

**STATEMENT
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**BEFORE THE
COMMITTEE ON ENERGY AND NATURAL RESOURCES
U. S. SENATE**

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INTRODUCTION

Chairman Bingaman, Ranking Member Murkowski, and members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today to provide the status of the U.S. Forest Service's wildfire response capabilities.

The Federal Government Agencies responsible for wildland fire fighting are perhaps the premier wildland firefighting organization in the world. Together, we (along with our State, local, and tribal government partners) work to maintain our operational excellence and to continually improve the safety and effectiveness of the fire management program. We take seriously our role in protecting people, property and valuable natural resources from wildfire. We are prepared for the 2011 wildland fire season and are staffed to provide appropriate, risk informed, and effective fire management. We will continue our commitment to aggressive initial attack of wildfires, where appropriate, with full attention to firefighter and public safety. Further, Federal engagement with State and local fire agencies is central to our collective success. Wildfires know no boundaries and we must work within an all-lands context to manage for and respond to wildfires. Our commitment to risk-informed, performance-based strategies will reduce exposure of firefighters and the public at large to unnecessary risk during fire incidents. Additionally, we will continue to provide assistance to communities that have been or may be threatened by wildfire to enable these communities to become more fire resilient and to reduce risks of fire.

NATIONAL COHESIVE WILDLAND FIRE MANAGEMENT STRATEGY

Our commitments – wildfire response, risk-informed performance, support to states and local agencies, and assistance to fire-adapted communities - are consistent with the recently completed National Cohesive Wildland Fire Management Strategy (Cohesive Strategy). The Cohesive Strategy has been embraced by the wildland fire community with statutory authority over wildland fire: federal, tribal, states, counties, municipalities, and local fire departments. The wildland fire community, through the auspices of the Wildland Fire Leadership Council (lead by Secretaries from the Departments of Agriculture, the Interior, and Homeland Security),

developed the Cohesive Strategy. The Forest Service and DOI were a catalyst for the nationwide collaborative effort among wildland fire organizations, land managers, and policy making officials representing federal, state and local governments, tribal interests, and non-governmental organizations. This blueprint provides a common underpinning for all entities with statutory responsibilities for wildfire. Federal, non-federal, and tribal wildland fire management partners are now engaged in ensuing phases where, development of regional assessments and strategies will support completion of a national risk trade-off analysis, due next year.

The three main components of the Cohesive Strategy provides a framework for the wildland fire program as a whole. These components are:

- **Restoring and Maintaining Resilient Landscapes**
- **Creating Fire-Adapted Communities**
- **Wildfire Response**

Restoring and Maintaining Resilient Landscapes

The first component of the Cohesive Strategy involves the restoration of landscapes to help promote ecosystem health and resiliency. Wildland fire has a valuable natural role in many ecosystems, helping to regulate forest and rangeland composition. We continually strive to safely allow fire to play its natural role in creating resilient landscapes. However, many ecosystems across the country are out of balance and are in need of restoration. This ecological imbalance is manifested by an increased fuel accumulation and infestation by invasive pests and results in ecosystems that are more threatened by wildfire. A high-risk fire environment may result in adverse effects on natural resources and poses great risks for local communities. Added to the effects of climate change, these imbalanced ecosystems often lead to higher fire risk potential, which contribute to extreme fire behavior and severe fire effects, such as significant impacts to municipal water supplies.

By managing vegetation and restoring natural function and the resiliency of the land, we can positively influence fire behavior and minimize the negative impacts of fire. Through a combination of mechanical treatment and managed fire, we can improve the health of some fire-adapted ecosystems and prevent heavy accumulations of highly flammable fuels. In FY 2010, the Forest Service treated over 2 million acres for hazardous fuels reduction, with the majority in the Wildland Urban Interface. This fiscal year, we have already treated over 900,000 acres.

The Integrated Resource Restoration (IRR) line item proposed in the President's FY 2012 budget, applied in conjunction with our hazardous fuels program, will help the agency more efficiently restore ecosystems balance. Combining the existing programs will improve land management professionals ability and flexibility to meet a wider range of ecological, economic and social values than possible under the current structure. This will enable more work to get accomplished on the ground. IRR will allow larger projects to be undertaken through the emphasis on collaboration with stakeholders, internal multi-disciplinary planning, and a well-crafted accountability system.

In addition, the Forest Service will continue to expand community engagement in restoration efforts on National Forest System land through the Collaborative Forest Landscape Restoration (CFLR) Program. In FY 2010, 10 CFLR projects in Idaho, California, Colorado, Arizona, New Mexico, Montana, Washington, Oregon, and Florida were funded by the CFLR Fund. CFLR projects are proposed through multi-stakeholder collaborative planning at a local level, nominated by the Regional Foresters to the Secretary, who takes into consideration recommendations made by an advisory committee.

Creating Fire-Adapted Communities

The second component of the Cohesive Strategy involves working collaboratively with non-governmental organizations as well as federal, state, local and tribal governments to strengthen fire-adapted human communities. An all-lands approach, along with emphasizing individual responsibility, is critical to minimizing risk to communities.

This second component of the Cohesive Strategy relies on coordination and work already taking place among the federal agencies, states, and communities. Community Wildfire Protection Plans (CWPPs) play an important role at the local level in providing specific risk-assessments to a county or community. CWPPs are a comprehensive wildfire planning tool for a community that is supported by the the Federal Government in partnership with State forestry agencies. By providing Federal support to state and local wildland fire agencies, we enhance our capability to work together to create these important plans and bring awareness of shared wildfire risk to communities.

Additional activities include:

- The International Association of Fire Chiefs, with help from the Federal Government, sponsored a forum to identify, share opportunities, and prioritize mitigation needs for a wide range of private sector partners.
- The Fire-Adapted Communities Project gathers all wildland urban interface mitigation tools into one toolbox to assist in the implementation of Community Wildfire Protection Plans by providing communities, organizations, fire departments, and the public with the information they need to reduce their risk of wildfire.
- The Ready, Set, Go! and Firewise projects are part of our Fire-adapted Communities program. With our State, local and NGO partners, we are reaching out to increase the 600 Firewise communities we have today to over 1,000 communities by 2013. By combining Firewise with the Ready, Set, Go! principles, we are working together to make communities in fire-prone areas more resilient to catastrophic loss.

Wildfire Response

In preparing for the 2011 fire season, the Federal Government worked along with the tribes and the states to ensure we had adequate firefighting resources prepared and positioned. Fire managers will assign local, regional, and federal firefighting personnel and equipment based on anticipated fire starts, actual fire occurrence, fire spread, and severity. All federal, state, and tribal wildland fire agencies are represented in the National Wildfire Coordination Group. This group provides oversight to the National Interagency Coordination Center, located at the National Interagency Fire Center in Boise, Idaho, and oversees coordinated wildland

firefighting responses throughout the nation. When fire resources in one geographic area are in short supply, the NWCG helps to prioritize, allocate, and, if necessary, re-allocate the resources. Prioritization ensures firefighting forces are positioned where they are needed most. Fire resources such as personnel, equipment, aircraft, vehicles, and supplies are dispatched and tracked through an integrated national system developed by the Forest Service.

In specified instances, the Department of Defense resources may be available to assist. Assistance also may be available under standing international agreements with Canada, Mexico, Australia, and New Zealand if the Secretary determines that no firefighting resources within the United States are reasonably available.

WILDLAND FIRE PREPAREDNESS

Firefighting Forces

Wildfire responses in the United States involve not only the resources of the Federal Government, but also employees from States, tribal governments, and local governments, contract crews, and emergency/temporary hires. For the 2011 fire season, the available firefighting forces – firefighters, equipment, and aircraft – are comparable to those available in 2010, more than 16,000 firefighters available from the Department of Agriculture and the Department of the Interior with approximately 70% coming from the Forest Service. The levels 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, also are comparable to those available in 2010. Additionally, the federal wildland fire fighting community work with State and local fire departments, which serve a critical role in our initial attack, and in many cases, extended attack success. The Forest Service uses its authority to provide State Fire Assistance funds to State partners to support State fire management capacity. We could not achieve the successes we have without these key partners.

Aviation

Nationally, the wildland firefighting agencies continue to employ a mix of fixed and rotor wing aircraft. The number of these aircraft may fluctuate depending on contractual and other agreements. Key components of the Forest Service 2011 aviation resources include:

- Up to 19 contracted large air tankers (comprising 90% of all large air tankers);
- 77% of the federal wildland fire response helicopters, including:
 - 26 Type 1 heavy helicopters;
 - 41 Type 2 medium helicopters on national contracts; and
 - 52 Type 3 light helicopters on local or regional contracts;
- 15 Leased Aerial Supervision fixed-wing aircraft;
- Up to 12 Smokejumper aircraft;
- 2 heat detecting infrared aircraft;
- 2 single engine air tanker aircraft (SEATs); and
- 300 call-when-needed helicopters.

The Forest Service maintains a contract for a 100-passenger transport jet to facilitate rapid movement of firefighters during the peak of the fire season. The Forest Service also coordinates closely with the Department of Defense in maintaining eight Modular Airborne Fire Fighting Systems (MAFFS) that can be deployed by Air National Guard and Air Force Reserve C-130 aircraft. The MAFFS program provides surge capability for air tanker support on large fires.

Fire Safety

The Forest Service initiated, and continues to use cutting-edge risk management analyses in our strategic and tactical fire management decisions. We have implemented a Risk Management program that focuses on improving wildfire decisions. This program is enhancing the skill of decision makers by allowing managers to evaluate risk and benefit relative to the overall objective of any given wildfire and reducing the level of uncertainty when determining how to respond to a fire. A critical component of the program is furthering the development of tools to help managers and firefighters make better informed decisions about wildfire response. The Wildland Fire Decision Support System (WFDSS) is an example of a tool that assists fire managers and analysts in making strategic and tactical decisions for fire incidents. WFDSS uses fire behavior modeling, economic principles, and information technology combined with land management plans and spatial analysis of a fire to establish a solid foundation for our professional wildland firefighters to make mindful, risk-informed decisions on wildland response. It continues to be a valuable analysis tool in wildland fire management. Our emphasis on safety is a core value to the agency.

Suppression Funding

Finally, the amount of suppression funding appropriated to the Forest Service Wildland Fire Management Account for FY 2011 is similar to the amount appropriated for FY 2010. In addition, the Forest Service has funding from prior fiscal years to allow us to respond to a worse-than-average fire season. These funds together with the FLAME Fund, established by the FLAME Act of 2009, will minimize the need to transfer funds from non-fire accounts to the Wildland Fire Management Appropriation for fire suppression.

Current Wildland Fire Activity

To date, approximately four million acres across the country have burned this calendar year, predominately in the southeast, Texas, Oklahoma, and Arizona¹. Early spring months were drier than typical across sections of the south and southwest states. The total number of individual fires across the country is less than the ten-year average, but nearly three times more acres have burned than the ten-year average for this time of year. The State of Texas experienced a higher than normal number of fires and acres burned due to a combination of prolonged drought with dry, windy conditions. Drought is forecast to persist or worsen across the south and southwest parts of the nation. The Interagency Fire Predictive Services group is calling for above normal fire potential through June across this area, including Arizona, New Mexico, western Texas, southern Colorado, and Florida. Above normal significant fire potential is also expected in portions of Alaska and Hawaii.

Arizona Fires Update as of Testimony Submission – June 10, 2011

In response to the large fires burning in Arizona, we have deployed more than 2,500 interagency firefighters to protect lives and property through a joint incident command system, and we are coordinating the resources available at local, state and federal levels. While we have prevented the loss of many homes, and have had no loss of life, we anticipate that the current dry and windy conditions will lead to several difficult days of firefighting ahead of us to prevent additional acreage within the state impacted. We are working with local partners to strategically deploy staff and equipment to minimize the impact on homes and communities within the region. The three large fires in Arizona (e.g., the Wallow fire, Horseshoe 2 fire, Murphy fire) are human caused and are still under investigation.

This concludes my statement. I would be happy to answer any questions that you may have.

¹National Interagency Fire Center, National Year-to-Date Report on Fires and Acres Burned by State and Agency, March 21, 2011