Statement of
Jay Jensen
Deputy Undersecretary for Natural Resources and the Environment
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Concerning
The Future of Our Nation’s Forests

Mr. Chairman and members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today to provide the Department’s view on the Future of Our Nation’s Forests. We are blessed with some of the most diverse, beautiful, and productive forests on the planet. We’re a great country in part, because we have great forests. The mission of the U.S. Forest Service is to sustain the health, resilience, and productivity of the Nation’s forests and grasslands to meet the needs of present and future generations. Our mission extends to assisting both public and private forests nationwide.

Over 100 years ago, the forests of the east and south were significantly cut over, as were some in the west, largely due to the primary objectives of the time, the conversion of forests to crop land, and the use of wood for building railroads, mining and fuel. The National Forests and the United States Forest Service were created over a hundred years ago in the initial stages of the American conservation movement, in part, to stop rampant deforestation and to begin the practice of scientific and sustainable forest management. Eventually, national forests were established in the east primarily for the purpose of healing cut over watersheds. The goal of stopping and
reversing the deforestation crisis of 100 years ago was largely achieved. Today, our nation’s forests cover about one-third of the country, provide 51 percent of the nation’s demand for water (US Forest Resource, Facts and Historical Trends, 2005), provide wood and paper products, provide habitat for threatened and endangered species and other wildlife, and offer beautiful settings for billions of recreation visits (RPA, 2005).

Today I’d like to focus on the values our forests provide, rather than on any specific output. I believe we need to rethink our relationship with these lands in terms of their long-term values, not just their short-term uses. These values include everything from clean drinking water to hardwood for furniture to grizzly bear habitat to an experience of solitude as a respite from urban life to biomass that can help solve some of our nation’s energy challenges. To protect and maintain the values the nation’s forests provide requires much vision, planning, and work. Our forests are owned privately by individuals, families, and companies, and publicly by counties, states, and the federal government. One can find these forests in the backcountry far from cities, around communities, and sometimes in our own backyards. Our challenge is to reconnect urban and rural Americans to these forests and to focus on how we can work together to deliver all these important and essential values.

As part of delivering those values, we must have a clear assessment of the current condition of our nation’s forests. Our forest scientists, located at universities and Research Stations throughout the nation, are continually gathering and analyzing data to help us better understand the conditions we are facing. In addition, our Forest Inventory and Analysis division has been gathering on-the-ground data on the condition of our nation’s forests for the better part of a
century. These assessments point to the challenges our nation’s forests are currently facing due to changes caused by insects, disease, noxious and exotic weeds and fire, and the conversion of forest land for development. Here are some specifics:

- While tree mortality caused by insects tends to be cyclical, it is at its highest level in fifty years. Eight percent of the forested area of the US is at risk of attack and potential mortality (RPA 2005). Beetle killed trees cover large areas of the Northern Rockies, the Southwest, and dry forests in the Northwest. Similarly, areas of the Lake States are being ravaged by the Emerald Ash Borer and the Asian long horned beetle is destroying trees in New England and right here in the backyard of the nation’s capitol. The impact of insects and disease is not limited to the back woods. Cities and towns throughout the northeast are witnessing the death of their beloved trees along streets and within community parks.

- Public and private forests have accumulated a significant amount of excess hazardous fuels (brush and woody materials) due, in large part, to a century of fire exclusion. On the National Forests alone, between sixty and eighty million acres of forest land is classified as densely stocked with small diameter trees and at risk for a catastrophic wildfire (Budget Director re: Congressional testimony provided in 2009). As a result, wildfire is burning large amounts of forests across the nation. In recent years fires have burned about eight million acres each year of forest and grassland. This is an area nearly twice the size of the State of New Jersey. Management predictions for the next decade indicate that fires may well burn in excess of ten million acres of forest and grassland annually (Quadrennial Fire Review). In addition, more homes are being burned each
For many federal, state and local agencies, the cost of suppression continues to grow.

- Forested lands are being invaded by noxious and exotic weeds. On the National Forests alone, our management estimates indicate that to be six to eight million acres annually (Invasive Species Threat to America’s Forested Ecosystems, Ielmini).

- Over the past fifty years urban areas have increased in size by 60 percent. During that same period, forested acreage has shown little change. The actual picture is somewhat more complex than the simple statistics alone would suggest. The amount of forest area is generally shrinking in the eastern and western states due to urbanization and fragmentation, while the amount of forest area is increasing in the interior of the nation as some of our cropland reverts to forest. Over the next ten years we anticipate that almost 22 million acres of forest within ten miles of existing cities and towns will be further subdivided or developed (Forest on the Edge, Stein, McRoberts, and Alig, 2006). In addition, many of the owners of large tracts of forest are senior citizens, indicating vast tracts of forested land will be transferred to new owners who may or may not maintain them as large forested tracts. Considering that the majority of forestland in this country is owned by private family landowners, change is coming and it may be significant.

- Today, over eighty percent of the population lives in urban settings (cities and towns with a population greater than 2500). The average canopy cover in these cities and towns is 27 percent. These trees have many environmental benefits in the urban ecosystem including
cleaning the air and actually cooling neighborhoods which reduces our energy needs.  

Open space also provides areas for filtering surface water and helps mitigate potential 

flooding. Management estimates indicate that there are 3.8 billion trees in these settings  

(Forest Resource Facts and Historical Trends, 2009). As noted, the impact of insects and  
disease is also a major concern in these urban ecosystems.  

• We continue to demonstrate our appreciation for forest settings in large numbers. Last  

year, we estimate that Americans made several billion visits to forest settings. On the  

National Forests, our survey data indicates that the Forest Service hosted approximately  

186 million visitors. These forested settings are critical to the quality of life for many of  

us and our communities. (Forest Resource Facts and Historical Trends, 2009)  

In addition to resource challenges, the forest products industrial infrastructure is in decline in  

many places. Accompanying that decline is a loss of jobs and a decline in community vitality.  

Much of this is a result of the current recession and the associated decline in housing starts. This  

makes resource management, where needed, more difficult.  

There are numerous challenges ahead, but every set of challenges also offers opportunity. There  

are significant opportunities to begin addressing these challenges by maintaining, reconnecting,  

and renewing the bond between communities and their forests. We can deliver the many values  

we’ve come to appreciate and want if we invest the time and energy to work together.
We look forward to working with the Congress to address many of the challenges facing America’s forests. Some of those challenges include:

- private forests and development,
- insect, disease and noxious weed epidemics in both rural and urban settings,
- hazardous fuels reduction near communities, municipal watersheds and critical infrastructure,
- moving towards more fire resilient forested landscape,
- balancing sustainable wood products and the biomass industry which helps restore healthy ecosystems,
- managing roadless areas,
- supporting such values as clean water, clean air, and fiber and carbon sequestration and storage,
- protecting and enhancing wildlife and fish habitat, and
- providing opportunities for citizens to choose forest settings to recreate, refresh, and renew themselves.

Another challenge our forests face is the deep divide that persists in the wake of decades of debate about how to best manage for the desired multiple uses. Some of our forests need restoration work and sustainable active management to remove hazardous fuels, to ensure clean water flows; all while maintaining forest health and resiliency in a changing climate. It is important to note that not every acre needs active management. We must move beyond the all or nothing ideas of competing interests by focusing on shared values and how they can overlap and
come together. This requires intelligent, collaborative planning, smart, scientific based management, and inclusive decision-making.

It’s been my experience that people on opposite sides of the forestry table often have the same values. They just differ in how they would want to see those values expressed on the land. While for one person, protection is eliminating human influence on an ecosystem, for another it is aggressive treatment. Both want the forest to exist and thrive. If we can focus on values, we can enlarge the dialogue and arrive at a better solution.

Currently, collaborative efforts are flourishing across the nation, creating increased understanding between citizens of diverse backgrounds. Here are several recent examples where people have been working together to accomplish this vision:

1. The town of Woodland Park, Colorado, working with the Front Range Fuels Treatment Partnership Roundtable, of which the Forest Service is a member, was the recipient of the Community Demonstration Project Award. The project already has attracted $100,000 to help treat fuels in high-risk areas. One hundred percent of the project is in the Wildland Urban Interface (WUI). Funding from the Governor’s Energy Office, the Colorado Forest Restoration Institute, and the Office of Smart Growth will be matched with funding from national foundations and local organizations to make the Woodland Park Healthy Forest Initiative a reality. This collaborative project of various federal, state, local government, nonprofit, and individual partners is dedicated to the improvement of the resiliency and health of forests in and around the Woodland Park area, and the implementation of the
Teller County Community Wildfire Protection Plan. Current funding for this project from
the grant and from other partners exceeds $350,000.

2. The National Forests of Mississippi produced a nearly completed draft Land and
Resource Management Plan that was a result of excellent collaboration with all interested
parties. The collaborative process clarified the wide support for prioritizing native
ecosystem restoration and habitat improvement for threatened and endangered species as
core components of the plan. This collaborative process demonstrates how active forest
management is a tool for meeting ecosystem restoration goals, sustaining healthy,
resilient forests while also supplying desired goods and services to the local communities.

3. The Mississippi Forestry Commission is leading a collaborative effort to address the
kudzu problem. Utility companies, federal, state and local officials spend thousands of
dollars each year to control kudzu. Kudzu contributes to the intensity of woodland fires
because it is highly flammable and provides a fuel ladder from the forest floor to the
forest canopy. The purpose of this collaborative and comprehensive approach between
state and federal agencies and non-governmental organizations is to address the threat
and destruction that kudzu poses to farmers, ranchers, and foresters on both public and
private lands. The coalition intends to facilitate a voluntary and cooperative effort in
educating the public, researching this pest species, and providing a means of control,
suppression, or selective eradication of kudzu. As a partner in these efforts, Secretary
Vilsack recently approved $1.6 million for American Recovery and Reinvestment Act
invasive species projects on the Holly Springs National Forest.
Our intention is to provide the means to multiply these successes across America. We are committed to a vision where Americans will sit down to not only address impacts, but more importantly, to protect and promote the full range of forest values that are important to all of us.

On a national and local scale, one particularly successful collaborative effort over the past several years has been the development of Community Wildfire Protection Plans (CWPPs). The National Association of State Foresters estimates that there are over 56,000 communities at risk. To date, more than 4,700 at-risk communities have completed (CWPPs). These plans prioritize fuels reduction areas across the landscape. Federal and state agencies have found CWPPs to be very useful in helping prioritize agency fuel treatments via these collaborative mechanisms.

The Administration is increasing support for the Forest Legacy Program as well as the Land and Water Conservation Fund, both of which will help Americans protect important forested landscapes for future generations.

We have much restoration work to accomplish on the nation’s forested landscapes. Fortunately, the U.S. Forest Service is staffed by some of the best-trained, hardest working professionals in the world. They know we cannot achieve these objectives without the active participation and collaboration of federal and state resource management agencies, elected officials, residents living in and close to forested areas, the forest products industry, environmental interests, and the general public. We look forward to working together with the Congress and our partners to, among other things: 1) conserve working forest landscapes, 2) protect our nation’s forests from harm - wildfire, invasive species and the ravages of insect and disease outbreaks, and 3) enhance
benefits associated with trees and forests; e.g., water quality as well as sustainable communities and landscapes.

I am convinced that with the help and continued engagement of the Congress and our state and local community partners, we can improve upon these successes by restoring our forests, public and private, consistent with the values we cherish. Simply put, healthy forests equal healthy communities. We welcome your involvement and assistance in that effort.

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