Statement of
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Before the

Committee on Agriculture

U.S. House of Representatives
Concerning
2002 Wildfire Season and Wildfire Threats for the 2003 Season

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Mr. Chairman and members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to discuss with you the 2002 Wildfire Season and the outlook for this fire season, focusing particularly on emergency stabilization and rehabilitation and hazardous fuels reduction.

I will address efforts to implement the National Fire Plan and, in addition, speak to the progress on President Bush's Healthy Forests Initiative (HFI), a common-sense approach to reducing the threat of catastrophic wildfires by restoring forest and rangeland health.

Mr. Chairman, you and the other members of the Committee are to be congratulated for your leadership and continuing efforts to address the forest health conditions that too often make our forests and rangelands vulnerable to catastrophic wildfire which threatens communities and the natural resources on forests and rangelands.

In the last Congress, this committee included language in the House-passed version of the 2001 Farm Bill to address both enhanced community protection and hazardous fuels reduction. In this Congress, this Committee has reported H.R. 1904, legislation to provide Federal land management agencies important and effective tools to improve our capability to plan and implement critical on-the-ground activities. I will discuss H.R. 1904 in depth later in my testimony.

2002 FIRE SEASON

The 2002 wildland fire season was intense, difficult, and historic. Long-term drought over most of the West contributed to a lengthy and severe fire season. We sustained 62 days of Preparedness Level 5, our highest level of activity, longer than any other year. Approximately 7.2 million acres burned in 2002, in every type of vegetation, but the largest, most costly and damaging fires were in the long-needle pine forests (Fire Regime 1/Condition Class 2 or 3) where fuel buildup was most alarming. More than 800 structures were lost to wildfires last year. Initial attack suppression activities were highly successful. Of the more than 88,000 fires reported, less than 700 escaped to become large fires over 300 acres. Much praise must go to the men and women who make up our firefighting corps who do an impressive job under adverse conditions. They deserve our thanks and admiration.

Following the Thirtymile Fire tragedy in July 2001, we reexamined our safety programs and made a number of improvements including work-rest guidelines to minimize fatigue. We are emphasizing management of firefighter fatigue, use of the 10 Standard Fire Orders and the 18 Watch Out situations. Changes have been made to the aviation program. We have an improved fire shelter and we will continue to examine ways to improve the safety of our firefighting effort.

Fighting the 2002 fires was expensive. The total cost for both Departments was almost $1.6 billion. The Forest Service transferred approximately $1 billion from other accounts to fund fire suppression costs.

Recent criticism of the expenditures to suppress wildfire is of great concern to the Department. Forest Service Chief Dale Bosworth, in cooperation with Interior agencies, dispatched an accountability team to review specific expenses and policies that may have contributed to unnecessary expenditures on large fires. New procedures have been established that will focus on cost containment strategies in suppressing wildfire and eliminating unnecessary expenses; establish clearer financial management accountability of incident commanders and line officers; and provide for improved controls and incentives for suppressing costs. Additionally, the Forest Service has initiated new procedures and efforts to improve incident accounting and financial reporting.

The Incident Accountability 2003 Action Plan Recommendations are being implemented. Wildland Fire Situation Analysis will now consider a Least Cost Alternative for fire suppression strategies. Line officers are being trained to ensure that costs are adequately evaluated. Monetary limits for line officer authority for fire expenditures have been established. Once a fire exceeds a monetary threshold, a Regional Large Fire Cost Review will be triggered. For example, a review was just completed for the Aspen Fire in Arizona.

Additionally, the Forest Service and the Department of the Interior will fully implement performance measures that will allow for standardized measurements of accountability for the five wildland fire agencies. The 18 new performance measures will determine our success in implementing the 10-Year Comprehensive Strategy. Starting in FY 2003, we

are collecting this performance information for assessing trends in levels of activities and accomplishments, comparing and reducing unit costs, and most importantly, for tracking hazardous fuels treatments in our efforts to reduce the impacts to communities and the environment.

Let me turn now to the two subjects which I understand the committee wanted to pay particular attention to: emergency stabilization and restoration and hazardous fuels reduction.

EMERGENCY STABILIZATION AND RESTORATION

The Department of the Interior and the Forest Service categorize post-wildland fire treatments as either emergency stabilization or rehabilitation. The first priority is emergency stabilization in order to prevent threats to life and property and further damage to the watershed. The stabilization work begins before the fire is out and continues for up to a year. The rehabilitation effort to repair damage caused by the fire begins as soon as the fire is out. Rehabilitation focuses on the lands unlikely to recover from wildland fire damage through natural processes.

On National Forest System lands, 2.4 million acres burned in 2002. Of these, 340,000 acres were severely burned. Through Burned Area Emergency Response (BAER) plans, $72 million was made available for immediate emergency stabilization after the fires of 2002. Rehabilitation efforts continue in 2003. The majority of the work to be accomplished in FY 2003 results from the negative fire effects from the Rodeo/Chediski, Hayman, McNally, Biscuit, and Missionary Ridge Fires of 2002. Treatments planned in FY 2003 will accelerate the restoration of forested ecosystems and wildlife habitat, will more rapidly improve water quality, and allow for earlier visitor access to National Forests by returning recreational facilities to safe conditions.

Previous commitments and priorities for rehabilitation of damage caused by the fires of 2000 are also being addressed by this year's planned rehabilitation and restoration efforts on a priority basis. The FY 2004 Budget provides a $187 million increase for fire suppression, which includes ample funds for burned area rehabilitation needs. Longer term activities can take place within the agency's ongoing forest management programs consistent with applicable land and resource management plans. Additional rehabilitation needs can be addressed through new authorities for stewardship contracting, a part of the President's Healthy Forest Initiative. In addition, the FY 2004 request for forest health maintains an increase of $14 million over the FY 2002 enacted level of $69 million. This level provides adequate funding to address high priority forest health issues relating to fire damage.

In April, the General Accounting Office (GAO) released a report to Congress titled: *"Better Information Needed on Effectiveness of Emergency Stabilization and Rehabilitation Treatments."* The GAO pointed out in this report: "…it could not be determined whether emergency stabilization and rehabilitation treatments were achieving their intended results." To address this shortcoming, GAO recommended that the agencies:

(1) specify procedures to be used to monitor treatment effectiveness including type and extent of monitoring data collected and methods to collect these data, and
(2) develop an interagency system to collect, store, and disseminate information on monitoring results.

In a joint response, the Department of the Interior and the Department of Agriculture have established an inter-departmental committee of scientists and managers to identify post-fire stabilization and rehabilitation treatments for which monitoring protocols will be established. Technical experts will then develop the monitoring protocols and identify research needs. The inter-departmental team will also develop an interagency system to collect, store, and disseminate information on monitoring results.

A great deal of information exists that shows that many emergency stabilization and rehabilitation treatments are effective. The recently created BAER DAT website summarizes over 20 years of monitoring of emergency stabilization treatments. The Rocky Mountain Research Station publication, "*Evaluating the Effectiveness of Postfire Rehabilitation Treatments*" discusses the effectiveness of some treatments.

An interagency workshop on emergency stabilization and rehabilitation is being planned for the spring of 2004. At this workshop, experts will present the latest scientific findings on the effectiveness of various actions. A steering committee for this inter-departmental team had their initial meeting in May and agreed to establish subcommittees to develop monitoring protocols according to treatment objectives, rather than by treatments. For example, the objective may be to stabilize soil. There are several treatments that may accomplish this objective. The subcommittee would develop monitoring protocols for all these treatments.

In January, the two departments agreed to work towards standardizing certain aspects of their programs, such as definitions and timeframes. DOI and USDA are also developing language for their respective manuals for Emergency Stabilization and Rehabilitation, including a requirement that the most appropriate treatment be selected and monitored. Additionally, the Departments are drafting interagency guides for implementation of emergency stabilization or rehabilitation treatments.

HAZARDOUS FUELS REDUCTION

Fire historically played a positive role in sustaining ecological stability in many ecosystems. The altered condition of these forests and grasslands makes the use of fire for forest management much more difficult. Future wildfires can be very beneficial to various resources, especially where the natural fire return interval has been maintained or where the fuels buildup, such as thick understory and dense trees, are thinned by environmentally sound forest management practices.

Fuel treatments are designed to mitigate the risk of unwanted wildland fire to people, communities, and natural resources. The objective is to manage these lands for healthy, resilient conditions in which fire can be re-established. Fuel treatments accomplish these goals by manipulating vegetation and/or removing or modifying wildland fuels to: reduce

the potential severe wildland fire behavior, lessen post-fire damage, limit the spread and proliferation of invasive species and diseases, and maintain and restore healthy diverse ecosystems. Treatments are accomplished using prescribed fire, mechanical thinning, or combinations of these and other methods. Fuel treatments must conform to agency regulations, land management plans, and all environmental statutes. In addition to specific preplanned fuel treatment projects, current policy encourages the use of naturally ignited wildland fire to accomplish specific land management objectives.

The Forest Service and DOI are developing a common strategy for reducing fuels and restoring land health in fire-prone areas. The strategy will emphasize improved working relationships between Federal land managers, as well as with multiple key disciplines inside the various land management and regulatory agencies and bureaus across geographic scales. The purpose of the strategy is to:

1. Establish national priorities for fuel treatment; ensuring funding is targeted to the highest risk communities and ecosystems.
2. Recommend a strategic program to best achieve national fuel treatment objectives for community protection and ecosystem restoration and maintenance.
3. Emphasize landscape-scale, cross-boundary treatments that reduce hazards while providing benefits to other ecosystem values.

We expect that a common strategy will be finalized and adopted in the near future.

In 2002, despite a very challenging fire season, the Federal wildland fire management agencies treated 2.26 million acres of hazardous fuels on Federal and adjacent lands. This is 168,000 acres more than 2001. The total acreage includes 386,000 acres of mechanical treatment, 1.78 million acres of prescribed fire, and 83,000 acres of other treatment. Of the total, 974,000 acres were treated in the wildland urban interface, a 25 percent increase over the FY 2001 wildland urban interface acres. We also reduced hazardous fuels on slightly more than 1million additional acres through wildland fire use. Wildland fire use is the management of naturally ignited fires to accomplish specific resource management objectives. The combination of prescribed fuel treatments and wildland fire use resulted in 3.28 million acres being treated to mitigate hazardous conditions and restore forest and rangeland health.

For 2003, we anticipate treating 2.5 million acres of hazardous fuels of which 1.1 million acres are in the wildland urban interface. While we cannot tell you at this time the acreage that will benefit from wildland fire, this year has been a successful one so far. An example is the Gila National Forest, which has accomplished 162,000 acres of wildland fire use as of mid-July. As the season progresses, depending upon locations of fire starts and burning conditions at the time, other forests may have the opportunity to manage the incidents for fire use.

The Committee is aware of a draft GAO report, *"WILDLAND FIRE MANAGEMENT: Additional Actions Required to Better Identify and Prioritize Lands Needing Fuels Reduction."* The Forest Service had an opportunity to review the draft and provide

comments to GAO. We agree with the fundamental premise that prioritization is essential to program effectiveness, both in identifying those lands most in need of treatment as well as for collecting data needed to monitor program effectiveness.

2003 SEASONAL WILDLAND FIRE OUTLOOK

The 2003 fire season is significantly below average to date, but it is early in the fire season for the West. The number of wildfire acres burned to-date (1,355,536 acres) is approximately one-half of the amount burned by this date in 2000 (2,703,125 acres).

Although wildland fire activity so far this year has been one-third less than the average of the last ten years, we have seen some indications of the potential for destructive wildfires. Conditions have deteriorated in the past several weeks and we expect wildfire acres burned to accelerate quickly, as the fire danger increases across much of the Interior West, Northwest, and portions of California and the Northern Rockies. At this time, fire danger indices are very high to extreme in: Alaska, Arizona, California, Colorado, Hawaii, Idaho, Montana, Nevada, New Mexico, Oklahoma, Oregon, Texas, Utah, Washington, and Wyoming.

On July 20, the National Preparedness Level was increased from Level 3 to Level 4. This change means that 425 or more 20-person fire crews are deployed throughout the nation; 5 Type I Incident Management Teams are deployed; and 2 or more Geographic Areas are experiencing Type I incidents. At National Preparedness Level 4, the national Multi-Agency Coordinating (MAC) Group begins to allocate resources between and among the 11 geographic area coordination centers.

National suppression cost estimates remain above the 10-Year average.

THE PRESIDENT'S HEALTHY FORESTS INITIATIVE

Recognizing this need, President Bush last year proposed Healthy Forests: An Initiative for Wildfire Prevention and Stronger Communities. The President directed Federal agencies to develop several administrative and legislative tools to restore deteriorated Federal lands to healthy conditions and assist in executing core components of the National Fire Plan. Since the President's announcement last August, Federal agencies have taken several regulatory steps.

- Endangered Species Act Guidance – On December 11, 2002, the Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration Fisheries (NOAA Fisheries) issued joint guidance documents to facilitate and improve the design, review, approval and implementation of HFI projects. The guidance allows multiple projects to be grouped into one consultation and provides direction on how to consider and balance potential short- and long-term beneficial and adverse impacts to endangered species when evaluating projects. The goal is to recognize that project-specific, short term adverse impacts need to be weighed against the longer-term watershed level benefits such projects will achieve.

- CEQ Memorandum & Model Environmental Assessment (EA) Projects –Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ) Chairman Connaughton issued guidance addressing the preparation of model environmental assessments (EAs) for fuels treatment projects. The guidance addresses the purpose and content of an EA, specifically, that EAs should be focused and concise. These guidelines are now being applied on both Forest Service and DOI agency fuels treatment projects and some of these model EAs are currently out for public comment.

- Appeals Process Reform – Both USDA and DOI made rule changes designed to encourage early and meaningful public participation in project planning, while continuing to provide the public an opportunity to seek review or appeal project decisions. This allows more expedited application of hazardous fuels reduction projects.

- Categorical Exclusions (CE) – Both USDA and DOI have established new categorical exclusions, as by the CEQ regulations implementing the National Environmental Policy Act, (NEPA) for certain hazardous fuels reduction projects and for post-fire rehabilitation projects. These new CEs shorten the time between identification of hazardous fuels treatment and restoration projects and their actual accomplishment on the ground. The agencies have compiled an extensive scientific record demonstrating that similar projects did not result in significant environmental effects, either individually or cumulatively.

- Proposed Section 7 Counterpart Regulation - FWS and NOAA Fisheries have proposed Section 7 joint counterpart regulations under the ESA to improve Section 7 consultation procedures for projects that support the National Fire Plan. The proposed regulations would provide, in some situations, an alternative to the existing Section 7 consultation process by authorizing the agencies to make certain determinations without project-specific consultation and concurrence of the FWS and NOAA Fisheries.

We believe these administrative actions will provide Federal land managers with important tools they need to restore these lands to a condition where they can resist disease, insects, and catastrophic fire. In addition to the HFI actions, the Forest Service has proposed three new timber harvest categorical exclusions (CEs) to its NEPA implementing procedures. Projects for limited timber harvesting of live trees, salvage harvests, and sanitation of dead and dying trees for insect and disease control under certain specified circumstances occur routinely as part of managing National Forest System lands. Where they would facilitate rehabilitation or hazardous fuels reduction, they could also aid implementation of the National Fire Plan.

However, the Administration believes that the additional tools and authorities that are provided in H.R. 1904 are still needed to address the severity of forest health conditions in a meaningful timeframe.

LEGISLATIVE ACTIONS IN 108TH CONGRESS

This Congress has moved assertively to enact forest health legislation. Public Law 108-7, the Consolidated Appropriations Resolution, 2003, contains stewardship contracting authority for the Forest Service and the Bureau of Land Management requested by the President as part of HFI.

This spring, both the House Agriculture Committee and the House Resources Committee approved the Healthy Forests Restoration Act, H.R. 1904. We commend the Committee for its leadership in moving this important legislation through the House. H.R. 1904 contains a number of very helpful provisions.

Title I would improve processes which now significantly contribute to costly delays, and allow timely implementation of critical fuels reductions projects. The title would allow the agencies to focus the proposed alternatives they would have to analyze for proposed hazardous fuels reduction projects but otherwise would maintain requirements for public notice and input. Title I would require the Secretary of Agriculture to establish an administrative review process for these projects as an alternative to the current legislatively mandated appeals process. It also would clarify the standard for injunctive relief against actions that are necessary to restore fire-adapted forests or rangelands and would provide timeframes for judicial review

Title IV of H.R. 1904 would require the Secretaries of Agriculture and the Interior to develop an accelerated program on certain Federal lands to combat pest infestations. This title also would authorize the Secretaries to conduct applied silvicultural assessments on certain Federal lands. An assessment of a site not more than 1,000 acres would be deemed to be categorically excluded from further documentation under NEPA. We believe Title IV will allow us to quickly design and test methods of responding to insect outbreaks.

The Administration strongly supports H.R. 1904. The comprehensive approach to forest health and hazardous fuels reduction it sets out remains the best approach among several legislative proposals to give land managers the tools they need to reduce the risk of extreme wildland fire. On May 20, 2003, President Bush called on Congress to move as quickly as possible to pass the legislation and get it to his desk for signature. Just yesterday, in testimony before the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee, I again expressed the Administration's desire to work with the Congress to make any technical amendments that are needed to clarify and strengthen H.R. 1904.

Mr. Chairman, the President remains committed to working with Congress to enact meaningful legislation that would lead to healthy forests. The Administration will oppose legislation which, while well intentioned, could impede implementation of hazardous fuels reduction projects rather than facilitate them.

SUMMARY

With the outlook positing an severe fire season, the five Federal land management agencies and our partners at the State and local level are doing all that we can to be prepared, treat fuel loads on forests and grassland, reduce the vulnerability of our communities to wildfire and restore the health of our forests and rangelands in cooperation with States, local governments, Tribes, and interested groups and citizens.

The Administration is also pursuing a range of administrative actions to improve the timeliness of hazardous fuels reduction projects without sacrificing public involvement or scientific analysis.

H.R. 1904 would provide many of the needed additional authorities sought by the President's HFI to achieve these goals. We strongly support H.R. 1904 and look forward to working with the Congress as it moves through the process.