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Before
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Subcommittee on Forests and Forest Health
Concerning
Firefighting Preparedness
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INTRODUCTION

Mr. Chairman and members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to meet with you today. Since the Department of the Interior and the Department of Agriculture work closely together in fire management and in implementing the National Fire Plan, it is appropriate to use one statement to inform you on preparations for the 2004 fire season and our long term efforts to restore fire adapted ecosystems.

For much of the twentieth century, wildland fires were generally thought to be bad for the environment, for timber resources, and for communities that were impacted. As a consequence, fires were suppressed as soon as possible. The resulting lack of fire had an unintended consequence across large areas of the landscape where fire had been a frequent phenomenon. Over time, the amount and structure of shrubs and trees increased. This build up of fuel, coupled with other factors such as long term drought, has led to increasing concerns about the overall wildland condition and particularly the health of our forests and rangelands.

The President's Healthy Forests Initiative (HFI) helped us tackle our gridlock of process that was impeding our restoration of fire adapted ecosystems, including treatment of hazardous fuels. HFI resulted in the development of a number of administrative tools and included a request for congressional help to further reduce procedural barriers. On December 3, 2003, the President signed into law the Healthy Forests Restoration Act of 2003 (HFRA), giving Federal agencies additional tools needed to implement the 10-Year Comprehensive Strategy and Implementation Plan. Its passage sent a strong message of bipartisan support for reducing fuels and restoring forest health, especially in the wildland-urban interface.

The 2004 fire season is shaping up to be another challenging year. While most of the nation is anticipated to be near normal in terms of the expected number of fires and acres burned, portions of some states in the interior West is expected to have the potential for an above normal wildland fire season.

The potential for build up of fuels, recognition that long-term drought persists over much of the interior West, and an increase of drought-stressed and insect- damaged trees and brush have resulted in a greater potential for large wildfires in the West. Last week's fires in Southern California resulted from stifling heat and an abundance of dry brush. Although last year's fall wildfires in Southern California charred more than 740,000 acres, they consumed only 7% of the dying trees and dry chaparral lands that surround the local communities.

FIRE AVIATION CHANGES

The USDA Forest Service and the Department of the Interior have agreed to forgo the use of large fixed-winged contracted airtankers for fire suppression for the remainder of the 2004 fire season as we evaluate the long-term options for aviation resources. In doing so, the Departments have terminated the national 2004 airtanker contract. This decision comes in response to recommendations contained in the April 23, 2004 National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) report on three previous airtanker accidents. The NTSB report stated that "it was apparent that no effective mechanism currently exists to ensure the continuing airworthiness of these firefighting aircraft."

The report also concluded that the Forest Service and the Department of the Interior were responsible for ensuring the safety of firefighting aircraft. To continue to use these contract large airtankers when no mechanism exists to ensure their airworthiness, presents an unacceptable level of risk to aviators, the firefighters on the ground and the communities that we serve. Large airtankers are but one of the many tools that we use to suppress wildland fires. During any year, thousands of wildland fires are suppressed without the benefit of air support. We have developed a strategy for the 2004 fire season to supplement our wildland firefighting efforts with other available aircraft. These additional aircraft assets include the use of large helicopters and helitankers, single engine airtankers (SEATS) and military C-130 aircraft equipped with the Modular Airborne Firefighting System (MAFFS).

A long-term evaluation of the mission and composition of aviation assets that includes certification, maintenance and inspection programs based on available funding will be developed by the leadership of the Forest Service and the Department of the Interior agencies.

2003 FIRE SEASON REVIEW

The effects of catastrophic wildfires and the efforts to reduce hazardous fuels in forests and on grasslands across this country have been at the forefront of local and national interest. Nationwide, the 2003 fire season had 63,000 fires which burned more than 4 million acres. Of this amount, 18,000 fires burned 2.6 million acres on Federal lands. Ninety-eight percent of all fires on Federal lands were stopped during initial attack.

In 2003, while the number of acres burned nationally was below the ten-year average, California suffered its worst wildland fire season in modern history. Over 3,600 homes were lost, and 24 people died, including one firefighter. The State and Federal agencies spent \$157 million to contain the fires. Sixteen people died in the floods and debris flows that followed as a result of the fires. A large portion of the damage to resources and improved property occurred on state or private lands. Santa Ana winds combined with extended drought conditions and high fuel loads led to extreme fire behavior and evacuations. October 28, 2003 had the largest acreage burned in one day with 135,851 acres. The Cedar Fire, on and adjacent to the Cleveland National Forest, burned 280,293 acres, ultimately

becoming the largest fire in California recorded history. The Cedar fire burned 80,000 acres in 10 hours. These fires burned in and around wildland-urban interface areas, requiring extensive evacuations of communities, subdivisions, and ranches.

2004 SEASONAL WILDLAND FIRE OUTLOOK

Weather patterns reflect a continuing drought trend through much of the West. The Southwest is the driest area of the West. Warm March temperatures have resulted in a significant reduction of Western snowpacks. Late March and April storms in the Southwest (especially in New Mexico) have delayed the onset of the fire season. However, the Southwest may experience a rapid escalation to critical fire potential in Arizona and Western New Mexico for May and June. Spring and summer are expected to be warmer than normal in the West, while dryness is expected to continue in the Southeast. Longer-term forecasts call for no significant improvement in terms of temperature relief or increased precipitation.

HEALTHY FOREST INITIATIVE

Consistent with the belief that public land policies need to be based on common sense and common ground the Healthy Forests Initiative was introduced by the President to help reduce the risks of catastrophic wildfire to communities and the environment. The Healthy Forests Initiative implements core components of the National Fire Plan's 10-year Comprehensive Strategy and Implementation Plan. HFI improves regulatory processes to insure more timely decisions, greater efficiency, and better results in reducing the risk of catastrophic wildfires by restoring healthy, viable ecosystems to our forest and rangelands.

In May of 2002, the Secretary of the Interior, the Secretary of Agriculture, the Chair of the Council on Environmental Quality, and the Western Governor's Association met to sign an implementation plan for the *10-Year Comprehensive Strategy, A Collaborative Approach for Reducing Wildland Fire Risks to Communities and Environment*. The Strategy and Implementation Plan provides a road map for helping communities to protect themselves from the risk of wildland fire.

The Secretaries of Agriculture and the Interior established the Wildland Fire Leadership Council to coordinate wildland fire management policies under the 10-Year Plan and to monitor accomplishment. The Council is a cooperative organization that includes State and local and tribal representatives, and is dedicated to achieving consistent implementation of the goals, actions, and policies of the National Fire Plan and the Federal Wildland Fire Management Policy.

The Council has been leading the fire management agencies in eliminating interagency differences to ensure more seamless delivery of a coordinated fire protection program. In its first year of operation, the Council:

- adopted field guidance to establish compatible, broad, national standards for identifying communities at risk, while still allowing flexibility at the State and regional levels for risk determinations;
- approved a policy for emergency stabilization and rehabilitation of burned areas that ensures interagency consistency in the timing and funding of treatments and monitoring;
- adopted a common budget structure for wildland fire management appropriations; and,
- adopted interagency direction for the implementation of the Federal Wildland Fire Policy.

We are actively using authorities under the President's Healthy Forests Initiative that offer additional categorical exclusions to accomplish hazardous fuel reduction before and rehabilitation work after a fire. These two categorical exclusions facilitate scientifically sound, efficient, and timely planning and decision making for the treatment of hazardous fuels and rehabilitation of areas so as to reduce risks to communities and the environment caused by severe fires. These new procedures to comply with the National Environmental Policy Act allow high-priority fuels reduction and forest restoration projects identified through collaboration with state, local and tribal governments and interested parties to move forward more quickly.

The President sought, and in 2003 the Congress provided, long-term stewardship contracting authority for the Bureau of Land Management and expanded the limited authority it had previously granted to the Forest Service. Stewardship contracts or agreements allow communities, tribes, private companies and others to retain forest and rangeland products in exchange for performing services for the agencies, such as fuel reduction treatments, riparian improvements, thinning trees and removing dead wood.

The results of this strategy are starting to materialize. In FY 2003, the Forest Service and the Department of the Interior together treated more than 2.7 million acres for hazardous fuels. Of this amount, almost 1.6 million acres, or 58%, were treated in the wildland urban interface (WUI). Of the total acres, 2 million were treated by prescribed fire, more than 460,000 by mechanical treatments, and more than 210,000 by other treatments.

In addition to the planned treatments, the agencies treated an additional 719,624 acres through wildland fire use – the management of naturally ignited wildland fires to accomplish specific resource management objectives, such as ecosystem maintenance and restoration.

For FY 2004, the Department of the Interior and the Forest Service plan to treat an additional 2.7 million acres of hazardous fuels. We will focus our resources to optimally mitigate fire risk by effectively reducing fuels and maintaining healthy forests and grasslands on priority projects. Forest Service research indicates that well planned treatments in key areas can successfully influence fire behavior, thus protecting many more acres than are actually treated. Two treatments, one a prescribed burn and one a mechanical treatment, each significantly altered the behavior of Colorado's Hayman Fire in 2002. The Polhemus prescribed burn mitigated the spread of the Hayman Fire despite even though the fire approached the treated area driven by winds exceeding 30 mph. When the fire reached the mechanically treated area that portion of the fire was more easily suppressed. In 2002 the Cone Fire entered the Blacks Mountain Experimental Forest in northern California. When it reached an area where trees had been thinned and surface fuels had been treated, it dropped from a crown fire to an easily controlled surface fire in a matter of feet.

We continue to use the full range of options available to us to achieve our goal of restoring fire-adapted ecosystems where appropriate, through mechanical thinning, prescribed fire, wildland use fire or through other programs. For example At Oregon's 2002 Biscuit Fire, areas where thinning had been followed by prescribed burning exhibited the least burn severity of all portions of the forest that were studied.

We will also continue our effective and much-needed prescribed fire program, including our cost efficient program in the southeastern United States which maintains a vegetation regime of rapidly

growing vegetation. In the Western United States we will restore fire dependent ecosystems by targeting funds towards projects that achieve this goal. To achieve more acres treated and become more efficient in the Western United States, we will continue to seek opportunities to treat these acres through programs and projects such as stewardship contracting, bio mass utilization and partnerships with other Federal agencies, tribes and local governments.

We do not anticipate that we will treat every acre of wildland forest or grassland that has a high fuel hazard. Neither the Forest Service the Department of the Interior or other Federal, state or local fire agencies can absolutely protect the growing number of homes and businesses adjacent to wildland areas. Given severe fire conditions and high home ignitability, exposure to flames and particularly firebrands can result in residential destruction. It is critical that private landowners also take steps on their own to protect their property. We are providing help to homeowners through research on adequate defensible space, educational materials and grant assistance to FIREWISE programs.

FIREFIGHTING COST

In FY 2003, the Forest Service expended \$1.02 billion to suppress wildfires, and the Department of the Interior's suppression costs were \$303 million. Federal wildfire suppression costs for FY 2003 were 50 percent above the average costs over the last ten years. Initial attack success was higher than normal and both the number of fires and number of acres burned were below average. Three out of the last four fiscal years have seen Federal suppression costs exceeding \$1 billion per year.

We recognize that the cost of suppressing wildland fire is high. We need to strike a balance between the costs of suppressing fires and the need to protect property and resources. Large fire cost reviews, which began in 2003 will be continued in 2004. These reviews provide wildland fire management leaders with detailed on-the-ground cost information with which to make more cost-efficient resource decisions. The Wildland Fire Leadership Council has directed the agencies to take actions to respond to key findings of the large fire cost reviews including;

- strengthening business oversight and financial management on fire incident command teams;
- developing incident cost-share agreement guidelines so agreements can be in place prior to start of the local fire season; and,
- resolving problems with the Wildland Fire Situation Analysis process to improve timeliness and practicality for field use.

The Departments will continue to implement appropriate cost reduction actions stemming from the Large Fire Cost Reduction Action Plan and the Fire and Aviation Management Operations Action Plan). By the end of this year, each Federal agency land unit will have in place a current or compliant Fire Management Plan. We will continue to use large fire cost containment oversight teams on those incidents that meet certain size, cost, and duration criteria. We will implement those recommendations contained in reports from that will improve efficiency and reduce costs. We will focus on making improvements as identified through the PART process. Finally, the President's FY 2005 Budget includes several cost containment initiatives such as a requirement by the Forest Service to establish and use cost containment performance measures as well as actions, together with targets and milestones.

This year, the Wildland Fire Leadership Council also convened a high level panel comprised of senior State, local, Tribal and Federal representatives, and incident team members, representing a mix of on-the-ground and policy expertise, to examine cost containment issues in a broader, land management-context to integrate suppression and vegetation management. The panel's findings and recommendations will be presented this summer.

SUMMARY

With the outlook for an upcoming potentially difficult fire season, the five Federal land-managing agencies and our partners at the State and local level are doing all that we can to be prepared. Safety of firefighters and communities is our first priority. With the fire adapted ecosystems of North America, we have the challenging task of reducing fuels and the vulnerability of our communities to wildfire while restoring the health of our forests and rangelands. This challenge is national and long term in scope. With your continued help, all the agencies can accomplish robust performance-based programs for the nation's forests and rangelands, and do so in full collaboration with state governments, communities, Congress and the American people. We look forward to working with you in implementing the agency's programs and would be happy to answer any questions.