

Statement of
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Committee on Energy and Natural Resources
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Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee. I am here today on behalf of the Secretary of the Interior to discuss the Department's preparedness for this year's fire season and to provide comments on the recent report to the President on managing impacts of wildfires.

Before beginning to address those topics, I would like to take a moment to pay tribute to the men and women who have helped fight this year's fires. Burning conditions have been some of the most extreme ever seen in our nation. The level of risk to the firefighters and members of the public has often been high, from the early start of the season in February through this very moment. Often, firefighters faced difficult, if not impossible, circumstances. Yet foot by foot, mile by mile, they constructed fire lines, until eventually they pinched off most of the major fires. The true heroes of this season are those who wore the yellow shirts and green pants, those who jumped from aircraft to attack wildfire, those who flew the air tankers that dropped retardant, those who performed almost around the clock to support one of the largest wildfire-fighting efforts ever seen in this country. This season will stand alongside the other benchmark fire seasons of the last century - 1910, 1930, 1950, 1988, 1994 and 1996.

Our paramount goal is for no firefighters or anyone else to lose their lives. Unfortunately, fifteen fatalities occurred this fire season - two were people working on the lines. The others mostly involved aircraft malfunctions. While we never wish to minimize the loss of a firefighter anywhere, given the extreme fire behavior and the high risk during this season, our overall safety record was good. Even so, we feel the loss of those firefighters deeply, and seek to meet our goal of no loss of life in the future.

Fire Season Preparedness:

The firefighting agencies in the Department of the Interior understood early that the season was probably going to be long, difficult and dangerous. The early indicators were all in place: the pool of cool water in the Pacific Ocean resulting from La Nina began to weaken, bringing drought conditions to much of the West and South; an abundance of fuel in many places; and a source of ignition, coming in the form of a series of thunderstorms and lightening strikes, many of which were accompanied by little or no moisture.

Recognizing the severe potential of this season as early as last winter, the Department of the Interior's five firefighting agencies, working closely with the US Department of Agriculture's Forest Service and local cooperators, began to prepare accordingly. We prepared all our resources for a severe fire season - then faced an horrific one.

Preparation for the season begins with local plans that are based on the ten-year average of fire occurrence and the damage caused by those fires. We use models that calculate a mix of personnel, equipment and deployment locations that reflects their most efficient use during a normal year. It is important to emphasize that an overall plan was developed and in place before the fire season began. As an example, for the Bureau of Land Management, that pre-season plan included the following:

- A guide to mobilize forces in the 2000 season.
- An analysis of what personnel and equipment would likely be needed, and the best location for deployment.
- "Fire Danger Operating Plans" by our field units. At a minimum, those plans describe roles and responsibilities, assign a fire danger rating for specific areas based on key fire factors, and identify appropriate fire management actions based on certain thresholds.
- Readiness Reviews of individual fire programs in BLM states.
- Staging crews and equipment where indicators showed they would be most needed.
- Annual training of incident command teams, firefighters and other specialists.
- A system to track conditions and key indices throughout the season, so fire managers could make adjustments as needed.

Similar pre-season activities took place in the other bureaus.

In addition to developing local pre-season fire plans, we use a system of five national "Preparedness Levels" for all five federal agencies. This system helps us identify and track the level of wildland fire activity and resources needed.

- Level I indicates no large fire activity, with low to moderate fire danger.
- Level II means one geographic area is experiencing high fire danger, with the potential for escapes and large fires. It also means the potential exists to mobilize resources from another geographic area.
- Level III means two or more geographic areas are experiencing significant fire activity, thus requiring a major commitment of national resources. Additional resources are ordered and mobilized through the National Interagency Coordination Center.
- Level IV is two or more geographic areas are experiencing fires requiring Type I incident command teams. Type I teams are the highest level of the incident command structure able to handle the most complex incidents. At Level IV there is competition for fire fighting resources among geographic areas; typically 425 crews of 20 people, and five Type I incident command teams are committed nationally.
- Level V indicates several geographic areas are experiencing major incidents that have the potential to exhaust all agency fire resources. Typically 550 crews are committed nationwide.

Our fire preparedness also incorporates a concept of total mobility. Regardless of the home bases of our aircraft, equipment and personnel, we expect them to go where they are needed the most. We move our firefighting forces from one area of the country to another to meet threats from a changing fire season. For example, we expect crews to be ready to fight fire in New Mexico in March, Montana in July, and California in October. This year, crews assigned to Alaska in the spring were moved to the Great Basin, once it became apparent that Alaska's fire season would be short. When local resources are exhausted, the wider geographic area provides help. The United States is divided into 11 geographic areas, organized to support large fire activity when the demand becomes too much for local jurisdictions. When a geographic area is overwhelmed, the National Interagency Coordination Center in Boise, Idaho, is called in to locate and mobilize the closest available resources. The practice of positioning our people and equipment to where they are needed the most generally works well.

We also have the ability to release "severity funding" for areas at highest risk to further strengthen local resources, be they equipment, personnel, public education or other resources. Beginning in March, the National Office of Fire and Aviation began approving additional funding to the Southwest. As of today,

BLM has approved nearly \$22 million in severity funding to the western states. Other Interior bureaus have approved nearly \$8 million.

Unfortunately, there remains the possibility that this year's fire season could extend well into the Fall. Very high to extreme fire indices are reported in Oregon, California, Idaho, Utah, Arizona, Nevada, Montana, Wyoming, Arizona, Colorado, Kansas, Texas, and Oklahoma. Our federal firefighting community, our partners in the states, and local firefighting organizations will remain on alert and engaged through the end of this year's fire season. There is still fire to be fought out there. As of September 14, slightly more than 800,000 acres remained on fire, an extraordinary figure for mid-September.

So far this year over 70,000 wildland fires have burned 6.6 million acres. Fire suppression costs for this season thus far are about \$820 million. The magnitude of the fires' effects on communities prompted President Clinton to request recommendations from the Secretaries of the Interior and Agriculture on immediate and long-term rehabilitation of the communities impacted by the fires. These recommendations are included in a Report to the President which I will now discuss.

New Actions for the Future:

During his trip to visit fires in Idaho on August 9, 2000, the President requested a report from the Secretaries of the Interior and Agriculture outlining the agencies' plans for immediate and short-term activities that will help rehabilitate burned areas and assist rural communities to recover from the impacts of fires. In addition, the President asked us to develop actions to help protect communities and natural resources from the risk of unusually intense fires in the future. The Secretaries have completed the report, and the President has accepted it (hereafter referred to as the President's Report) and its recommendations. I would like to share the major findings and points made in the President's Report with you today.

The President's Report covers five major areas:

- Continuing to make all necessary firefighting resources available to protect communities and forests as the fire season continues;
- Restoring landscapes and rebuilding communities and landscapes affected by the fires;
- Investing in projects to reduce fire risk by removing brush, shrubs, and small trees;
- Working directly with communities to increase local firefighting capacity and reduce fire hazards, and;
- Being accountable through creation of a cabinet-level coordinating team.

The President's Report builds on many of the actions that we are already taking. However, given the magnitude of the fire season and its effects, there is clearly a need for additional action and resources than would otherwise be possible within our baseline programs.

1. Continuing to make all necessary firefighting resources available

The President's Report's recommendations reinforce the need to have additional initial-attack and extended-attack resources. It also reinforces the need to address firefighter pay equity issues. As a first priority, the Departments will continue to provide all necessary resources to ensure that firefighting efforts protect life and property.

2. Restoring landscapes and rebuilding communities

Burned-area emergency-rehabilitation teams are already mobilized and conducting preliminary assessments and rehabilitation projects needed to help prevent further loss of life, property, and resources from the first damage-producing storms that may cause excessive erosion, water

quality degradation, and other damage in burned areas. In addition to this work, we will invest in landscape-restoration efforts such as tree planting, watershed restoration, and soil stabilization and revegetation.

The recommendations in the President's report would also expand our cooperative efforts with the National Association of State Foresters, the National Fire Protection Association, and local communities and their firefighting organizations to help ensure that home protection capabilities are improved and to educate homeowners in fire-sensitive ecosystems about the consequences of wildfires and techniques in community planning, homebuilding, and landscaping to protect themselves and their property. Our FIREWISE program has been very successful in helping homeowners and communities reduce damage to their houses and other properties.

3. Investing in projects to reduce fire risk by removing brush, shrubs, and small trees

As stated earlier, we are steadily increasing our capacity to reduce the accumulation of hazardous fuels on public lands. We are focusing these efforts on the wildland/urban interface, but the scale of the problem is beyond our current means. The President's Report recommends increased resources to continue making progress in reducing fuels, particularly in the wildland/urban interface areas. The recommendations are entirely consistent with other Administration policies.

4. Working directly with communities to increase local firefighting capacity and reduce fire hazards

Working with local communities is a critical element in restoring damaged landscapes and reducing fire hazards near homes and communities. This will be pursued through expanding community participation, increasing local capacity, and learning from the public.

5. Being accountable through creation of a cabinet-level coordinating team

The President's Report establishes a Cabinet-level coordinating team to ensure that the actions recommended by the Departments receive the highest priority. The Secretaries of Agriculture and the Interior will co-chair this team, and integrated management teams in the regions should take primary responsibility for implementing the fuels reduction, restoration, and preparedness programs.

6. Funding and Budget Issues

The President's report identifies a need for an additional \$1.57 billion per year for the Departments of Interior and Agriculture starting in FY 2001 to implement its recommendations. This funding will be used for fire preparedness, fire operations, State and volunteer fire assistance, forest health management, and economic action programs related to accomplishment of the Report's recommendations.

Increasing funding for the work that needs to be accomplished will require new investments. Congress and the Administration must work together to address this issue in order to help the agencies achieve these important goals of reducing the threat of catastrophic wildfire across the landscape and implementing an effective recovery and rehabilitation program.

Summary:

The Department of the Interior and other federal agencies with firefighting responsibilities are committed to minimizing the losses from unusually intense fires such as those in New Mexico, Idaho, Montana, and across the interior West in the future. The Interior Department is committed to working with communities to implement a strategy to restore and maintain healthy ecosystems on the lands it manages. That means reducing hazardous fuels, while ensuring cautious and consistent protocols in any use of prescribed fire.

We will continue to provide the national leadership and to work with our Federal, State, and local firefighting cooperators, and Congress to ensure that the Federal firefighting agencies and their cooperators have the resources needed to assist in educating home and land owners about fire risks and fire-risk-reduction strategies, and to protect the public, property, and resources when fires occur.

As I stated before, it is also essential to recognize that hazardous fuels buildup in the West occurred over many decades. Restoring the health and resilience of the affected ecosystems while protecting nearby communities from the effects of catastrophic fire will take many years. That reality, however, is no excuse for inaction. Our strategic approach, which will be led by the Departments of the Interior and Agriculture, will treat areas that pose the highest risk to people, property, and natural resources, and do so in the most expeditious manner possible. This will require partnerships, resources, and common sense approaches that avoid needless controversy.

This concludes my statement. I would be happy to answer any questions you or the members of the Subcommittee may have.