

**Statement of Victoria Christiansen, Interim Chief of the USDA Forest Service
Before
The Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources
Concerning
The 2018 Wildland Fire Outlook and Wildland Fire Management Programs.
June 5 2018, 10:00 a.m.**

Madam Chairman and members of the Committee, thank you for inviting me to testify on the agency's efforts to prepare for and respond to wildfires and improve the condition of America's forests and grasslands. I appreciate the Committee's continued support and your recognition that this work goes beyond wildfire response, and is as much about proactively creating healthy, fire-resilient conditions on National Forest System lands so they provide for the uses, experiences and services that meet the needs of our Nation. This Congress provided valuable tools in the Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2018 (2018 Omnibus) that will allow the agency to carry out projects that help reduce the threat catastrophic wildfires and other forest threats pose to lives, homes and communities. We will take advantage of the opportunities presented in the 2018 Omnibus and work diligently to deliver desired results.

2018 Wildfire Year

Last year was one of the most devastating wildfire years on record. Tragically, dozens of Americans were killed, including 14 wildland firefighters who perished while working to protect lives and property. Communities in the Great Plains, the Southeast, Southwest and the West were affected, with more than 10 million acres burned—an area larger than the state of Maryland—and more than 12,300 homes and other structures destroyed. It was also the most expensive year for wildfires on record: For the first time ever, we spent \$2.9 billion dollars to suppress wildfires across the nation.

Early predictions indicate that 2018 will likely be another challenging wildfire year. According to the forecast released by the National Interagency Fire Center on June 1, 2018, significant portions of the western United States are predicted to have above average potential for significant wildfire activity between now and the end of September. States likely to be affected include Arizona, California, Colorado, Idaho, Montana, Nevada, New Mexico, Oregon, Utah, and Washington. To date, about 1.7 million acres have burned, mostly in the South, Southwest and Rocky Mountain regions; this number is on trend with the number of acres burned last year at this time. Wildland firefighting is not a solitary effort, and we rely on federal, tribal, state and local partners to provide a sustained and effective response across jurisdictions. This year the Forest Service and our partners have more than 10,000 firefighters, 900 engines, and hundreds of aircraft available to manage wildfires. At this time, we believe these to be adequate resources to address wildfire activity but will continue to evaluate our needs as the fire year progresses.

Recent trends in wildfire response data suggest that increasing suppression activity appears to be the new normal. In adjusting to this new normal, the authorities provided in the 2018 Omnibus are key.

I am especially appreciative of the solution to our fire funding dilemma. It is a challenge we have struggled with and worked on together for well over a decade. In fiscal year 2020, this comprehensive fire funding fix will ultimately stabilize our operating environment by addressing the impact of the rising suppression budget on forest management and research, and by treating catastrophic wildfires as natural disasters. Congress has dramatically reduced the need for transferring funds from our other mission programs so we can cover firefighting costs. We now have new tools and expanded authorities to help us do more to improve the conditions of our forests and grasslands. We will step up to this challenge and will do our part as an agency to get more work done on the ground.

Again, we are already developing more efficient and effective ways to do our work while taking steps to contain fire costs and ensuring we spend dollars in the right places to make a difference. We expect to demonstrate this commitment as we confront the 2018 fire year. Moreover, will continue our internal reforms, especially in active forest management that will result in changing overly complex, time-consuming, outdated processes that delay our work on the ground. Coupled with the expanded authorities, these reforms will translate to more favorable results, production and work in our nation's forests.

Forest Management

Congress has been very helpful in recent years, providing a number of authorities to help us get more work done on the ground. Thank you – it is helping, and we are making progress. For example, the Good Neighbor Authority (GNA) provided in the Agricultural Act of 2014, and expanded by the 2018 Omnibus, has dramatically increased our cooperation with states. We now have 150 agreements in 34 states using this authority. This shared stewardship approach has generated more trust and allowed significantly more work to get done.

While the total number of GNA agreements shows real progress, that number alone does not tell the whole story. For example, in the State of Utah a single 10-year agreement between the Forest Service and the state has yielded 36 projects that will treat over 50,811 acres of National Forest System lands in Fiscal Year 2019 alone.

The new authorities provided by Congress in the 2018 Omnibus give us more tools to increase forest treatments. The combination of these new tools and the fire funding fix are already changing the way we get work done-it's no longer business as usual. Since the 2018 Omnibus was signed into law, we analyzed the new tools technically and legally, provided explicit guidance to the field, and have required the Regions to submit their plans for implementing the authorities by June 8, 2018. More immediately we have directed the Regions to modify their Good Neighbor Agreements and use the new categorical exclusion for wildfire resilience projects. The new categorical exclusion will also be available for post fire treatments this year. In addition, we are actively working with our Regions and industry partners to identify the best areas to initiate 20-year stewardship contracting, thereby maximizing in the development of new infrastructure to process forest products.

Outside of increasing the use of new Congressional authorities, we have been very aggressive on improving our processes administratively to reduce the time and cost to plan and implement work on the ground. It's paying off. Our focus to streamline planning over the past eight months has decreased the time necessary to authorize projects, reduced costs by nearly \$30 million, and resulted in more shovel ready work. But we know there is more to do.

We are also putting into place a national risk-based strategy to address wildland fuels. To that end, this year we have increased acres treated by 36 percent and timber harvest by 13 percent over last year's levels. Compared to last year, we have nearly 30 percent more timber harvested at this point in the year. Our anticipated level of timber harvest in Fiscal Year 2018 is the highest it's been in 20 years. In all, this year the Forest Service plans to sell 3.4 billion board feet of timber while improving the resiliency and health of more than 3 million acres of National Forest System lands through removal of hazardous fuels and stand treatments.

Our implementation of vegetation treatment is also getting more efficient. We have trained personnel and industry partners in every region to use designate by prescription and description methods. We have also delivered updated technology to our personnel in the field, designed to reduce the time it takes to administer a timber sale, moving us closer to industry standards.

While we are pleased with the progress we are making, we recognize that the successful delivery of services and work starts with a highly skilled, motivated workforce. Forest Service employees remain our largest and most important investment. They are essential to confronting the arduous challenges facing America's forests and grasslands. They are integral to the services and experiences we provide to citizens and local communities. A safe and respectful work environment is the foundation for everything we do at the Forest Service. We simply cannot succeed without it. The next step toward this end will be during the week of June 11 when every Forest Service employee will participate in a daylong event called *Stand Up for Each Other*. Our local leaders will convene learning sessions designed to show how we as Forest Service employees can better support each other so that we all feel valued and respected. We expect the following outcomes for all Forest Service employees from *Stand Up for Each Other*: employees will understand that harassment, assault, bullying and retaliation are absolutely unacceptable behaviors; they will all know what to do if we experience or witness unacceptable behaviors; and, our agency as a whole will have built a collective capacity among employees to *Stand Up for Each Other*. We will continue to work in the weeks and months ahead to create the work environment each and every one of us deserves.

That concludes my testimony, Madam Chairman. I would be happy to answer any questions you or the Committee members have for me.