technology, and targeted program implementation to reduce fire-related impacts. Specifically, these actions include:

- We will continue to reduce hazardous fuels on priority lands. From 2001 through 2008, together we have treated about 23 million acres on federal lands through hazardous fuels reduction and over 7 million acres through other land restoration activities;
- We will continue our focus on hazardous fuels treatments in wildland-urban interface areas and in fire-adapted ecosystems that present the greatest opportunity for forest and rangeland restoration and to reduce the risk of severe fires in the future;
- Continued implementation of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act which provides \$500 million for the Forest Service and \$15 million for the Interior Department to reduce hazardous fuels and restore forest health on federal and other lands, through partnership, including up to \$50 million to promote woody biomass as renewable energy. These funds will greatly expand the effort to reduce dangerous accumulations of fuels, create private sector jobs in hazardous fuels reduction and alternative energy, and help support local economies. Many projects have begun and most will be completed within 1-3 years;
- We will continue to constantly improve decision-making on wildland fires starting this year. The wildland fire agencies have employed new decision support tools, through the Wildland Fire Decision Support System, to give managers better information to estimate risk and better ways to predict what may happen during a fire. The decision support process is intended to guide and document wildfire management decisions. The process provides situational assessment, analysis of hazards and risk, defining implementation actions, and documentation of decisions and rationale for those decisions. For fires that escape initial attack, we will incorporate these science-based computer models and couple them with improved risk management approaches as part of the agency continuing effort to safeguard lives, protect communities and important natural resource values and restore ecosystem health. These fire management

reforms are aimed at improving fire management decisions, increasing firefighter and public safety, and are anticipated to provide cost-effective and accountable outcomes from investments made in managing fire on the landscape.

- We will continue to work on enhanced response and efficiency that comes from national shared resources, aviation resources management, pre-positioning of firefighting resources, and improvements in aviation risk management for safe engagement;
- We are developing an Interagency Aviation Strategy that looks to address a current aviation fleet that is aging and costs of maintenance increasing;
- We will continue after action review of fire incidents to apply lessons learned and best practices to policy and operations; and
- Since the advent of the National Fire Plan in 2000, federal, state and non-governmental entities have collaborated operationally and strategically in an attempt to improve fire prevention and suppression, reduce hazardous fuels, restore fire-adapted ecosystems, and promote community assistance. Ongoing planning with performance measures and implementation tasks will guide the agencies to build on previous successes with our partners.

The Forest Service and Department of the Interior partner agencies have the best wildland firefighting organization in the world and together with our state, local, and tribal government partners work to maintain our operational excellence and continually improve the safety and effectiveness of the fire management program.

CONCLUSION

This concludes our statement. We would be happy to answer any questions that you may have.