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Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources
Subcommittee on Public Lands and Forests
Concerning
Firefighting Preparedness
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INTRODUCTION

Mr. Chairman and members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to meet with you today. Since the Department of the Interior (DOI) and the Department of Agriculture work closely together in fire management, the two agencies are providing a joint statement. We are pleased to be here today to review the Forest Service's and the Department of the Interior's (DOI) preparedness for the upcoming fire season. Three themes characterize our efforts in wildland fire management and hazardous fuels reduction—better management to ensure efficient use of resources; application of science to inform our decisions; and collaboration to leverage resources and ensure coordinated action.

The Forest Service and DOI continue to have available the resources, including firefighters, equipment, and aircraft, necessary to achieve a high rate of success in suppressing fires on initial attack. Our plans, as discussed below, ensure successful initial attack capability, with public and firefighter health and safety continuing to be our highest priority.

Though many areas across the United States have fire-adapted ecosystems, decades of vegetation build-up have resulted in overly dense tree stands and hazardous levels of underbrush. As a result, we face the challenging tasks of reducing fuels, restoring the health of our forests and rangelands, and reducing the vulnerability of our communities. These challenges are national and long term in scope. Meeting these challenges requires unprecedented levels of interagency cooperation among federal agencies and with state, tribal and local governments. To strengthen this cooperation, we continue to work through the Wildland Fire Leadership Council as a policy and implementation forum.

Of the three factors that most influence wildland fire behavior – weather, topography, and fuel - land managers can effectively influence only fuel. For much of the twentieth century, wildland fires were generally thought to be bad for the environment. As a consequence, fires were suppressed as soon as possible. Over time and across large areas, fire-adapted ecosystems changed as the amount and structure of shrubs and trees increased. The build up of vegetation, coupled with other factors such as long-term drought and the development of homes and communities next to public lands, has led to increasing concerns about the both the health of our forests and rangelands and the risks to communities near these lands. Both the President's Healthy Forests Initiative and the bi-partisan Healthy Forests Restoration Act recognize and help us address these challenges.

2005 SEASONAL WILDLAND FIRE OUTLOOK

The Predictive Services office at the National Interagency Fire Center (NIFC) provides an ongoing outlook for the fire season by monitoring weather conditions and other factors and reporting changing conditions. The reports increase in frequency as the fire season progresses. The preliminary outlook for the 2005 fire season shows normal fire potential in the southern and eastern states. Significant fire activity in the southwest is expected to occur mostly in the southern parts of Arizona and New Mexico at lower elevations. The potential for above-average fire activity exists in the northwest and northern Rocky Mountain States later this summer. Alaska is not expected to have another severe fire season like that of last year. Currently, the main threat for high fire potential is in the western Kenai Peninsula due to large areas of bug-killed spruce.

PREPAREDNESS

Predictive Services units located in each geographic area and at the national level provide integrated analysis and assessment of weather, climate and fuel conditions. This information supports local, geographic and national decisions about resource allocation based on anticipated fire starts, fire spread and severity. Local units identify required personnel, equipment, and supplies based on computer models that include local fire frequency and the resources at risk, such as homes or unique areas.

The closest local responders provide the initial fire attack. The closest available resource responds regardless of agency. Usually this is the agency with management jurisdiction and protection responsibility for the location of the fire, such as a national forest or national park. However, interagency agreements allow for response by the closest fire fighting entity.

In initial fire attacks, agencies use a variety of firefighting resources, including firefighters, engines, or a mixture of fixed-wing aircraft and helicopters. In recent years, agencies have succeeded in controlling 98 percent of fires through initial attack. If the fire continues to grow and locally available resources are inadequate, fire managers request additional resources.

Critical firefighting needs are coordinated through the National Interagency Coordination Center, located at the National Interagency Fire Center (NIFC) in Boise, Idaho. If fire-fighting resources are strained as a result of multiple simultaneous fires, resources are prioritized and allocated by the National Multi-Agency Coordinating group at NIFC. The National Multi-Agency Coordinating group consists of the national fire directors of all the Federal firefighting agencies and state representatives. These efforts ensure assets are appropriately positioned based on the most up to date information.

Firefighting resources include:

- Fulltime professional fire program leaders;
- Firefighters hired based on geographic area fire seasons;
- Federal agency personnel qualified and mobilized to perform incident management duties in addition to their normal responsibilities, often called the "militia";
- State and local personnel (including volunteer fire departments) through mutual aid agreements;
- Agency-owned equipment;
- Contract equipment, aircraft, and crews; and
- Firefighting personnel from other countries.

We expect to have firefighting resources comparable to those available last year. The number of firefighters usually peaks in late June as students become available following firefighter training. More than 18,000 firefighters will be available, including permanent and seasonal Federal and State employees, crews from Tribal and local governments, contract crews, and emergency/temporary hires. Training and qualification systems for personnel are standardized nationally. There are 16 Type 1 (500 individuals or greater) national interagency incident management teams available for complex fires or incidents. Thirty-eight Type 2 (200 individuals or less) incident management teams are available for regional or national incidents. If local areas experience severe fire risk, we will increase firefighting ability by staging or deploying firefighters, equipment, and teams as needed.

In 2005, the Department of Defense will make available two battalions (500 personnel each) to serve as firefighting crews if needed in extreme conditions (where requests exceed the available firefighters). If needed, additional firefighting resources are also available through other countries using established agreements and protocols.

Personnel, equipment, aircraft, vehicles, and supplies are dispatched and tracked through a nationally integrated system. Supplemental personnel, equipment, and aircraft will be prepositioned in specific locations when increased threats for fire starts are determined.

FIRE AVIATION

In May 2004, the Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management terminated the contracts for 33 heavy airtankers due to the National Transportation Safety Board recommendations about the airworthiness of the aircraft. In July 2004, airworthiness of eight P3s was determined and these planes were returned to service. , Tragically, one of these aircraft, a P3 Orion, crashed on April 20 during a training flight, killing three crew members. The incident is under investigation by the National Transportation Safety Board. While this aircraft was not operating at that time under contract to the government, we are deeply saddened by this loss and wish to underscore the imperative of maintaining safety for all firefighting activities.

Heavy airtankers are one of the many tools that we use to suppress wildland fires. The primary role of heavy airtankers is to deliver a large amount of retardant rapidly, in the initial attack of a wildfire. We have increased our fleet of other firefighting aircraft to assist ground firefighters, particularly during extended attack. We also note that during any year, thousands of wildland fires are suppressed without the benefit of air support.

In 2004, we reconfigured the fleet of firefighting aircraft. We increased the use of Single Engine Airtankers (SEATs), large helitankers, and medium helicopters, and we pre-positioned the military C-130 aircraft equipped with Modular Airborne Firefighting Systems (MAFFS) to areas of high fire danger, thereby reducing initial attack response times. As fire season 2005 develops, we will continue to monitor needs and reconfigure the fleet of firefighting aircraft as needed with the goal of successfully suppressing fires upon initial attack.

To date, our 2005 aviation plan includes 6 heavy airtankers, 6 large helitankers and helicopters, and more than 70 small and medium helicopters. Through cooperative agreements with State and interagency partners, there are 2 exclusive use CL-215 airtankers, 28 Exclusive Use SEATS, and approximately 70 Call- When-Needed SEATS. We expect that two to three Call-When-Needed CL-215s will be available. Eight military C-130 aircraft equipped with the Modular Airborne Firefighting System (MAFFS) are also available.

The heavy airtankers will continue to be downloaded by 15% by weight of retardant as an extra precaution. All of the airtankers have been configured with traffic collision avoidance systems. In addition, three heavy airtankers will be returned to limited service to collect operational loads data to be used in determining the mechanical stresses of aerial firefighting. Operational loads monitoring equipment will be installed in all activated airtankers as additional safety and data gathering tools.

The Forest Service and DOI, together with interagency partners, have initiated a long-term plan for aviation resources.

MANAGEMENT IMPROVEMENTS

Recognizing that the fire program is both complex and uses significant resources, the agencies and Wildland Fire Leadership Council have taken and continue to take steps to implement recommendations of the Administration's Program Assessment Rating Tool (PART) evaluation to improve the effectiveness and efficiency with which we use resources.

Fire Management Plans

Consistent with the 2001 National Fire Policy, Fire Management Plans have been completed for all of the National Forests and National Grasslands and the vast majority of lands managed by DOI, with the exception of BLM-managed lands in Alaska which will be completed by the end of September 2005. These new plans will enable us to increase substantially the use of wildland fire to accomplish land management objectives in predefined geographic areas.

Post-fire activities are determined by an assessment of damage caused by the fire and suppression activities as soon as safely possible. Plans are created and implemented for immediate repair of damage

caused by firefighting activities. Erosion control and replanting activities are also conducted based on the assessment of the risk for erosion and invasive species.

Fire Safety

Situational awareness is the centerpiece of firefighter safety and for managing the unexpected on wildfires. Both Departments have significantly increased training programs, and we are continually evaluating the results. After the investigations of fatal fires in the last decade, we have implemented a number of changes. Classroom training, review of qualifications, on-the-job training, drills, discussions, and after action reports and reviews are part of the expanded safety program. Firefighters today must complete more comprehensive coursework that includes multiple training assignments and simulations before they are certified for critical fireline positions.

Type 3 Incident Commanders (ICs) manage fires that have escaped initial attack using multiple resources. In reviewing the similarities among the incidents that led to fatalities over the last ten years, the Forest Service realized Type 3 ICs required a higher level of competency to oversee and manage more complex transitional fire operations. The Forest Service now requires Type 3 ICs to undergo real-time simulations to test their decision making skills under changing wildfire conditions. In 2004, every Forest Service Type 3 IC was required to be tested for proficiency in leadership and decision making skills. Every new Forest Service Type 3 IC must pass this proficiency test. In areas where Interior personnel work in close proximity to the Forest Service, many Interior Type 3 ICs took advantage of the Forest Service training and testing as well.

In fall 2004, the USDA Office of Inspector General (OIG) completed a review of the Forest Service Firefighting Safety Program. The report noted the Forest Service has made significant improvements in the safety of firefighting operations and had excellent written firefighting safety policies and procedures. The report identified four areas in which the agency can strengthen efforts to promote firefighter safety. The four areas that the OIG identified were: (1) monitoring the agency's response to fire safety recommendations, (2) maintaining centralized records to support firefighting qualifications, (3) conducting administrative investigations on serious fire accidents, and (4) incorporating firefighting safety standards as critical elements in firefighter performance evaluations.

Reviews such as the OIG report help us in our evaluations of firefighter safety. In cooperation with the Occupational Safety and Health Administration and other interagency partners through the National Wildfire Coordinating Group, we agree on areas of safety that need focus. For example, we improved our fire complexity analysis; enhanced training of agency administrators involved in fire suppression; emphasized fatigue awareness; and improved work/rest guidelines. We also clarified driving guidelines for both our employees and our contractors. We recently began the use of the Incident Qualifications Certification System which enhances our ability to track the formal training and on-the-job training of each federal firefighter and fire manager. With this system, fire managers and supervisors can better measure previous training and experience to help determine future training needs.

In addition, both Departments are concentrating on human factors such as experience, leadership, and performance. One major initiative is our interagency Wildland Fire Leadership Development Program. The program comprises three major components that affect both firefighters and fire managers. The first is a set of leadership values and principles that define good leadership and provide a framework for evaluating the performance of firefighters in leadership roles. The second component is a curriculum of formal leadership development courses that are designed to span the career of wildland firefighters from entry levels to management. The third component is an on-line resource (www.fireleadership.gov) that assists individual firefighters seeking to improve their leadership skills through self-directed continuing education efforts. We emphasize preparing leaders to be capable decision-makers in the complex and intense situations found in firefighting.

On an interagency basis, the Fireline Safety Refresher Training is updated annually and is a required course for all fire personnel. The annual updates focus on key safety principles and key issues that

surfaced in the preceding fire season. These updates are distributed nationwide to all agencies for use in required pre-season safety refresher courses.

Also, a Safety Summit and Human Factors Workshop is being held this week in Missoula, Montana. This summit, which has drawn hundreds of fire personnel from across the Nation, is focusing on leadership and human factors issues and training that we, as a group, believe contribute significantly to improved fire line safety and operational performance.

Contracted firefighting resources are additional assets for the agencies. We recognize our responsibilities for these resources and are working with the National Wildfire Coordinating Group to improve our interagency oversight to ensure safe, reliable performance.

Cost Containment

Interagency large-fire cost reviews, which began in 2003, continued in 2004. In 2004, the Wildland Fire Leadership Council convened a strategic cost panel comprising senior State, local, Tribal and Federal representatives and incident team members. The panel examined cost containment, including methods to better integrate suppression activities and vegetation management in a broader landscape context. The report, "Large Fire Suppression Costs, Strategies for Cost Management", was issued in July 2004. The report contains a variety of recommendations, many of which have the support of the Wildland Fire Leadership Council. A team assigned to design implementation actions will be reporting to the Wildland Fire Leadership Council in May.

Every year, the agencies prepare a Fire and Aviation Management Operations Action Plan. The Plan provides direction for suppression and includes direction for efficient coordination and cost containment.

In 2005, for those incidents that meet certain size, cost, and duration criteria, we will continue interagency large fire cost-containment oversight. In addition, the Forest Service asked the USDA Office of the Inspector General to conduct a large fire cost review in 2005. This review will look at decision making and cost containment practices. The Forest Service is assembling the internal and external review recommendations made over the past two years and will prioritize them based on their potential to improve efficiency and reduce costs. The Service will develop an implementation plan and track these recommendations.

Program Effectiveness

Finally, the Departments are continually working to improve program efficiency through a variety of means, including developing cost containment strategies, using data from established performance measures, integrating systems that implement cost reporting, prioritizing hazardous fuels projects, standardizing cost-sharing agreements, and reviewing recommendations made by an independent cost control review panel.

USE OF SCIENCE

Land managers are increasingly challenged by the need to justify decisions and apply scientifically sound solutions to firefighting as well as to on-the-ground land management. This need for science-informed decision making has always existed, but the demand is increasing as management agencies strive actively to address fuels problems and restore fire-adapted ecosystems. The need for new information and tools also is increasing as firefighting and treatments are applied in visible wildland urban interface areas and across larger areas of the landscape. As researchers develop information and tools to address these and other emerging issues, we are working to transfer rapidly and effectively these advances to managers so that work can be based on the best available information.

For example, the LANDFIRE project is a multi-partner ecosystem and fuel assessment mapping project. It is designed to map and model vegetation, fire, and fuels characteristics for the United States. The objective is to provide consistent, nationwide spatial data and predictive models needed by land and fire managers to evaluate, prioritize, plan, complete, and monitor fuel treatment and restoration projects. Two

prototypes, in Montana and Utah, are complete. We expect to complete this year a rapid assessment of fire regime condition class at the mid-scale. We expect national delivery of LANDFIRE products to occur over the next five years, with the western United States scheduled in 2006. These data will help agencies focus their effort where the risk is the greatest.

COLLABORATION: WHAT OUR PARTNERS ARE DOING

Collaboration lies at the heart of the Healthy Forests Restoration Act and President's Healthy Forests Initiative. A centerpiece of collaboration is in project selection and design. To enhance collaboration, the National Association of State Foresters, National Association of Counties (NACO), Society of American Foresters, and the Western Governors Association (WGA) prepared a handbook—"Preparing a Community Wildfire Protection Plan" in March 2004 to assist communities in identifying values, risks, mitigation measures, and priorities for wildland fire projects.

State and Federal land management agencies and local communities can use Community Wildfire Protection Plans (CWPPs) to bring about comprehensive and locally-supported solutions to the hazardous fuels problem in the wildland urban interface. As described in the Healthy Forests Restoration Act, these community plans provide local communities the opportunity to become involved in planning for hazardous fuels treatment on Federal lands.

Interior agencies have completed over 7000 fuel reduction projects associated with risk assessments and mitigation plans or Community Wildfire Protection Plans in WUI areas. The Bureau of Land Management places a high priority on assisting communities to complete Community Wildfire Protection Plans. Each state has a different approach. Some undertake their plans at the county level; others—like California—use a Fire Safe Council approach on a smaller geographic scale. Enough communities in Utah now have plans such that BLM is requiring all BLM wildland-urban interface projects to be identified in a completed Community Wildfire Protection Plan.

The Forest Service utilizes the State Fire Assistance (SFA) program to work with states, local and tribal governments and non-governmental organizations to enhance wildland fire prevention, hazard mitigation, and wildland fire suppression response. The Forest Service provides SFA funding to State Foresters to allocate for such tasks as coordinating wildland fire response, developing Community Wildfire Protection Plans, conducting hazardous fuel treatments in the wildland urban interface, and coordinating cross-boundary fuel treatment efforts. The Forest Service will provide \$73,099,000 of SFA funding in 2005.

Collaboration goes beyond priority-setting to include project implementation. The Wildland Fire Leadership Council is working with the WGA and others on developing a monitoring protocol, including ways to monitor the extent of collaboration and cooperation.

Citizens can take action through the FIREWISE program, which helps people who live or vacation in fire-prone areas educate themselves about wildland fire protection. Homeowners can learn how to protect their homes with a survivable, cleared space and how to build their houses and landscape their yard with fire resistant materials. A consortium of wildland fire agencies sponsors the program; the consortium includes the Forest Service, the Department of the Interior, the National Fire Protection Association, and the National Association of State Foresters.

We also continue working to enhance collaboration in firefighting with rural and volunteer firefighters. In 2004, Interior bureaus invested over \$9 million with nearly 1,500 rural fire departments. We invested another \$10 million with local communities doing risk assessments, mitigation planning, and implementation actions like fuels treatments. So far in 2005, Interior has issued 40 awards totaling \$332,000 in the rural fire assistance program, while dispensing another \$1.3 million in community assistance. We again expect to help about 1,500 rural fire departments with equipment purchases and training using some \$10 million in appropriated funds.

The Forest Service assists volunteer rural fire departments with funding for training, equipment and organization through the Volunteer Fire Assistance (VFA) program. In 2004, the Forest Service provided \$13,445,000 in VFA funding to over 2,600 volunteer fire departments to assist in the establishment of new fire departments, train firefighters, and fund the purchase, repair and maintenance of equipment. In 2005, another \$13,917,000 in funding is available to support volunteer fire departments through VFA, and the Forest Service expects to support a similar number of fire departments.

Some have expressed concerns about capacity for rural fire assistance going forward. We want to underscore that our commitment remains strong. Interior and the Forest Service expect to work closely with FEMA and its local fire assistance program to ensure that we are able to assist rural firefighting communities who contribute significantly to the wildland fire effort.

THE HEALTHY FORESTS INITIATIVE

We would also like to discuss briefly our progress in implementing the Healthy Forests Initiative. The President's Healthy Forests Initiative (HFI) includes both the Healthy Forest Restoration Act (HFRA) and administrative reforms that give federal agencies tools to reduce the risk of severe wildland fires and restore forest and rangeland health.

The HFRA complements administrative reforms put into place previously. These reforms help expedite hazardous fuel treatments and ecological restoration projects on federal land and are being successfully implemented. For example, hundreds of projects have proceeded using Categorical Exclusions, Guidance for Environmental Assessment of Healthy Forest Projects and Forest Stewardship Contracting.

The Forest Service and the Department of the Interior (DOI) agencies accomplished 4.2 million acres of hazardous fuel reduction in 2004. This includes 3.1 million acres treated under the hazardous fuels program and another 1.1 million acres from other DOI and USDA vegetative management activities that also result in fuels reduction. Overall, we exceeded our acreage targets by 13%. Thus far in FY 2005, about 1.6 million acres have been treated with hazardous fuels dollars. About 1.0 million of those acres located in the Wildland-Urban Interface (WUI).

At the Interior Department, WUI acres now account for over 60 percent of dollars spent and, we expect, nearly half of all acres in 2006. This contrasts to 20 percent of fuels reduction efforts in 2001. In total, DOI and Forest Service will have completed nearly 9 million acres of fuels treatments in WUI areas between 2001 and 2006.

A more complete list of our accomplishments in 2005 can be found in the Healthy Forests Report located on the internet at www.HealthyForests.gov. The FY 2006 President's Budget proposes more than \$867 million to continue our efforts. The FY2006 President's Budget proposes more than \$867 million to continue our efforts.

SUMMARY

In conclusion, Mr. Chairman and members of the Subcommittee, we are prepared for the 2005 fire season. We are happy to answer any questions you might have.