

**STATEMENT
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**BEFORE THE
UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
COMMITTEE ON AGRICULTURE
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CONCERNING

**US FOREST SERVICE LAND MANAGEMENT: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR
ACHIEVING HEALTHIER NATIONAL FORESTS**

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to present the views of the U.S. Department of Agriculture regarding U.S. Forest Service Land Management: Challenges and Opportunities for Achieving Healthier National Forests.

Today, people understand that forests provide a broad range of values and benefits, including biodiversity, recreation, clean air and water, forest products, erosion control and soil renewal, and more. We have national forests in 42 states and Puerto Rico that comprise a land area of nearly 193 million acres. Our mission is to sustain the health, diversity, and productivity of the Nation's forests and grasslands for present and future generations. The Forest Service does this through working with numerous federal, state, and local partners, citizens, and industry.

Our collective ability to sustain the nation's forests and provide ecosystem services is increasingly at risk. Drought, invasive species, loss of open space, uncharacteristically severe wildfires, uncharacteristically severe outbreaks of insects and disease—all these stresses and disturbances are affecting America's forests on an unprecedented scale.

The Forest Service is responding by restoring the functions and processes characteristic of healthy, resilient ecosystems. Our goal is to sustain and restore ecosystems that can deliver all the benefits that Americans want and need. Due to changing climate, we may not be able to restore them to their original condition, but we can move them toward ecological integrity and health. The Forest Service recognizes that increasing the pace and scale of restoration and active management of the National Forests is critically needed to address these threats to the resiliency of our forests and watersheds and the health and safety of America's forest-dependent communities.

The Forest Service also recognizes the need for a strong forest industry to help accomplish forest restoration work. A vibrant industry can provide both the manpower and the know-how to undertake mechanical treatments and other restoration activities. Forest industry also lowers the cost of restoration to the taxpayer by providing markets for forest products. The Forest Service is committed to

increasing the number of acres being mechanically treated by 20% over the next three years. This increase would allow the Forest Service to increase the number of acres and watersheds restored across the system, while supporting jobs and increasing annual forest products sale to 3 billion board feet of timber. A critical part of this effort is building public support for forest restoration and management activities. To this end, the Forest Service continues to emphasize the importance of collaboration among diverse stakeholders in developing restoration projects on national forest lands. Such collaboration not only results in better projects, but it also reduces the risks of litigation.

An additional benefit of this restoration work is job creation. For example, through implementation of the Collaborative Forest Landscape Restoration Program (including the use of stewardship contracts), the proponents of projects on national forest lands anticipate creating or maintaining 1,550 jobs. The benefits of maintaining a robust forest industry flows not only to local communities but also to the Forest Service itself as the agency relies on local forest contractors and mills to provide the work force to undertake a variety of restoration activities. A study has shown that every million dollars spent on activities like stream restoration or road decommissioning generates from 12 to 28 jobs¹. In addition, restoring the health and resilience of our forests generates important amenity values. Healthy, resilient forests and grasslands are magnets for outdoor recreation, with more than 170 million visits per year to the National Forest System. That in turn leads to jobs and economic opportunity.

The Forest Service continues to work toward restoring more land to accomplish restoration objectives, maintain a robust forest industry, and in turn create jobs. We are striving to efficiently implement existing programs and policies, as well as pursuing a number of new policies and initiatives to increase the pace of forest restoration and conservation through collaboration and management of the national forests. The aim of these efforts is to move beyond the conflicts which have characterized forest policy in the past and toward a shared vision that allows environmentalists, forest industry, local communities, and other stakeholders to work collaboratively toward healthier forests and watersheds, safer communities and more vibrant local economies.

Within the framework of the overall restoration program, the Forest Service is focused on the role of active forest management – including hazardous fuels reduction, reforestation, stream restoration, road decommissioning, forest thinning and harvesting, prescribed fire, and a range of other practices – as important tools to accomplish needed restoration work. The following are a series of actions that will allow the Agency to further restoration and management on the national forests:

Investing in restoration projects with partners through the Collaborative Forest Landscape Restoration (CFLR) Program. In Fiscal Year 2012, the Forest Service received slightly less than the full \$40 million authorized by the CFLR Act. The Secretary funded 10 new projects, in addition to the continued funding for 10 projects selected in 2010. Three additional high priority collaborative projects were also funded from other appropriated FS funding. These 23 projects have demonstrated that collaboration among stakeholders can facilitate large, landscape scale restoration, thereby improving forest health, reducing wildfire risk, restoring fire-adapted ecosystems, and increasing timber and biomass production from our national forests.

¹ Cassandra Moseley and Max Nielson-Pincus, “Economic Impact and Job Creation from Forest and Watershed Restoration: A Preliminary Assessment” (Ecosystem Workforce Program Briefing Paper #14; winter 2009; Institute for Sustainable Development, Eugene, OR).

Current CFLR projects range from longleaf pine restoration in Florida to restoration of several forest types on both public and private land in the Sierra Nevada. One example is the Four Forest Restoration Initiative in Arizona, where we are working with partners to implement a collaborative landscape-scale restoration strategy across 2.4 million acres on the Coconino, Kaibab, Apache-Sitgreaves, and Tonto National Forests. This project will implement treatments in dry ponderosa pine that is overgrown and in need of thinning and underburning to restore the role of fire in this fire-adapted forest type.

Watershed Condition Framework (WCF). This framework provides a consistent and comprehensive approach for classifying the condition of the 15,000 watersheds that comprise the National Forests and Grasslands, and for prioritizing our restoration needs. The WCF informs project planning by identifying the essential suite of projects to improve a watershed's condition and aids in project location effectiveness. The WCF also will inform Integrated Resource Restoration project planning and implementation.

Integrated Resource Restoration (IRR). – This approach is a better way for the agency to align its budgeting to focus on landscape scale restoration projects across resource areas, and with partners, by combining the restorative focus of several line items into a single item. It combines work done under vegetation and watershed management, forest products, wildlife and fish habitat management, hazardous fuels, legacy roads and trails, and road decommissioning into a single account. IRR will provide the Forest Service flexibility to focus on priority work using a more integrated approach to management and allows the needs of the land to drive what work gets done. In FY 12 this program is being piloted in Forest Service Regions 1, 3, and 4. The emphasis in these regions will be on program integration, and the outcomes will be measured using traditional targets such as timber volume sold, miles of road decommissioned, acres of hazardous fuels treated, and miles of stream habitat restored, while also including new measures related to the watershed condition framework. The three pilot regions, located in North Dakota, Montana, Idaho, Nevada, Utah, western Wyoming, Arizona, and New Mexico, have already determined the condition class of all 5,926 watersheds containing significant portions of NFS lands. Among them, 78 priority watersheds were selected for restoration activities in the next 3 to 5 years. The IRR pilot regions will have increased flexibility to focus restoration treatments on the priority watersheds in a more efficient manner.

National Cohesive Wildland Fire Management Strategy. (Cohesive Strategy) – The Federal Land Assistance, Management, and Enhancement (FLAME) Act of 2009 charged the Secretaries of Agriculture and Interior to create a cohesive wildfire management strategy. Federal Land Managers responded by working through the Wildland Fire Leadership Council to direct the development of the Cohesive Strategy. The Cohesive Strategy is a collaborative process with active involvement of all levels of government and non-governmental organizations, as well as the public, to seek national, all-lands solutions to wildland fire management issues. The Cohesive Strategy addresses the nation's wildfire problems by focusing on three key areas: 1) Restore and Maintain Landscapes, 2) Fire Adapted Communities, and 3) Response to Fire.

The Cohesive Strategy will soon be moving into Phase III where a trade-off analysis of national risk will be conducted. We expect one result will be a better understanding of how the Forest Service can play a larger role in restoring and maintaining fire-adapted ecosystems and landscapes within an all-lands context. This understanding should help focus and support efforts that I've already described under Integrated Resource Restoration and the Collaborative Forest Landscape Restoration Program.

The Forest Service Bark Beetle Strategy. – Bark beetles have impacted nearly 18 million acres of National Forest System lands. The Bark Beetle Strategy, developed in 2011, focuses management efforts on

priority treatment areas to ensure human health and safety and to reduce hazardous fuel conditions. In FY 2011, a total of approximately 16,800 acres were treated to reduce safety hazards to forest visitors, 50,100 acres were reforested, and 237,000 acres were thinned to improve resilience, producing approximately 300 million board feet of timber, 153,800 green tons of biomass, and resulting in removal of hazard trees along 978 miles of road.

Use of Stewardship Contracting. – This tool helps the Forest Service to acquire additional restoration services. Stewardship contracting allows the Forest Service to offset the value of the services received with the value of forest products removed pursuant to a single contract or agreement. Reauthorizing this authority and expanding the use of this tool is crucial to our ability to collaboratively restore landscapes at a reduced cost to the government. In Fiscal Year 2011, 19% of all timber volume sold was under a stewardship contract and funded activities such as watershed and wildlife habitat improvement projects, trails projects, road decommissioning, and hazardous fuels reduction.

Expand markets for Forest Products. Struggling markets have made it more difficult for the Forest Service to undertake restoration projects. The Forest Service is taking steps to assist in the development of new markets for woody biomass utilization and green building materials by working toward providing a reliable and predictable supply of biomass for potential investors through 20 coordinated resource offering protocol studies. In addition, the Forest Service is working in partnership with 2 other USDA Agencies on 12 Wood to Energy emphasis areas that will assist in creating jobs. The Forest Service continues to promote wood as a green building material.

Rigorous, applied research supports new and emerging markets with innovations that enhance and diversify the forest products industry. The **Forest Products Lab (FPL)**, located in Madison, Wisconsin, plays a key role in research related to forest products markets. The FPL's mission is to identify and conduct innovative wood and fiber utilization research that contributes to conservation and productivity of the forest resource, thereby sustaining forests, the economy, and quality of life. Since 1993, the Forest Products Laboratory (FPL) has focused some of its research effort on characterizing small-diameter logs and woody biomass, identifying potential uses, and providing technology that can help rural-based communities create successful businesses from the by-products of sustainable forest management. FPL research projects are exploring the potential of the small-diameter roundwood as a structural material for uses such as bridges, boardwalks, trail structures, picnic shelters, storage sheds, and other rustic-type buildings. Other FPL research is finding other innovative ways to use underutilized woody biomass.

Restoration Research. – Our research staff develops new technologies and brings cutting-edge science to land managers that bears on the sustainable management of the Nation's forests and rangelands. Long-term research from our experimental forests and rangelands contribute to an understanding of the impacts of forest disturbance on natural and cultural resources. This knowledge assists land managers in forest restoration – restoring the functions and processes characteristic of healthy forested ecosystems.

To restore Sierra Nevada forest ecosystems, for example, our researchers have recommended an emphasis on the ecological role of fire, adaptive strategies for changing climate conditions, and the importance of diverse forest structures. In the South, Forest Service research has helped focus our Longleaf Pine restoration efforts. There the objective is to reestablish the natural structure and function in these ecosystems by adjusting species composition, modifying stand structure, and facilitating ecological processes, such as periodic fire and longleaf pine regeneration.

Implement a new forest planning rule. - The new rule corrects the inefficiencies of the 1982 planning procedures and provides a modern framework for planning in order to sustain and restore the health and resilience of our National Forests. The final rule provides an efficient planning process to guide management of National Forest System lands so that they are ecologically sustainable and contribute to social and economic sustainability, with resilient ecosystems and watersheds, diverse plant and animal communities, and the capacity to provide people and communities with a range of uses including timber, grazing, minerals and energy as well as hunting and fishing, sustainable recreation, wilderness, and cultural uses.

This rule was developed in the most collaborative effort the Agency has ever used in rule making, possibly ever in its history. The rule reflects what people told us as well as the experience of the Agency gained over thirty years of land management planning. We have created a final rule that emphasizes restoration, public involvement, and sustainable management to provide benefits and services both today and for future generations.

New Objections Process. – Another tool that has been helpful in building relationships and improving agency decision making is use of the objections process prior to a decision, rather than using an appeals process after a decision is made. Our experience with the objections process for hazardous fuel reduction projects authorized under the Healthy Forest Restoration Act indicates that the process tends to increase direct dialogue between the agency and stakeholders and often results in resolution of concerns before a decision is made, and thus better, and more informed decisions result. One example is the Sportsman’s Paradise Fuels Reduction Project on the Mt. Hood National Forest. This project was initiated by local homeowners, who along with the Oregon Department of Forestry and an environmental group worked collaboratively to develop recommendations for the District Ranger. The most positive aspect of this effort is that the Sportsman's Paradise homeowner's group, which previously had not engaged with the Forest Service became an active participant in the project planning process resulting in new relationships. The Mt. Hood National Forest received an objection from a participating environmental group. After discussions with the group, the District Ranger made some minor revisions to the project which resulted in the group withdrawing their objection. Upon implementation, the authorized work will reduce the risk of potential catastrophic fire loss for approximately 900 acres surrounding the Sportsman's Paradise community of approximately 170 lots. The 2012 Consolidated Appropriations Act includes a provision for the Secretary to expand and establish a pre-decisional objection process in lieu of the appeal requirements of the Appeal Reform Act. This provision allows the Agency to apply the positive experience gained from use of the pre-decisional objections process for Herger Feinstein Restoration Act authorized fuel reduction projects. We have begun work on drafting the regulations.

Improved efficiency of the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) process for restoration. - A robust comprehensive and extensive Planning/NEPA program is needed to accomplish the hundreds of thousands of acres of natural resource projects we do across the country each year. We continuously strive to save time and money in this program. The Agency has initiated a NEPA learning networks project to learn from and share the lessons of successful implementation of streamlined NEPA analyses. The goal of this effort is to ensure that the Agency’s NEPA compliance is as efficient, cost-effective, and up-to-date as possible. Specifically we are looking at expanding the use of focused environmental assessments (EAs), iterative environmental impact statement (EIS) documentation, expanding categories of actions that may be excluded from documentation in an environmental as or an environmental impact statement, and applying an adaptive management framework to NEPA. Our landscape-scale NEPA projects will also increase efficiencies by analyzing across broad swaths of land, avoiding repetitive

NEPA analysis. For example, our Mountain Pine Beetle Response Project on the Black Hills National Forest will implement a landscape-scale adaptive approach for treating future pine beetle outbreaks. We are also preparing for the NEPA decision on the Four Forest Restoration Initiative project in the Southwest for landscape-scale forest restoration projects.

In summary, in the 21st century the Forest Service will continue to strive to adopt and improve our ability to meet our mission of sustaining the health, diversity and productivity of the Nation's forests and grasslands for present and future generations. Doing so will require working closely with our partners, including Congress and local governments.

I want to thank the committee for its interest, leadership, and commitment to our national forests, their surrounding communities and the forest products infrastructure.

This concludes my prepared statement and I would be pleased to answer any questions you may have.