

**STATEMENT OF  
JAMES R. LYONS  
UNDER SECRETARY  
NATURAL RESOURCES AND ENVIRONMENT  
UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE**

**Concerning**

**FEDERAL AGENCY PREPAREDNESS FOR THE SUMMER 2000 FIRES  
and the  
PRESIDENT'S REPORT ON MANAGING THE IMPACTS OF WILDFIRES  
ON COMMUNITIES AND THE ENVIRONMENT**

**Before the**

**COMMITTEE ON ENERGY AND NATURAL RESOURCES  
SUBCOMMITTEE ON FORESTS AND PUBLIC LAND MANAGEMENT  
UNITED STATES SENATE**

**September 15, 2000**

MISTER CHAIRMAN AND MEMBERS OF THE COMMITTEE:

Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today concerning this summer's wildfires and Secretary Glickman and Babbitt's report to the President. I am Jim Lyons, Under Secretary for Natural Resources and Environment for the Department of Agriculture.

I appreciate your interest in what the Departments of Agriculture and the Interior are doing with respect to catastrophic wildfire. The 2000 fire season is one of the worst in recent memory, and it is not over yet. So far this year, fire has burned over approximately 6.6 million acres of Federal, State, tribal, and private land. The Forest Service has spent over \$610 million in its attempt to contain these fires to protect life and property and critical natural resources. Six battalions of military have assisted our fire-fighting efforts, and specialists, equipment, and crews have been called in from several other countries to supplement our resources.

This fire season is a result of extremely hot and dry weather conditions in the west. The weather phenomenon known as La Nina caused severe, long-lasting drought

across much of the country, drying out our forests and rangelands. The situation was exacerbated by the fact that the drought followed several seasons of higher-than-normal rain, which fueled the growth of grasses and other plants that quickly dried when the rains stopped. This left millions of acres susceptible to fires. To make matters worse, this weather pattern also spawned a series of mostly dry thunderstorms with heavy lightning across the West. The current season corresponds to a historical pattern of extensive wildfires during similar unusual weather conditions.

The result has been an extended, severe fire season with wildfires burning simultaneously across the western United States. In these difficult conditions, our federal fire fighters and their interagency partners have done an outstanding job. So far this year, they have put out a remarkable 76,000 fires. President Clinton and many of us here today have had the opportunity to thank our fire fighters personally for their hard work and commitment, but they really deserve our praise for what they have been able to accomplish.

During his trip to visit fires in Idaho on August 9, 2000, the President requested a report from the Secretaries of Agriculture and the Interior outlining the Departments' plans for immediate and short-term activities to help rehabilitate burned areas and assist rural communities in recovering from the impacts of the fires. In addition, the President asked us to develop actions to help protect communities and natural resources from the risk of future unnaturally intense fires. The Secretaries issued this Report, entitled *Managing the Impact of Wildfires on Communities and the Environment*, on September 8, and the President has accepted the Report and its recommendations. I would like to discuss the major findings and recommendations in the Report with you today. The Secretaries' Report emphasizes five key points:

1. We must continue to make all necessary firefighting resources available.
2. We must restore landscapes and rebuild communities.
3. We must invest additional resources in reducing fire risks, especially near communities.
4. We must work directly with communities and our other partners including other Federal agencies, the States, Tribes, and local governments.
5. We must emphasize accountability in implementing these recommendations and ensure that the recommendations receive the highest priority.

Let me discuss each of these key points in turn.

**We must continue to make all necessary firefighting resources available.**

As a first priority, the Departments will continue to provide all necessary resources to available to ensure that firefighting efforts protect life and property. The Nation's wildfire firefighting operation is the finest in the world and deserves our strong support. The 2000 fire season is not over yet. While weather conditions have helped our firefighting efforts in Montana and Idaho, fires continue to burn. Very high to extreme fire indices continue to be reported in Oregon, California, Idaho, Utah, Arizona, Nevada, Montana, Wyoming, Arizona, Colorado, Kansas, Texas and Oklahoma.

**Investing in restoring landscapes and rebuilding communities.**

The Departments will invest in restoring communities and landscapes impacted by the 2000 fires. Some communities already have suffered considerable economic losses as a result of the fires. These losses will likely grow unless immediate, emergency action is taken to reduce further resource damage to soils, watersheds, and burned over landscapes.

The Departments will assess the economic needs of communities and, consistent with current authorities, commit financial resources to assist individuals and communities in rebuilding their homes, businesses, and neighborhoods. Existing loan and grant programs administered by the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), the Small Business Administration (SBA), and USDA's Forest Service and rural development programs will provide this assistance. In addition, to expedite and simplify the delivery of assistance to communities, we will establish one-stop centers, where individuals, businesses, and communities can get answers to questions and apply for resources quickly with minimal red tape.

The Departments are already evaluating landscape restoration needs to help prevent further loss of life, property, and resources from excessive erosion, water quality degradation, and other damage from burned areas. The Forest Service already has 69 Burned Area Rehabilitation (BEAR) teams in place, and they are in the process of treating more than 400,000 burned acres. More than \$34 million dollars has already been released for treating damaged acres. Activities on the ground include tree planting, watershed restoration, revegetation, and soil stabilization. In completing this work, the Departments will prioritize investments in landscape restoration to protect:

- Public health and safety (e.g. municipal watersheds);
- Unique natural and cultural resources (e.g. salmon and bulltrout habitat) and burned-over lands that are susceptible to the introduction of non-native invasive species; and

- Other environmentally sensitive areas where economic hardship may result from a lack of reinvestment in restoring damaged landscapes (e.g. water quality impacts on recreation and tourism).

### **Investing in reducing fire risks, especially near communities.**

This year's fires reflect a longer-term disruption in the natural fire cycle that has increased the risk of catastrophic fires in our forests and rangelands. Because of a century long policy of extinguishing wildland fires, studies show that today's wildfires, typically burn hotter, faster, and higher than those of the past. At the same time because more people have moved into fire-prone areas adjacent to or intermingled with Federal and State wildlands, firefighting has become more complicated, expensive, and dangerous.

While the policy of aggressive fire suppression has successfully protected homes and forests during the last century, it has also inadvertently prevented fire from naturally cleaning out brush, shrubs, downed material, and small trees that can fuel fires and make them hotter and more difficult to control. The increased risks associated with the overaccumulation of brush, shrubs, and small trees is made even more complex by the dramatic increase of people living in fire-prone areas adjacent to or intermingled with Federal and State wildlands in the west. New development in, this “wildland-urban interface” means that more communities and structures are threatened by fires. Wildland firefighters today often spend a great deal more time and effort protecting structures than in earlier years.

Addressing these issues will require significant investments to treat landscapes through the physical removal of undergrowth, the prevention and eradication of invasive plants, and the reintroduction of fire to forest and rangeland ecosystems. Federal agencies have increased their efforts to reduce risks associated with the buildup of brush, shrubs, small trees and other fuels by nearly 500 percent since 1994. This year federal agencies will treat approximately 2.4 million acres.

At the same time, significant new information and the scope of this year's fires suggest that reversing the effects of a century of aggressive fire suppression will require additional resources. The Report emphasizes that reversing the effects of a century of aggressive fire suppression will be an evolutionary process, and not one that can be accomplished in a few short years. Indeed, greater investments must be made in working cooperatively with communities and the States to reduce fire risks in high priority areas such as those near communities and in critical watersheds. In the short-term there are many opportunities to treat these high priority areas through prescribed burning and thinning.

Our request for new resources to reduce fire risks is entirely separate from our traditional timber programs. The agencies' traditional timber programs focus largely on harvesting large, commercially valuable trees. Similarly, salvage logging typically focuses on large commercially valuable trees that have been damaged by fire, insects, disease, or some other natural disturbance. In contrast, our recommendations for reducing fire risks focus on removing brush, shrubs, small diameter trees, and downed material that have accumulated near many communities during the last century. The Report stresses the need to work cooperatively with communities, citizens, state governments, and other federal agencies to remove this brush and small trees through small, controlled, intentionally set fires and mechanical thinning treatments.

Any harvest of commercially valuable timber would be handled separately through the Departments' normal commercial timber programs. Commercial logging is certainly not a panacea for reducing fire risks. However, there may be opportunities in appropriate circumstances to capture the economic value of some fire-damaged trees. The Departments will continue to consider the option of harvesting fire-damaged trees when appropriate, with priority placed on those areas where roads already exist and on achieving important ecological objectives on the ground. Such timber sales would proceed only after all environmental laws and procedures are followed and affected communities are afforded the opportunity to participate in the process.

**We must work directly with communities and our other partners including the States, Tribes, and local governments.**

Working with local communities and our other partners is a critical element in restoring damaged landscapes and reducing fire hazards near homes and communities. To accomplish this, the Departments recommend expanding the participation of local communities in efforts to reduce fire hazards and the use of local labor for fuels treatment and restoration work. The Departments would also improve local fire protection capabilities through financial and technical assistance to State, local, and volunteer firefighting efforts. The Report to the President also recommends learning from the public, encouraging grassroots ideas and local solutions for reducing wildfire risk, and expanding successful outreach and education efforts to homeowners and communities through programs such as Firewise.

**We must be accountable for completing projects to reduce fire risks.**

Finally, the Report to the President recommends establishing a cabinet-level management structure to ensure that the actions recommended by the Departments receive the highest priority. The Secretaries of Agriculture and the Interior will co-chair this effort, assess the progress towards implementing the tasks recommended in the report to the President, and provide periodic reports to the President. Among other things, the new management team would be responsible for ensuring that appropriate performance objectives are established and met, ensuring that adequate financial and other resources are made available, establishing a system for identifying and addressing implementation issues promptly, and ensuring that the environmental reviews required by the National Environmental Policy Act, and all other environmental requirements, are undertaken and completed on a timely basis.

Regional integrated management teams will be accountable for accomplishing fuels treatment, restoration, and fire preparedness work. A number of existing, regional integrated management teams are in place to assist in the setting of regional priorities for land restoration, fuels treatment, and community cooperation and outreach. The Departments recommend that these regional structures be utilized and/or retooled, as appropriate, to provide a focal point for these initiatives.

Local teams, working closely with communities, the Department of Commerce and other appropriate agency partners, would manage projects on the ground. These integrated teams would identify specific land restoration, fuels treatment, and preparedness projects; coordinate environmental reviews and consultations; facilitate and encourage public participation; and monitor and evaluate project implementation.

**Funding Needs**

The President's Report builds on many of the actions that we are already taking. However, given the magnitude of the fire season and its effects, there is clearly a need for additional action and resources than would otherwise be possible within our baseline programs. The Report to the President identifies a need for an additional \$1.57 billion for the Departments of Interior and Agriculture in FY 2001 to implement the recommendations. This flexible contingent emergency funding will be used for fire preparedness, fire operations, State and volunteer fire assistance, forest health management, and economic action programs related to accomplishment of the Report's recommendations.

Increasing funding for the work that needs to be accomplished will require new investments. Congress and the Administration must work together to address this issue in order to help the Departments achieve this important goal of reducing the threat of catastrophic wildfire across the landscape and implement an effective recovery and rehabilitation program.

### **Summary**

The Forest Service and other federal agencies with firefighting responsibilities are committed to minimizing the losses from future unnaturally intense fires such as those in New Mexico, Idaho, Montana, and across the interior West. The Forest Service is also committed to working with communities to implement a strategy to restore and maintain healthy ecosystems on National Forest System lands. That means reducing fire risks through thinning and cautious use of prescribed fire.

We will continue to provide the national leadership and to work with our federal, State, and local firefighting cooperators, and Congress to ensure that the Federal firefighting agencies and their cooperators have the resources needed to assist in educating home and land owners about fire risks, fire risk reduction strategies, and to protect the public, property, and resources when fires occur.

As I have stated before, it is also essential to recognize that hazardous fuels buildups in the West occurred over many decades. Restoring the health and resilience of these ecosystems while protecting nearby communities from the effects of catastrophic fire will take many years. Our strategic approach, which will be led by the Departments of Agriculture and the Interior, will treat areas that pose the highest risk to people, property, and natural resources, and to do so in the most expeditious manner possible. This will require partnerships, resources, and common sense approaches that avoid needless controversy.

Mr. Chairman, we look forward to working with you and Congress to secure the funds we need to invest in healthy forests and communities. We will need your help and support to take the next step forward.

This concludes my statement. I would be happy to answer any questions you or the members of your subcommittee might have.