

**TESTIMONY of
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BEFORE THE
UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
COMMITTEE ON OVERSIGHT AND REFORM
SUBCOMMITTEE ON ENVIRONMENT
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Concerning
The Wildfire Crisis Strategy**

Thank you for inviting me to testify about the Forest Service’s 10 Year Strategy to Confront the Wildfire Crisis. We deeply appreciate Congress’s passage of the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law (BIL), which provides a significant down payment on the work we intend to accomplish under this strategy. Of the \$5.5 billion in funding provided by the BIL for the Forest Service, about \$3 billion will be invested over five years to reduce the risk of wildland fire to communities and restore ecosystems.

Value of Forests to People

People depend on the nation’s forests and grasslands for their social, economic, and personal well-being. National forests and grasslands are critical for climate resilience, providing benefits including carbon storage, habitat and connectivity for wildlife, and clean air and water. For example, nationwide, more than 60 million people living in 3,400 communities across 36 states depend on the national forests and grasslands for their drinking water. This includes residents of great cities like Portland, Denver, and Atlanta.

Americans also rely on their national forests and grasslands for recreation and respite. The benefits include physical exercise and all the mental and other health improvements that come with it. In 2020, the National Forest System had 168 million visitors, more than 50% of the United States population. For local communities, this is where they live and gather. Outdoor activities and scenery give communities a sense of identity and place, adding to their quality of life.

The National Forest System is also a tremendous source of jobs and economic opportunities for hundreds of thousands of Americans. In 2020, the National Forest System supported more than 370,000 jobs and contributed more than \$35 billion to our nation’s Gross Domestic Product (GDP). Outdoor recreation alone accounted for 45 percent of those jobs and 38 percent of the contribution to GDP in 2020. Management and investments, including fuels and forest health treatments, accounted for more than a quarter of the jobs and 31 percent of the contribution to GDP.

All this and more are now at risk on forests and grasslands nationwide.

The Risks to Forests

Nearly a quarter of the contiguous U.S. is currently in a high to moderate wildfire condition. Over the last two decades we have witnessed what has become a now familiar pattern: bigger and more destructive wildfires that are extremely challenging and costly to suppress. We have experienced catastrophic fire seasons in the last two years alone, devastating communities and destroying resources in their wake. They threaten human health, water quality, homes, jobs, local economies, communities, and infrastructure. They also threaten key ecological values, including carbon storage, species habitat, soil stability and watershed function: in some cases, even resulting in long-term deforestation.

Vast areas of the West and across the country are at risk from huge wildfires that can quickly spread 10 to 30 miles or more, burning through multiple landownerships, forest types, and communities. Conditions are only expected to worsen as climate continues to change at its current rate, and development in the Wildland Urban Interface continues unabated.

This growing wildfire crisis created the need for a new land management strategy—one designed to support strategic management and restoration of millions of acres of land in high-risk areas to protect forest health, watershed function, and human infrastructure. The need for increased pace and scale of restoration necessitates a holistic response in partnership with multiple agencies, State and Tribal governments, communities, industries, organizations, and private landowners.

This collaborative response needs to be a paradigm shift from small-scale, independently managed treatments to strategic, science-based landscape scale treatments that cross boundaries and meet the scale of the problem, starting initially with those places critically at risk.

The Wildfire Crisis Strategy

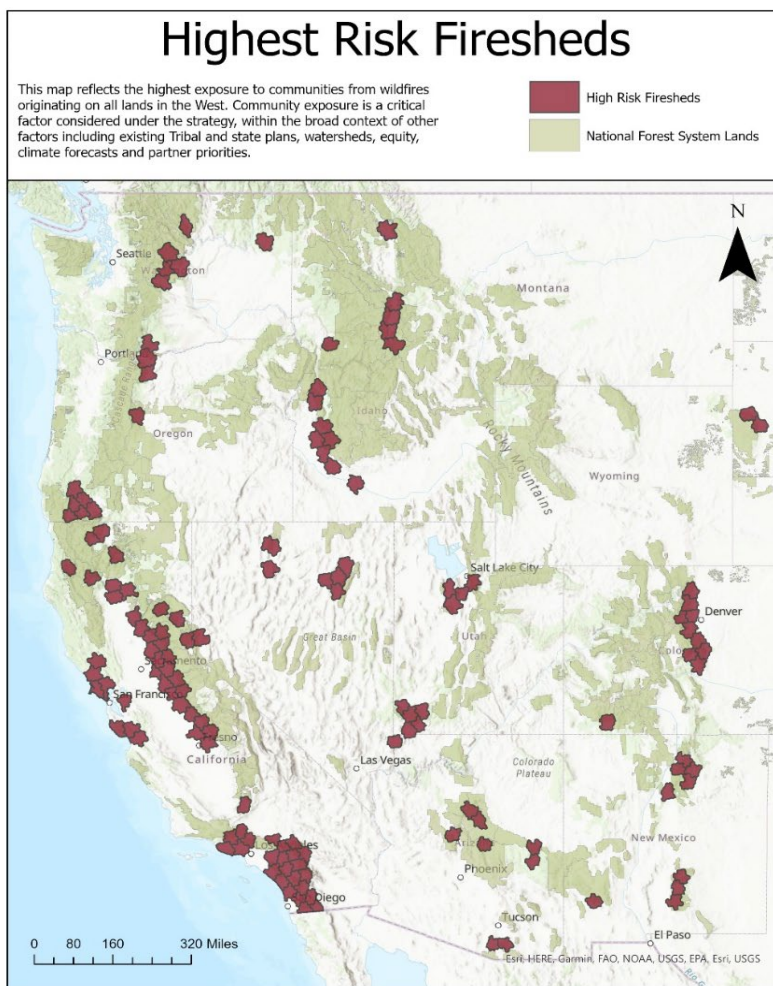
Our 10-year Wildfire Crisis Strategy will increase fuels treatments by up to four times previous treatment levels, especially in those areas most at risk. Fuels treatments by the Forest Service together with partners have made a difference over the years. But the scale of treatments has been outmatched by the rapid increase in the scale of wildfires as climate change accelerates.

This strategy calls for treating up to 20 million additional acres of National Forest System lands over the coming decade, and working with partners, including colleagues at the Department of the Interior, to treat up to 30 million additional acres on adjoining lands of multiple land ownerships, while building a long-term maintenance plan. The intent for these treatments is to meaningfully reduce the trajectory of wildfire risk to people, communities and natural resources, and restore fire-adapted landscapes so they are more resilient.

Active management rooted in sound science and ecological principles will remain a key tool in this work. We are using every tool and authority we have to protect and improve the health of America's forests. The tools we have include prescribed fire, mechanical thinning, targeted grazing, herbicides in some cases, Good Neighbor Authority agreements, Tribal Forest Protection Act agreements, and stewardship contracts.

It will be imperative to use fire itself for fuel and forest management in our western landscapes because many of the ecosystems evolved with fire. Fire is an essential and highly effective fuel treatment to reduce wildfire risk and can have ecological benefits for many western forest types.

Connecting landscape risk reduction and resilience with community risk reduction and resilience at the necessary scale is a critical part of the paradigm shift. Our tools for these connections include community fire prevention programs, community wildfire protection plans (CWPP), and Firewise practices for homes and communities to reduce the risk of catastrophic wildfire. In addition, the Forest Service is working with the National Association of State Foresters, Intertribal Timber Council, and other partners to implement the Community Wildfire Defense Grant (CWDG) Program authorized in the BIL and funded with \$1 billion to be spent over a five-year period. The CWDG program will provide financial assistance to “at risk” communities to develop CWPPs and to implement prevention and mitigation activities described within CWPPs which will reduce wildfire risk. Those communities that have a high or very high risk of wildfire, are considered low-income, or have been impacted by a severe disaster will all be given priority in the consideration process for grants.



Reforestation and post-fire risk reduction are also important components of this work. Reforestation provides one of the main tools for national forests to adapt to and mitigate the effects of climate change. By reforesting in the right place, at the right time, with the right trees, we foster the development of future resilient forests and the ecosystem benefits they provide for us and future generations. Part of the BIL, the REPLANT Act, gives us an historic opportunity to address the reforestation backlog needs from wildfires and other disturbances. With the REPLANT Act, we anticipate employing between \$140 to \$260 million per year for reforestation and related work. This will enable us to ramp up reforestation

treatments to almost 500,000 acres/year, including 200,000 acres of planting – a more than 300% increase.

I want to stress that the additional acres treated under the 10-year strategy will be over and above regular appropriations. That means the work that we have historically accomplished- in timber production, recreation, mining, wildlife habitat management- will continue.

These additional acres will focus on key high-risk firesheds- large, forested landscapes, 250,000 acres in size, with a high likelihood that an ignition could place homes, communities, infrastructure, municipal watersheds, critical habitats, and other values at risk. There are firesheds across the United States that need urgent attention.

The map included in the 10-year strategy shows firesheds where structures are at the highest risk based on historic ignitions. We are currently working to add watershed and social equity considerations into this risk map to inform decision-making and are holding national and regional roundtables that will inform implementation.

It is important to note that just because a community is not included in a high-risk fireshed, does not mean that it is not at risk from catastrophic wildfire. Treatments in nearby firesheds may be necessary to reduce that community's risk. Firesheds point to the source of ignition and not to all areas that could be affected by that ignition.

Implementation

While an important variable in project-decision making, fireshed risk is not the only variable that will be considered for priority projects under the 10-year Wildfire Strategy. Forest Service Regions and units will plan implementation work across entire landscapes, determined in coordination with states, counties, Tribes, partners, and private landowners. The Forest Service remains committed to sustaining the health, diversity, and productivity of all of America's forests.

We will build upon collaborative efforts already in place, such as the Joint Chiefs' Landscape Restoration Partnership, Shared Stewardship agreements, and the Collaborative Forest Landscape Restoration Program.

We will implement the strategy in two phases, with early implementation in Fiscal Years 2022 and 2023, followed by a focus on further developing projects through engagement and best available science from Fiscal Years 2024 through 2031. Our implementation plan will ensure we do the right work in the right place, and at the right scale to reduce wildfire severity, protect communities, and improve forest resiliency. We have also identified critical enabling conditions needed for long-term success such as workforce capacity, partner capacity, science and technology, and the incorporation of additional screens into the strategy to protect other important values on national forests, such as stands of older and mature trees.

We will continue to work with partners and communities to identify those places that meet the intent of the BIL, align with high-risk firesheds, have been collaboratively developed with a cross boundary lens, are designed at the scale necessary to mitigate risk to communities or can be

built out to scale, and have the capacity internally and with partners, including industry, to deliver on expectations. The agency is currently validating existing projects that have been through the planning process, are aligned with high-risk firesheds and are ready for early implementation.

The Forest Service will also lay out the basis for accelerated actions in Fiscal Years 2024 through 2031 by investing in the foundational elements for success which include additional workforce capacity, internal and external engagement, coalition building, science and technology, planning and implementation followed by long-term maintenance.

In addition, Forest Service research will continue to provide the scientific understanding we need to manage forests and grasslands sustainably in response to a changing climate, increasingly frequent disturbances, and threats from invasive species. We know that we must also focus on research to secure desirable tree reproduction for sustained goods and services, improve forest health through science-based active management, protect significant carbon stores on national forest lands, and restore resilient grasslands, savannas, woodlands, and forests. Incorporating Indigenous Traditional Ecological Knowledge will be a key part of our work.

Roundtables

The Forest Service’s engagement strategy strengthens alignment with and leverages the energy and innovation of others around this critical work. This includes close engagement with the U.S. Department of the Interior and other Federal agencies, Tribal consultation, national and regional roundtables with State and local partners, and engagement with the partners and stakeholders at multiple levels across the country.

This paradigm shift will take all of us working together, which is why the Forest Service is partnering with the National Forest Foundation (NFF) to host a series of internal and external roundtable discussions to increase understanding and awareness of the wildfire crisis, co-develop strategies for confronting the crisis, and explore ways to better leverage internal and external abilities and resources. We kicked off our national roundtable in early February with over 100 employees and partners and have since hosted two regional sessions in Regions 2 and 3. Our California roundtable begins today. We are working with regions through May to host targeted listening sessions with local partners and stakeholders to inform our implementation plan.

Roundtable Geographical Focus	Timeframe
National	February 3, 4, and 9
Region 3	February 22, 23, 24
Region 2	February 28, March 1, 7
Region 5	March 16, 17, 18
Region 6	Apr 5, 6, 7
Region 1	April 20, 21, 22
Region 4	May 3, 4, 5
Region 8	May 17, 18, 19
Region 9	Mid-May
Region 10	Late May

In the three roundtables held so far, we have heard about the need for an all-of-government approach to data and science, consistent policies around metrics, and improved use of

local knowledge and support, including Indigenous Traditional Ecological Knowledge. We need to build on the momentum created by State Forest Action Plans and Shared Stewardship. We have heard the need to incorporate data layers for additional ecologic and social values into the fire risk map to inform prioritization and treatment design. We have heard urgency around investing in shared workforce capacity, and that the Forest Service can play a catalytic role in supporting job growth in rural areas. There remains a critical need to work closely with the forest product industry to identify market solutions for utilizing restoration byproducts.

Following these engagements, NFF will present a synthesis of its findings and recommendations to Forest Service leadership in June 2022. NFF will also host a series of webinars for participants and interested audiences on its findings and recommendations. We anticipate the webinar series to be held in June and July of this year.

Capacity Building

No one organization can meet the goals of the Wildfire Crisis Strategy alone. We will work with and through our partners to implement the strategy. Our fellow land management agencies at the Department of the Interior are critical partners. We are also actively engaging with other agencies, partners, States, Tribes, counties, local communities, and other stakeholders to identify shared priorities. That includes meeting with local collaborative groups and with partners who have been working on cross-boundary treatments through Cohesive Strategy projects, Shared Stewardship agreements, Joint Chiefs' Landscape Restoration projects, Tribal Forest Protection Act projects, and Collaborative Forest Landscape Restoration projects.

To achieve the collective impact that our forests and communities need, we must build a coalition to work across land management jurisdictions, leverage diverse capacities, and build broad public and community support for the work at the scale necessary to make a difference. This includes work across Federal, Tribal, State, local, and private lands. Partnerships, including those beyond existing contracts and agreements, will help identify barriers to success and ways to overcome them.

The agency is also working to increase capacity to deliver on the Wildfire Crisis Strategy. Hiring and retaining firefighters in increasingly long and complex fire years is a challenge that we take seriously. The BIL provides targeted funds that enable the Forest Service to make significant investments in a stable, professional, permanent wildland firefighting workforce, and in programs that focus on mental health, resilience, and well-being. USDA, in collaboration with its partners at DOI and the Office of Personnel Management (OPM), is working to implement the BIL pay and staffing conversion provisions.

The Forest Service remains committed to creating an inclusive work environment where every employee, including our firefighters, feels safe, valued, and respected. We have made significant progress and we recognize we have more work to do. This remains a top priority. Specifically, we are focused on building skills that will enable employees and leaders to contribute towards a value-based, safe and harassment-free work environment.

In addition to hiring and retaining firefighters, the Forest Service is taking steps to rebuild capacity lost over time as more and more budgetary resources for the agency's core work were

redirected towards covering the rising costs of suppressing wildland fires. To facilitate short-term, large-scale hiring, the Forest Service implemented a national hiring strategy designed to target the agency's most critical capacity needs using expedited processes. The first wave of hiring focused towards specific support of occupations that provide the foundation for additional capacity building needs across the agency. In that first wave, we hired 91 Grants and Agreements Specialists, 142 Contract Specialists, and 74 Human Relations Specialists.

The second, and future waves, will focus on occupations that increase capacity to conduct critical program-level projects, including Civil Engineers, Foresters, and natural resource professionals to design, plan, and ensure our work meets the highest standards of natural resource management. We will also need collaboration and partnership specialists to engage communities and partners, and to ensure that this work is designed and implemented in ways that are equitable and reflect our commitment to environmental justice. Work is ongoing to identify occupational focuses for additional waves of national hiring to further increase capacity to mitigate wildland fire risk over the next decade.

The Forest Service also continues to take advantage of other timesaving hiring mechanisms including non-competitive hiring authorities such as veteran hiring, the Resource Assistant Program Direct Hiring Authority, OPM-sponsored BIL-related hiring surges, and collective hiring.

The Forest Service is also developing tools to support national and regional hiring. These tools will save hundreds of hours of otherwise manual handling and tracking for single vacancies. In addition, we are undertaking broad-scale position standardization at all levels to facilitate more efficient and timely hiring as well as workforce diversification.

In addition to our internal workforce, the Forest Service will be prioritizing investing in partner capacity and relationships to enable shared work.

Conclusion

The scope of the Wildfire Crisis Strategy is historic, and it will have a profound effect on America's forests and grasslands and adjacent communities. We greatly appreciate the significant down payment Congress has provided through the BIL that will allow the agency, with our many partners, to take the initial steps of this important work. Fully implementing this strategy will allow us to have healthier watersheds that provide clean water to rural communities, towns, and some of our largest cities. This proactive work will help to reduce the heavy smoke that as recently as last summer blanketed the country from California to the Carolinas. Americans who currently live in at-risk communities will be safer from catastrophic wildfire and the brave people in our wildland firefighting community will have safer anchor points from which to work. The strategy will create new jobs, new markets, and innovative uses for the wood that results from these treatments. And our collaborative approach will lead to stronger relationships with existing partners and build relationships with new partners and new industries. Finally, this work will result in resilient landscapes that have ecologic integrity, provide essential ecosystem services including carbon storage and habitat for wildlife, and boundless opportunities for American citizens to recreate.

The Forest Service looks forward to working with this Subcommittee to reduce the severity of wildfires in our country. This concludes my testimony. I welcome any questions the Subcommittee may have.