

**STATEMENT OF  
JIM HUBBARD  
DEPUTY CHIEF, STATE AND PRIVATE FORESTRY**

**USDA FOREST SERVICE**

**BEFORE THE U.S. SENATE COMMITTEE ON AGRICULTURE  
SUBCOMMITTEE ON CONSERVATION, FORESTRY AND NATURAL RESOURCES**

**NOVEMBER 5, 2013**

**SHORT CHANGING OUR FORESTS: HOW REDUCING INVESTMENTS IN FOREST  
HEALTH INCREASES RISK IN WILDFIRE**

Chairman Bennet, Ranking Member Boozman, and members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today to provide the status of investments by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) Forest Service in wildland fire suppression and hazardous fuels treatments and their impacts on forest health.

Around the world, the last two decades have seen fires that are extraordinary in their size, intensity and impacts. In Australia in 2009, the Black Saturday Bushfires killed 170 people. Domestically, Florida, Georgia, Utah, California, Texas, Arizona, New Mexico and Colorado have all experienced the largest and/or the most destructive fires in their history just in the last six years. On average, wildfires burn twice as many acres each year as compared to 40 years ago and there are, on average, seven times as many fires that are larger than 10,000 acres per year. (Climate Central, 2012).

In 2013, over 4.1 million acres burned in the United States. The 2013 fires included 20 that were greater than 40,000 acres in size and 7 that exceeded 100,000 acres. Unfortunately, fires this

season have burned 4,419 residences and 499 commercial structures. Our condolences remain with the families of the 34 individuals who lost their lives during this fire season including the 19 brave members of the Granite Mountain Interagency Hotshot Crew.

Increases in large fires in the West coincide with an increase in temperatures and early snow melt in recent years. These factors also contribute to longer fire seasons. The length of the fire season has increased by over two months since the 1970s (Westerling, 2006). Contributing to the problem of large fires is severe drought, increased levels of hazardous fuels and a changing climate. Some experts anticipate future fire seasons on the order of 12 to 15 million acres burned each year. Extreme wildfire threatens lives and the natural resources people need and value, such as clean, abundant water; clean air; fish and wildlife habitat; open space for recreation; and other forest products and services. The Forest Service Missoula Fire Lab completed an analysis in 2012 that showed 58 million acres of National Forest System (NFS) lands with a high, or very high, potential for a large wildfire that would be difficult for suppression resources to contain (Dillon, 2012). At the same time, landscapes are becoming more susceptible to fire impacts, and more Americans are choosing to build their home in the Wildland Urban Interface (WUI). In the conterminous United States, some 32 percent of housing units (i.e. homes, apartment buildings, and other human dwellings) and one-tenth of all land with housing units are situated within the WUI (Radeloff et al., 2005).

Forest Service estimates indicate 464 million acres of all vegetated lands are at moderate to very high risk from uncharacteristically large wildfires (Dillon 2012). The National Association of State Foresters estimates that over 70,000 communities are at risk from wildfire.

## **IMPACTS OF INCREASED FIRE COSTS**

In Fiscal Year (FY) 1991, fire activities accounted for about 13 percent of the total Agency budget; in FY 2012, it was over 40 percent. In the 1980s and 1990s, the 10-year average of suppression costs remained relatively stable, as did the number of acres burned nationwide. This was an abnormally wet period in the United States and fire activity was relatively low. However, beginning in the extreme fire season of 2000, which cost \$1 billion in suppression, this trend started to change. The cost of the FY 2000 fires alone caused the 10-year average to rise by over \$80 million – a 16 percent increase. Wildland Fire Management now makes up almost half of the Agency’s discretionary budget. Funding fire suppression has presented budgetary challenges for the Forest Service including the need to budget less for non-fire programs in an effort to maintain funding for fire suppression.

Fire transfers from non-fire accounts occur when the Agency has exhausted all available fire resources from the Suppression and FLAME accounts. From FY 2002 to FY 2012, the Forest Service made fire transfers from discretionary, trust, and permanent non-fire accounts to pay for fire suppression costs six times, ranging from \$100 million in FY 2007 to \$999 million in FY 2002, and totaling approximately \$2.7 billion. Of that total, \$2.3 billion was repaid but the transfers still led to disruptions within all Forest Service programs. In FY 2013, the Forest Service transferred \$505 million to the fire suppression and preparedness accounts for emergency fire suppression due to severe burning conditions and increasing fire suppression costs. We greatly appreciate the repayment of these transferred funds provided by Congress as part of the Continuing Appropriations Act, 2014.

Each time the Agency transfers money out of non-fire accounts to pay for fire suppression there are significant and lasting impacts across the entire Forest Service. When funding is transferred from other programs to support fire suppression operations, these non-fire programs are impacted because they are unable to accomplish priority work and achieve the overall mission of the Agency. Often this priority work mitigates wildland fire hazards in future years. In addition, transfers negatively impact local businesses and economies, costing people jobs and income as a result of delayed or cancelled projects.

Our partners at DOI have experienced similar challenges. The Administration believes that a new approach to funding wildland fire management is necessary. We are committed to working with Congress to find a solution that avoids funding transfers and enhances the Agency's ability to prepare for, respond to, and mitigate the threat of wildfire in a way that is accountable and science-based.

## **BURNED AREA EMERGENCY RESPONSE**

The funding spent to extinguish wildfires accounts for only a fraction of the total costs associated with a wildfire event. Damages from wildfire can result in increased flooding and erosion, water and air quality impacts, lost recreational and tourism opportunities resulting in impacts on revenues to local businesses, infrastructure shutdowns (e.g., highways, railroads), and increased costs for recovery and restoration. Burned Area Emergency Response (BAER) is a Forest Service emergency program that responds to imminent and unacceptable risks to people and resources that are triggered by changed conditions caused by fires. BAER teams conduct

assessments as soon as conditions are safe (often before a fire is fully contained). Assessments are completed to identify potential threats such as excessive erosion, flooding, invasive plants and falling trees and rocks. After determining risk, BAER teams evaluate the most cost effective treatments that can be accomplished to minimize additional damage. Treatments such as hillside stabilization, invasive weed treatment, recreation site repair, soil and stream channel improvement, line boundary resurveys, road protection, hazardous material stabilization and hazard tree removal occur within the first year following the fire and follow National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) requirements for emergency actions. In some cases, conditions are such that no treatment will mitigate the risk of potential threats (e.g., excessive erosion, flooding).

In FY 2011 and FY 2012, the Forest Service program spent almost \$94 million through the BAER program for emergency stabilization efforts on NFS lands immediately after fires. As of mid-September this year, the Forest Service has spent \$25 million for BAER work in response to fires during FY2013 and expects to approve an additional \$15 million for work to be accomplished before the end of this calendar year. In Colorado, there is an estimated \$15 million needed for reforestation, fence replacement, weed treatment, boundary resurveys, road and trail work, and other recovery efforts following last year's High Park, Waldo, and West Fork fires.

Through other non-emergency programs, the Forest Service repairs fire-damaged facilities, repairs or improves land by replanting trees, re-seeds bare areas with grass or forbs, rebuilds burned fences, resurveys property boundaries, rebuilds burned campgrounds, restores wildlife habitat and other rehabilitation activities.

## **RESTORING ECOSYSTEMS AND REDUCING HAZARDOUS FUELS**

The Forest Service is restoring the ability of forest and grassland ecosystems to resist climate-related stresses, recover from climate-related disturbances, and continue to deliver important values and benefits. By restoration, we mean restoring the functions and processes characteristic of healthier, more resistant, more resilient ecosystems, even if they are not exactly the same systems as before. Restoring and maintaining fire resilient landscapes is critical and essential to our stewardship responsibilities for the National Forest System. Factors including human activities and land development, loss of indigenous burning practices, and fire suppression have all led to changes in forests that historically had frequent fires. Some forests have experienced a buildup of trees and brush due to a lack of fire. In some areas fuel loads on the forest floor have increased where low intensity fires were historically the norm. These forest types are now experiencing high severity fires under even moderate weather conditions.

There are many programs within the Forest Service that can reduce the risk of catastrophic wildland fires. These include Integrated Resource Restoration, Collaborative Forest Landscape Restoration, Hazardous Fuels, Federal and Cooperative Forest Health programs, Stewardship Contracting, Good Neighbor Authority, State Fire Assistance, and others. Approaches to restoring fire-adapted ecosystems often require treatment or removal of excess fuels (e.g., through mechanical thinning, prescribed fire, or a combination of the two) that reduce tree densities in uncharacteristically crowded forests, and application of fire to promote the growth of native plants and reestablish desired vegetation and fuel conditions. Excess fuels often include leaf litter and debris on the forest floor as well as the branches and foliage of small trees. These

provide ladder fuels that often allow surface fires to transition to high intensity crown fires. Fuel treatments result in more resilient and healthier ecosystems that provide the many benefits society wants and needs, including clean water, scenic and recreational values, wood products, biodiversity, communities that are better able to withstand wildfire, and safer conditions for firefighters. Fuel treatments change fire behavior, decrease fire size and intensity, divert fire away from high value resources, and can result in reduced suppression costs.

When a wildfire starts within or burns into a fuel treatment area, an assessment is conducted to evaluate the resulting impacts on fire behavior and fire suppression actions. Of over 1,400 assessments conducted to date, over 90 percent of the fuel treatments were effective in changing fire behavior and/or helping with control of the wildfire (USFS, Fuels Treatment Effectiveness Database).

In FY 2012, the Forest Service treated a total of 2 million acres, which included 1.2 million acres of prescribed fire treatments, 662,500 acres of mechanical treatments to reduce hazardous fuels, and 141,300 acres of wildfire management to reduce hazardous fuels. The WUI remains the highest priority. Nearly 1.3 million acres of the total hazardous fuels reduction acres were in the WUI. Of these treatments, 93 percent of the acres accomplished were identified as a treatment priority in a community wildfire protection plan or an equivalent collaborative plan. Hazardous fuels treatments also produced 2.8 million green tons used for energy and nearly 500,000 million board feet (MMBF) of wood products. We are working with the Department of the Interior to improve the implementation and measurement of hazardous fuels removal projects to increase the beneficial outcomes.

The Forest Service utilizes the Collaborative Forest Landscape Restoration (CFLR) Program to restore large landscapes. Currently, 23 CFLR projects are underway that emphasize restoration across large scale landscapes in order to reestablish natural fire regimes and reduce the risk of uncharacteristic wildfire. In addition to finding efficiencies in planning and treating larger landscapes, CFLR emphasizes collaboration. Through work with partners, land managers are able to leverage funding to accomplish additional work on the ground. In FY 2012, these projects exceeded the targets for the majority of performance measures.

Colorado has two CFLR projects that are having a measurable impact on rural economies and reducing hazardous fuels, the Uncompahgre Plateau and the Front Range Landscape Restoration Initiative. To date, the Uncompahgre project has generated 12 MMBF of timber, and it reduced hazardous fuels on more than 11,500 acres. The Uncompahgre Plateau and the rest of the lands administered by the Grand Mesa, Uncompahgre, and Gunnison National Forests will play a key role in support of the newly opened lumber mill in Montrose. As part of the Colorado Front Range project, Denver Water contributed more than \$1,000,000 in 2012 for restoration efforts. Since FY 2010, the Front Range project has reduced hazardous fuels on more than 17,000 acres and generated more than 17 MMBF of timber.

The Southwest Crown of the Continent CFLR project in Montana has produced more than 139,000 green tons of biomass and 36 MMBF of timber, established or improved vegetation on more than 6,600 acres, and enhanced more than 66 miles of stream habitat and 18,799 acres of terrestrial habitat. This project generated and maintained 155 full and part time jobs in FY 2012.



We know we cannot achieve this restoration work without a strong integrated forest products industry that can use all parts and sizes of trees. Our best opportunity for reducing the cost of these restoration treatments is through timber harvest and stewardship contracting. Maintaining a robust forest industry also provides benefits to local communities and economies—we rely on local forest contractors and mills to provide the workforce to undertake a variety of restoration activities.

Stewardship contracting (along with timber sale contracts) is a critical tool that allows the Forest Service to more efficiently complete restoration activities. Permanently reauthorizing stewardship contracting and expanding the use of this tool is crucial to our ability to collaboratively restore landscapes at a reduced cost to the government by offsetting the value of the services received with the value of forest products removed. In FY 2012, 25 percent of all timber volume sold was under a stewardship contract. Stewardship Contracting facilitates the removal of low value material (woody biomass) through removal of higher value products, aiding in accomplishing restoration objectives through goods for services. Stewardship contracting authorities enable the Agency to fund watershed and wildlife habitat improvement projects, invasive species removal, road decommissioning, and hazardous fuels reduction activities.

Another tool that has been helpful in fuels reduction has been the Good Neighbor Authority. In 2000, Congress authorized the Forest Service to undertake a pilot program referred to as “Good Neighbor” in Colorado and granted authority for the program in Utah in 2004. This legislation

authorizes the Forest Service to enter into cooperative agreements or contracts with state foresters to conduct certain watershed restoration activities—such as reducing hazardous fuels, addressing insect outbreaks, and improving drainage to prevent sediment from eroding into forested watersheds—on NFS land. In Colorado, the state must be conducting similar activities on adjacent state or private land, but in Utah the statute does not require the state to conduct similar work on adjacent state or private land. Although projects are conducted by the state, projects on federal land remain subject to NEPA and this responsibility cannot be delegated to the state. The Good Neighbor Authority expired in Colorado on September 30, 2013, but was extended by the 2014 Continuing Resolution through January 15, 2014. The Forest Service supports extending this authority and expanding its use to other states.

The agency is looking to target and focus limited resources on high value resources to communities. One example of this is the Western Watershed Enhancement Partnership announced this past summer as part of the President's Climate Action Plan. The Partnership, a cooperative arrangement between the USDA Forest Service and the DOI Bureau of Reclamation (BOR), targets the 43 BOR reservoirs for hazardous fuel reduction and other wildfire risk reduction efforts. Key to the effort is the open invitation to local communities and municipalities to join the federal agencies to manage key watershed storage resources and reduce their risk to wildfire.

The Agency has the capability to protect life, property, and natural resources while assuring an appropriate, risk-informed, and effective response to wildfires that is consistent with land and resource management objectives. However, we cannot do this alone. Wildland fires are managed by the Federal Government, State, Tribal and local governments. The Forest Service and DOI alone cannot prevent the

loss of life and property. Research demonstrates that the characteristics of a structure's surroundings within 100 feet principally determine the potential for ignition. To improve the survivability of structures, the Forest Service and DOI work with State and local governments to develop and implement community protection plans. In addition, the Forest Service targets hazardous fuels funding to areas with the highest impact which often includes near communities that have already taken steps to reduce fire risk. Forest Service programs, including the State Fire and Volunteer Fire Assistance programs, and the Federal and Cooperative Forest Health Protection programs provide important assistance to States, local communities and non-Federal landowners in responding to, preparing for, and mitigating the threat of wildland fire.

## **CHALLENGES FOR THE FUTURE**

For the Forest Service, changes in environmental conditions are altering forests, grasslands, and waterways and changing the benefits they provide. In an era of catastrophic fires and a changing climate, we must adapt our management to help ensure a sustainable future. Our mandate is to deliver the goods and services Americans need from forests and grasslands, along with the associated jobs and economic benefits. A legacy of fire exclusion, fuel buildup, and increasing wildfires, combined with urban development, loss of open space, invasive species, and the spread of forest pests and diseases are creating dynamic modifications of our landscape. These factors interact in multiple ways and are creating a challenging new environment for land and natural resources management now and into the future.

This concludes my statement. We look forward to working with the Subcommittee to resolve these challenges. I would be happy to answer any questions that you may have.