

**Statement of Shawna Legarza, Director of Fire and Aviation Management,
USDA Forest Service
Before
The House Committee on Oversight and Government Reform
Subcommittee on the Interior, Energy, and Environment
Concerning
Wildfire Management and Response: Challenges and Opportunities.
August 7, 2018, 10:00 a.m.**

Chairman Gianforte and members of the Subcommittee, thank you for inviting me to testify on the agency's efforts to prepare for and respond to wildfires. Last year, our nation endured a long and devastating fire year, one that had significant impacts in Montana. Current wildland fire activity predictions indicate that this trend may continue in 2018 in the Northern Rockies. As in the past, the agency is committed to working with our federal, state, tribal, and local partners to make sound resource allocation decisions in order to safely and effectively respond to wildfires. I appreciate the Subcommittee's continued support, and your recognition that this work goes beyond wildfire response--it is just as important to proactively create healthy, fire-resilient conditions on National Forest System lands so that they provide for the uses, experiences and services that meet the needs of our Nation. To continue improving forest and rangeland conditions and reduce wildfire risk, the agency will bring urgency and focus to working at larger scales and increasing active management, using all the tools we have available, including the expanded authorities recently provided by Congress.

2017 Wildfire Year

Last year was one of the most devastating wildfire years on record. Tragically, dozens of Americans were killed, including 14 wildland firefighters who perished while working to protect lives and property. Communities in the Great Plains, the Southeast, the Southwest and the West were affected, with more than 10 million acres burned—an area larger than the state of Maryland—and more than 12,300 homes and other structures were destroyed. It was also the most expensive year for wildfires on record: For the first time ever, the federal government spent \$2.9 billion dollars to suppress wildfires across the nation.

Many Montana communities experienced a particularly significant fire year in 2017. The state experienced 2,420 fires that burned 1,366,484 acres. 141 structures were lost, and the Forest Service spent over \$300,000,000 to contain these fires. For over two months, the geographical area was at the highest wildland fire preparedness levels (4 and 5). During this time, many Montanans lived with pervasive smoke and degraded air quality. Wildfire smoke lasted for months, affecting local towns and cities, and drifting into other states and Canada.

2018 Wildfire Year

Recent predictions indicate that 2018 will continue to be another challenging wildfire year. According to the forecast released by the National Interagency Fire Center on August 1, 2018,

significant portions of the western United States, including much of Montana, are predicted to have above-average potential for significant wildfire activity between now and the end of September. To date, approximately 5 million acres have burned, mostly in the South, Southwest, Rocky Mountain, Pacific Northwest and Pacific Southwest regions.

Wildland firefighting is not a solitary effort, and we rely on federal, state, tribal, and local partners, as well as contractors and volunteers, to provide a sustained and effective response across jurisdictions. This year, the Forest Service has more than 10,000 firefighters, approximately 900 engines, and hundreds of aircraft available to manage wildfires. Moreover, the Northern Region of the Forest Service is a signatory to the Montana Cooperative Wildland Fire Management and Stafford Act Response Agreement, which promotes cooperation between wildland fire agencies within the state. When fires occur on lands that fall under more than one jurisdiction, a multijurisdictional command (known as a unified command) is established. Under this model, agencies affected by the fire work together to determine appropriate suppression activities. The agencies provide an adequate number of resources (a mix of crews, engines, heavy equipment, helicopters, smokejumpers, and rappellers) to manage the average fire load within the state. Under this Agreement, additional resources will be mobilized when needed to support suppression activities within the state.

The national preparedness level (PL) was raised to PL5, the highest level, on July 27, 2018. This change was based on the number and distribution of large fires and initial attack activity, an increase in resource mobilization and competition for resources, and fuels and weather conditions in affected areas. All agency resources are currently committed, including all available airtankers, and additional firefighting personnel has arrived through our cooperative agreements with Australia and New Zealand. We will continue to engage our partners and local communities early and often to ensure we are sharing risk and working toward achieving our shared goals.

Initial Attack Strategies

The Forest Service's wildfire suppression strategy has evolved through the years, and our current approach reflects the agency's efforts to evaluate conditions and manage risks collaboratively with our federal, state, tribal, and local partners. Paramount to these decisions is the safety of all firefighters: the Forest Service will commit firefighters to activities with the least exposure necessary to achieve the stated objective, and only in conditions where we believe they will succeed in protecting human life, property, or important natural resources.

We remain committed to the goals of the National Cohesive Wildland Fire Management Strategy. The Strategy was jointly developed by federal, state, tribal, and local partners, with input from members of the public, and outlines approaches to coordinate and integrate efforts to create resilient landscapes and fire-adapted communities. It also promotes safe and effective wildfire response based on risk analysis for all land ownerships. The Strategy's goals include to safely and effectively extinguish fire when needed; use fire where and when it can be managed effectively; and aggressively manage our natural resources. Drawing upon the Strategy's goals, the Forest Service's approach to suppression is made on a fire-by-fire basis using the following general guidelines: aggressive initial action on all human-caused fires and full suppression for wildfires in the wildland

urban interface; in the case of naturally-ignited fires, the initial response actions are based on policy and objectives contained in the local Land and Resource Management Plan, with consideration of conditions that may affect the ability to meet those objectives. Each case and the subsequent strategy is also informed by location and resources at risk, fuels, weather and topography.

If a fire threatens lives, homes, property or natural resources, we put it out as fast as we can at the least possible cost. We make that decision while the fire is still small, and our rate of suppression success is consistently high: up to 98 percent. Two to three percent of fires we fight escape our control. Some of them become huge conflagrations driven by winds through tinder-dry fuels. Such fires are often impossible to stop until weather or fuel conditions change. The decisions we make are based on the safety of our firefighters, and every wildfire response operation is decisive and structured around clearly-defined and obtainable objectives that are mutually understood at every level of command. However, we acknowledge the growing complexity and duration of wildland fires, and will continue to work to improve the wildland fire system to one that more reliably protects responders and the public, sustains communities and conserves the land.

That concludes my testimony, Chairman Gianforte. I would be happy to answer any questions you or the Subcommittee members have for me.