

**Statement of Nina Rose Hatfield
Deputy Assistant Secretary, Policy, Management and Budget
United States Department of the Interior
and
Mark Rey
Under Secretary for Natural Resources and Environment
United States Department of Agriculture
Before
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 review with you the Forest Service's and the Department of the Interior's preparedness for the 2006 fire season. Since the Department of the Interior and the Department of Agriculture work closely together in fire management, the two Departments are providing a joint statement.

Three themes characterize our efforts in wildland fire management and hazardous fuels reduction—availability of forces necessary to achieve a high rate of success, good management of firefighting forces, and collaboration with partners. Our preparedness ensures initial attack capability, with public and firefighter safety continuing to be a core value in our operations. Reducing fuels to lessen the risk and severity of fires – preventative treatment – is a critical part of our fire management efforts.

2005 FIRE SEASON

2005 was a year of fire, wind, and rain. Approximately 66,000 fires burned 8.7 million acres of Federal, State, and private lands; 50 percent of the acreage was in Alaska. Other areas of the country experiencing significantly greater than normal fire activity were the western and eastern Great Basin and the Southwest. Twenty five fires exceeded 40,000 acres each. Wildland fire use – by which fire was used to achieve resource management objectives in predefined geographic areas – accounted for an additional 489,000 acres. FY2005 Federal fire suppression costs totaled \$984 million including costs for hurricane response.

HURRICANE EFFECTS AND AFTERMATH

The Forest Service and Department of the Interior were tasked by the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) for emergency response under the National Response Plan following Hurricane Katrina which made landfall on August 29, 2005, on the Gulf Coast, and Hurricane Rita which made landfall on September 24, 2005, at Louisiana and Texas.

The ability of the Forest Service, the Department of the Interior, and their partners to contribute to hurricane emergency response is based upon years of experience in wildfire suppression and the use of the Incident Command System, the Incident Qualifications and Certification System (IQCS) and the Resource Ordering and Status System (ROSS). Interagency response peaked on October 1st with 28 Incident Management Teams on assignment. Approximately 5,500 people, including 139 crews and 2,780 management and support personnel, all qualified in the IQCS system, were assigned. In addition, 1734 pieces of equipment and 16 helicopters and fixed winged aircraft were mobilized and tracked through ROSS. Incident management teams managed all agency communications, coordinated the receipt and distribution of supplies, provided evacuees with food, shelter, and clothing, and supported emergency medical operations at the New Orleans base camp. Incident management teams also ran evacuation centers in Phoenix, Arizona, and Houston and San Antonio, Texas. Teams provided base camp operations and support to emergency responders and mortuary operations in 17 locations in Mississippi, Louisiana, and Texas. The agencies and their partners were able to adjust to the changing situation and provided coverage for fire suppression as well as rescue services.

While most of the response operations wound down in November, interagency teams continue to work with the States to plan for long range fuel mitigation, fire readiness and prevention, and fire suppression. The remaining personnel and equipment still providing state forestry assistance for hurricane response efforts will demobilize by April 8. We have conducted over 320,000 acres of hazardous fuels reduction on National Forests in the Gulf states. In addition over 60,000 acres of mechanical fuels treatment contracts have been awarded in Mississippi National Forests. The Forest Service has waived the normal 50/50 matching requirements for State Fire Assistance grants to facilitate the States' procurement of equipment and services for preparedness, mitigation of the severe fuel loading, and fire suppression. Due to drought, the enormous damage to forests by the hurricanes and resulting debris, firefighting crews and equipment have been moved to the Gulf Coast in anticipation of increased fire risk.

2006 SEASONAL WILDLAND FIRE OUTLOOK

The 2006 fire season started early this year, and fire activity has been well above normal in the Southern and Eastern areas of the United States. The National Interagency Fire Center (NIFC) Predictive Service Office expects fire potential to be significantly higher than normal across most of the Southwest, southern California, portions of the Rocky Mountain area, Texas, Oklahoma, and central Alaska. Recent precipitation in the Southwest and southern Plains will provide only temporary relief. Continued drought and carryover fine herbaceous fuels from 2005 will present an elevated risk of large fires over much of the West. Due to the lack of snow and rain, very dry conditions also extend from Florida to Virginia, where an active fire season is likely this spring. Assuming the weak La Nina pattern continues, warmer than normal conditions are expected over much of the South and West into the summer with drier than normal conditions predicted primarily from the southern Rockies to the southeast coast. By mid-summer other portions of the West, such as the Great Basin and northern California, are expected to see above normal fire potential. Overall, we anticipate a very active fire season for the remainder of 2006.

In this challenging fire season, citizens who live or vacation in fire-prone areas can gain valuable information about how to increase their safety and protect their homes and property through the FIREWISE program. 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. Information about the FIREWISE program can be found at www.firewise.org, sponsored by a consortium of wildland fire agencies that includes the Forest Service, the Department of the Interior, the National Fire Protection Association, and the National Association of State Foresters.

PREPAREDNESS

For the 2006 fire season, we have secured firefighting forces – firefighters, equipment, and aircraft – comparable to those available in 2005 and achieve similar success at initial attack. As has already been demonstrated during the fires in the Southeast and Southwest, we increase firefighting ability by locating our firefighters and equipment in areas of severe fire risk. The location of fire risk shifts with the progression of spring and summer. The Predictive Services staff continually analyzes weather, climate, and fuel conditions; the frequency of their assessments increases as the fire season progresses. Fire managers use the analyses to assign local, geographic and national firefighting personnel and equipment based on anticipated fire starts, fire spread, and severity.

In 2006, firefighting forces 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 cooperative and mutual aid agreements;
- Agency-owned equipment;
- Contract equipment, aircraft, and crews; and
- Firefighting personnel from other countries
- Department of Defense aircraft and personnel.

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. There are 17 Type 1 national interagency incident management teams (the most experienced and skilled teams) available for complex fires or incidents. Thirty-eight Type 2 incident management teams are available for geographical or national incidents.

Initial attack of a fire is handled by the closest available local resource regardless of agency jurisdiction. Generally this means that the agency with management jurisdiction and protection responsibility for the location of the fire, such as a national forest, Bureau of Land Management unit, wildlife refuge, or national park, handles initial attack. The local fire manager requests additional forces if the fire continues to grow.

The National Interagency Coordination Center, located in Boise, Idaho at NIFC, coordinates critical firefighting needs throughout the nation. In the event of multiple, simultaneous fires, firefighting forces are prioritized and allocated by the National Multi-Agency Coordinating group, a multiagency group of national fire directors also located at NIFC. Prioritizing ensures firefighting forces are positioned where they are needed most. Fire managers dispatch and track personnel, equipment, aircraft, vehicles, and supplies through an integrated national system. In 2006, if conditions become extreme, we will work with the Department of Defense under our standing agreements to provide assistance; in addition, firefighting forces are also available from Canada, Mexico, Australia, and New Zealand using established agreements and protocols.

When local areas experience severe fire risk, we will continue to move firefighters, equipment, and teams to those areas to increase our firefighting ability.

The ability of the Forest Service, Department of the Interior agencies, and their partners to respond to fires is the result of years of experience in the use of the Incident Command System, the Incident Qualifications Certification System, the Resource Ordering and Status System, and communications. While wildfire is the main mission, in the event of another hurricane or other national emergency, the Forest Service and Department of the Interior will assist partners as needed as part of the National Response Plan.

FIRE AVIATION

The fire aviation program has undergone significant changes since the spring of 2004 when contracts for large airtankers were terminated in the wake of the National Transportation Safety Board report addressing airworthiness issues. Large airtankers are one of the many tools that we use to suppress wildland fires. We have increased our fleet of other firefighting aircraft to assist ground forces, particularly during extended attack. We also note that during any year, thousands of wildland fires are suppressed without the benefit of air support. We testified before this Subcommittee on February 15, 2006, about the status of our fire aviation programs and our interagency long term aviation plan, so we will not go into detail here.

Our 2006 aviation plan includes 16 large airtankers and 258 large and medium helicopters. Through cooperative agreements with states and interagency partners, we have 2 CL-215 airtankers, and 107 single engine airtankers (SEATS) ready for service. Four military C-130 aircraft equipped with the Modular Airborne Firefighting System (MAFFS) are currently available. Four additional MAFFS aircraft are being overhauled and will be ready by early summer.

MANAGEMENT

Fire Safety

The tremendous complexity of the wildland fire management environment places many expectations upon our wildland firefighters. Above all else, human safety is our first priority. The Forest Service has adopted a foundational doctrine - principles guiding operations of fire suppression activities and actions. Currently, the Forest Service is reviewing guidance for dealing with the parts of fire suppression that rely

on interpretation, judgment, and agility. Review of current practices and policies is being done by people with expertise in risk management, human performance, fire safety, and the fire operations safety council.

Department of the Interior agencies and the Forest Service continue to require annual fireline safety refresher courses for all firefighting personnel. Additionally, the "6 Minutes for Safety", an interagency safety initiative, is issued daily during fire season and alerts firefighters to high-risk situations. It is distributed throughout the fire community.

Contracted firefighting forces are additional assets for the agencies. A recent audit by the USDA Office of Inspector General looked at the effectiveness of administration of contract crews. The Forest Service agreed with the results of the audit and has implemented most of the recommendations; the remainder will be implemented by the end of this summer's fire season. This Forest Service is working with the National Wildfire Coordinating Group to improve interagency oversight for ensuring safe, reliable performance of contract crews.

Budget

For FY2006, the total fire preparedness budget for the fire program for both Departments is \$934.9 million. The Forest Service receives \$666 million and allocates \$478 million of this to its regions for fire preparedness; the remaining \$188 million supports a variety of services, such as the National Interagency Fire Center, the National Advanced Fire and Resource Institute in Tucson, Arizona, Washington Fire and Aviation program leadership, projects at the Missoula and San Dimas Technology and Development Centers, the Albuquerque Service Center to process personnel and business transactions, and Information Technology programs. The Department of the Interior receives \$268.8 million for fire preparedness that is allocated to the four participating bureaus – the Bureau of Land Management, the Fish and Wildlife Service, the National Park Service, and the Bureau of Indian Affairs.

In the Appropriations language for the Forest Service for FY2006, Congress directed that fire suppression pay a proportionate share of cost pools (indirect costs) on the same basis as other funds. We want to assure you that no crews have been reduced as a result of this requirement because crews are funded through fire preparedness allocations. However, this direction has reduced available suppression funding by \$209 million, which may significantly increase the need for borrowing from other accounts in the event of a severe fire season. We again urge the Congress to recede from this direction.

As a matter of policy, the Department of the Interior does not assess indirect charges to the Fire Suppression program. However, appropriate direct program costs for the Department's Aircraft Management Directorate are charged to suppression. This policy ensures that the majority of appropriated dollars reach the ground for suppression operations. Furthermore, Department of the Interior policy limits the amount of indirect charges to non-suppression programs to 10 percent.

Cost Containment

In 2004, the Wildland Fire Leadership Council convened a strategic cost panel comprised of senior State, local, Tribal and Federal representatives and incident management team members. The panel examined cost containment, including methods to better integrate suppression activities and vegetation management in a broader landscape context. Teams are currently working on recommendations and have made considerable progress in implementation. For example, we are working with the U.S. Fire Administration to refine interoperability standards between structural and wildland firefighters to expand the use of local volunteer and rural fire departments in extended attack.

At Interior, we have aligned our 2006 Rural Fire Assistance program with the new Ready Reserve program to focus on providing training and safety gear to these volunteers to further expand wildland fire response capability and minimize mobilization efforts. Geographic coordination will be enhanced this year to more effectively manage national resources for large fire suppression.

For incidents that meet certain size, cost, and duration criteria, we will continue interagency large fire cost containment oversight. The Forest Service asked the USDA Office of the Inspector General to conduct a large fire cost review in 2005 and results should be out later this year. We will continue our review of large fires in 2006.

HAZARDOUS FUELS REDUCTION

We have a tremendously complex and dangerous fire and fuels situation in the United States. Many of the issues we are addressing are particularly challenging due to extended drought, climate change, human demographics, and societal expectations of forests and rangelands. We are pleased to report collaborative community-based stewardship is helping to restore forested landscapes to a healthy condition. We now treat more fuels than ever before.

Here are some other accomplishments in reducing hazardous fuels:

- At the request of the Western Governors' Association (WGA), the Wildland Fire Leadership Council is presently reviewing the "Implementation Plan" of the "10 Year Comprehensive Strategy" signed by WGA and the Secretaries of Interior and Agriculture in August 2001. The review is expected to be completed in early summer.
- Earlier this year, the Departments of the Interior and Agriculture completed a report entitled: "Protecting People and Natural Resources: A Cohesive Fuels Treatment Strategy." The report presents policy and management objectives and methods that will help reduce fire risk.
- The Forest Service and Department of the Interior last year treated hazardous fuels on more than 2.9 million acres of land, and reduced hazardous fuels on an additional 1.4 million acres through other land management actions. Over 2 million of these acres were in the wildland urban interface. The agencies achieved resource management objectives on 489,000 acres of lands in predefined geographic areas through Wildland Fire Use.
- The Department of the Interior, in collaboration with our non-federal partners, has shifted the hazardous fuels program to incorporate greater community protection. In 2001, Interior agencies treated some 165,000 acres in the wildland urban interface. Those acres accounted for 23 percent of our total program. In 2005, over 540,000 acres in the wildland urban interface were treated, a 230 percent increase and 43 percent of all treated acres.
- In 2005, State Foresters and local communities treated 77,000 non-Federal acres of hazardous fuels in the wildland urban interface using funds from the State Fire Assistance, administered by the Forest Service. For FY2006, funding will be used by States, local and Tribal governments and non-governmental organizations to build fire fighting capacity, develop Community Wildfire Protection Plans (CWPPs), and complete hazardous fuel projects.
- State and Federal land management agencies and local communities can use CWPPs to determine hazardous fuels treatments in the wildland urban interface. As of March 1, 2006, 650 CWPPs covering 2,700 communities at risk have been completed and 600 are in preparation.
- In 2005, we increased firefighting capacity by providing technical assistance, training and supplies to nearly 11,000 small rural communities through the Volunteer Fire Assistance (Forest Service) and Rural Fire Assistance (Department of the Interior). In 2006, additional funding will continue this work.

SUMMARY

In conclusion, Mr. Chairman and members of the Subcommittee, we are prepared for the 2006 fire season. Where local areas experience severe fire risk, firefighters, equipment and teams will be

assigned. We have a long term and complex fuels and fire situation that will continue to need to be addressed by communities, Tribes, States, and federal agencies. We appreciate your continued support and work as we move forward on these challenges. We are happy to answer any questions you might have.