

**STATEMENT OF
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UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
CONCERNING
IMPLEMENTATION OF THE NATIONAL FIRE PLAN
BEFORE THE
SUBCOMMITTEE ON FORESTS AND FOREST HEALTH
COMMITTEE ON RESOURCES
UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES**

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Good morning Mr. Chairman and members of the Committee.

I appreciate the opportunity to address this committee concerning a natural resource effort that is historic in its scope and presents a unique challenge, implementation of the National Fire Plan. My name is Tim Hartzell and I am the Director of the Office of Wildland Fire Coordination for the Department of the Interior. I am pleased to report that the Department of the Interior firefighting agencies have made substantial progress in responding to the mandate that Congress gave us in the appropriation language for FY 2001 to minimize the severity of another fire season such as we had in 2000, lessen the dangers to communities at risk, restore ecosystems and the natural role of fire, protect our critical natural resources, and most important, keep our firefighters and the public safe.

Background

The 2000 fire season was long, stubborn, volatile and widespread. The fire season started on January 1st, when a small blaze ignited near Ft. Myers, Florida, and lasted well into the fall. As late as December, more than 14,000 acres burned east of San Diego, California, destroying fourteen structures.

In total, almost 93,000 wildland fires burned close to 7.4 million acres. While neither the number of fires nor the number of acres approached all-time records, the conditions, fire behavior and potential for an even more explosive season were perhaps unparalleled in the last fifty years. The intensity of the fires was the result of two primary factors: a severe drought, accompanied by a series of storms that produced millions of lightning strikes and windy conditions, and the long-term effects of more than a century of aggressively suppressing all wildfires, which has led to an unnatural buildup of brush and small trees in our forests and on our rangelands.

The 2000 fire season also caught the attention of the public. In early August, President Clinton visited a battalion of soldiers from Ft. Hood, Texas, pressed into duty as firefighters on the Burgdorf Junction Fire, near McCall, Idaho. During that trip, President Clinton asked the Secretaries of Agriculture and the Interior to develop recommendations on how to reduce the impacts of fire on rural communities and ensure sufficient firefighting resources for the future. On September 8th, the Secretaries responded with a report entitled, "Managing the Impacts of Wildfires on Communities and the Environment: A Report to the President in Response to the Wildfires of 2000," also known as the "National Fire Plan."

The National Fire Plan recommended that the Departments of Agriculture and the Interior seek an increased appropriation for fire management, and do several things:

- Continue to make all necessary firefighting resources available.
- Restore landscapes and rebuild communities.
- Invest in projects to reduce fire risk.
- Work directly with communities.
- Be accountable.

We are grateful that Congress took quick and decisive action once the report was issued. As a result, the wildland fire budgets for both the Department of the Interior and Department of Agriculture were substantially increased for FY 2001.

At present, we are concentrating our efforts in the Department of the Interior on three main areas: fire preparedness, fire operations, and assistance to rural fire districts. Later in my statement, I will detail some of the steps that have been taken and will be taken in the coming months to address these three critical areas.

Accomplishments to Date

The FY 2001 appropriation provided an injection of critically needed support and funding for wildland fire and resource management. Although the agencies have managed wildland fire in the past as efficiently and safely as possible, the FY 2001 appropriation provided a much needed boost to ensure that adequate resources are available in the face of today's significant fire and resource management issues, such as rangeland and forest health, the increasing size and intensity of wildland fire that is resulting from much of the land's unhealthy state, and the ever-expanding wildland-urban interface. Late in 2000, the Department of the Interior and the USDA Forest Service began implementation of the National Fire Plan by detailing support, direction and funding for wildland firefighting agencies to better manage fire and resources on the land. An interagency steering group convened with representatives and leads from each Federal wildland firefighting agency, including DOI's Bureau of Indian Affairs, Bureau of Land Management, National Park Service, Fish and Wildlife Service, and USDA's Forest Service. Each of these agencies developed an agency-specific National Fire Plan implementation strategy to provide field personnel with procedural guidance.

The National Fire Plan is founded on a long history of cooperation among fire-fighting agencies. Its long-term success depends on cooperation and collaboration among Federal agency partners, Tribal, State, county and local governments, contractors and other service providers, and users of Federally- owned land. As soon as agencies received the FY 2001 budget, National Fire Plan leads from the Departments of Agriculture and the Interior met with such partners as the National Association of State Foresters, the Western Governor's Association, and the National Association of Counties, to discuss the ramifications of the FY 2001 appropriations.

Within weeks of the passage of the FY 2001 Appropriations Act, requests for pertinent data and status reports were sent to the field to determine staffing, rural fire district, and planning needs, and to determine which hazardous fuels treatment projects are ready for implementation in FY 2001 and which remain in the planning stages. Deferred maintenance and capital improvement projects were prioritized and allocated, and project tracking systems were developed. Weekly interagency and agency meetings, satellite broadcasts and information bulletins help coordinate efforts and disseminate information throughout the agencies.

In January 2001, the Department of the Interior and the Forest Service issued the "Review and Update of the 1995 Federal Wildland Fire Management Policy." This report came in response to a request from the Secretaries of Agriculture and the Interior. The National Fire Plan is built upon the foundation and framework of the Review and Update. The Review was conducted by 14 Federal agencies and the National Association of State Foresters, who concluded:

- The 1995 Fire Policy is still sound, but additional emphasis is recommended on science, outreach and education, restoration, and program evaluation.
- The fire hazard situation is worse than predicted in 1995.
- The scope of the Urban Wildland fuels hazard problem is even more complex and extensive than predicted in 1995.
- Additional research is needed on the effectiveness of different fuels treatment options, and post-fire rehabilitation activities.

- Additional collaboration and integration of all Federal agencies with land management responsibility as well as non-Federal agencies is needed.

The National Fire Plan addresses these concerns by:

- Increasing fuels hazard treatment activities for DOI to a planned target of 1.4 million acres of Federal land in FY 2001. This represents an increase from an average of 800,000 acres of fuels treatment activities.
- Increasing on-the-ground fuels hazard reduction work in FY 2001 around a greater number of vulnerable communities, and by developing a collaborative partnership with the State Foresters and others to design a long-term fuels treatment strategy in the Urban Wildland interface.
- Increasing research in: a) the economic and environmental consequences of fuels treatment alternatives in a variety of fuels types across the country; b) the effectiveness of post fire rehabilitation techniques including the control of noxious weeds and invasive species.
- Increasing outreach and partnership activities with the Western Governors' Association, the National Association of Counties, Tribes, other Federal partners, and non-Bgovernmental organizations in designing a 10-year strategy to restore health to fire adapted ecosystems and a plan of action to implement the NFP.

Also in January 2001, the Department of the Interior completed an action plan to implement the National Fire Plan. This action plan contains proposed accomplishments for FY 2001 in wildland fire preparedness, operations, and rural fire assistance. It addresses actions needed to implement the National Fire Plan, including:

- Hiring additional personnel and obtaining needed equipment.
- Completing deferred maintenance and construction.
- Enhancing fire science work.
- Planning and implementing hazardous fuels treatments.
- Planning and implementing burned area rehabilitation.
- A financial plan for complying with Title IV of the 2001 Appropriation Act.

We divided our accomplishments under the National Fire Plan into the three key areas: fire preparedness, fire operations, and rural fire district assistance.

Fire Preparedness

Wildland fire preparedness provides agencies with the capability to prevent, detect and take prompt, effective initial attack suppression action on wildland fires. Preparedness includes staffing, aircraft and equipment, maintenance and construction, fire science and research, and the associated Federal acquisition practices.

Interior and Forest Service personnel have been working together to create consistency in position classifications. Outreach and recruitment to obtain diverse, well-qualified candidates began in December 2000 to fill firefighter, fire manager and support positions, and for fire and fuels specialists. Many of these positions have been advertised jointly and centrally to eliminate duplication of effort and to streamline the application process.

We are contracting for the use of an additional 16 aircraft, and we purchased equipment, including 40 new heavy engines, 43 light engine upgrades, 14 crew carriers for Hot Shot crews, 7 water tenders, 5 helitack trucks, and 3 dozers and lowboys. Although this equipment has been purchased in 2001, some of it will not be delivered until 2002.

Within the Department of the Interior agencies, 50 fire facilities require maintenance or construction. These projects have been prioritized and the funding has been allocated. The Joint Fire Science Program, a six agency partnership to address wildland fuels issues, was established in 1998 to fill the gaps in knowledge about wildland fire and fuels. The purpose of the Program is to provide wildland fire and fuels information and tools to specialists and managers who make wildland fuels management decisions. The information and tools will also help agencies develop sound, scientifically-based land use and activity plans. The Joint Fire Science Program will fund important new research to explore effective methods of mapping and treating fuels. The program will also direct a significant portion of funding to answer questions about important regional or local suppression, fuels management and rehabilitation needs. The Department of the Interior and the Forest Service recently issued a request for proposals for fire science projects. We expect new proposals to focus on the feasibility of developing a locally-based biomass conversion industry. Other proposals will examine carbon storage, soil compaction, water quality, and habitat as they relate to fuels treatments. We have also requested proposals to determine the cumulative effects of fuels manipulation on fire behavior and severity, wildlife populations, and habitat structure. In addition, on January 18, 2001, we established the Joint Fire Science Program Stakeholder Advisory Group under the Federal Advisory Committee Act (FACA). The purpose of the Group is to advise and assist the Secretaries of Agriculture and the Interior, through the Joint Fire Science Program Governing Board, on priorities and strategies for completing wildland fire and fuels research and implementing research findings.

The National Fire Plan calls for a dramatic increase in the amount of fuels reduction and fuels management work, and much of this work is targeted for completion by independent contractors or through service agreements. In December 2000, an interagency team of contract and fuels specialists met in Boise, Idaho, and developed model contracts and agreements that agencies will use for fuels reduction, rehabilitation and restoration projects, and model grants and cooperative agreements to assist communities and rural fire departments. We created a web site that houses these model contracts so that each field office can access them easily, saving valuable time and effort, and increasing consistency among agencies.

Although fuels management by contract has grown over the last 10 years, there is still a need to foster growth in the number of contractors available. A primary focus of the 2001 appropriation is to facilitate awards to firms that will hire locally. Although the term "local" is undefined, managers and contracting personnel will emphasize the use of sealed bid awards to firms that are in closer proximity to project work and best value awards to firms that commit to specific plans to hire local workers.

The interagency contract and agreement team has developed an outreach plan that will:

- Locate firms that are not currently active in bidding or proposing on Government procurement for fuels management contracts.
- Introduce local independent contractors to the benefits of contracting for this type of work with the Government.
- Encourage continued participation by firms that currently have fuels management contracts.

Fire Operations

Wildland fire operations include suppression, burned area rehabilitation and fuels management, including fuels reduction in wildland-urban interface areas that pose a risk to people, property and natural resources. To better facilitate these operations, several steps have been taken:

First, a list of communities most at risk from wildland fire in the wildland-urban interface (discussed in more detail later in this testimony) and hazardous fuels reduction projects within and around those communities has been developed. Work is continuing to refine the criteria and the list of communities at risk.

Second, a cohesive fuels management strategy has been drafted that will provide a broad, national framework for Interior agencies to ensure:

- Effective collaboration among Federal agencies, Tribal, State and local governments and other stakeholders.
- Alignment of all program areas to prevent further degradation, and to work toward the common goal of reducing unnaturally intense wildland fire.
- Integration of fire and resource management within and across all agencies.

Third, on February 7th, Secretary Norton approved the release of \$4 million to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and \$2 million to the National Marine Fisheries Service, needed to perform consultations under Section 7 of the Endangered Species Act for work identified by DOI. This money will facilitate consultation for critical hazardous fuels treatment projects as implementation of the National Fire Plan progresses.

Finally, both Departments are engaged with the Governors, Tribes, non-governmental organizations and others in an active and open partnership to develop a ten-year comprehensive strategy to implement collaboratively the National Fire Plan and to begin to effectively and efficiently manage the nation's hazardous fuels situation. This ten-year strategy will unify State, Tribal, and Federal efforts to cooperate across jurisdictions, coordinate activities and maximize capabilities to reduce the impacts of wildfires on communities and the environment.

Rural Fire Department Assistance (RFDA)

The 2001 budget appropriation provided \$10 million to the Department of the Interior for a new program to enhance the wildland fire protection capabilities of rural fire departments (RFD). In December 2000, representatives from each of the Interior agencies met and developed basic selection criteria for the distribution of these grant funds. Grants will be limited to \$20,000 per RFD, and the RFDs that apply will be reviewed for criteria that include:

- Having an agreement in place with the State Forester or an Interior agency.
- Serving a community with a population of less than 10,000, in the wildland-urban interface.
- Using funding only for training, equipment and prevention.
- Sharing a minimum of 10 percent of the total cost.

An Interior work group was formed to develop an interagency agreement/contract which will be used by field offices to facilitate the transfer of funds to rural fire departments. A draft of this document is currently undergoing field review and will be finalized in the next few weeks.

The money for RFDA has been allocated by each Interior Bureau to field offices, and fire managers are working with partners at the local and regional levels to establish priorities and to allocate available funds.

Communities-at-Risk

The Secretaries of Agriculture and the Interior were asked in the FY 2001 Interior Appropriations Act (Public Law 106-291) to publish jointly in the Federal Register a list of all wildland-urban interface communities that are at high risk from wildfire.

The list was published in the Federal Register on January 4, 2001. Communities on the list were proposed by States, Tribes and local governments. The criteria for listing varied from State-to-State, which explains why some States listed hundreds of communities, while others submitted a much smaller list. The list also identifies communities with ongoing fuels treatment projects and those with projects planned for FY 2001. A total of 37 States participated and more than 4,500 communities were listed. Since then, four more States have submitted their lists, and the total number of communities has grown to

more than 6,400. We appreciate the work that went into the list, especially the work performed by the State Foresters and Tribes.

Developing the list of communities was only part of the Federal Register notice published on January 4. The notice also provided a definition of wildland-urban interface, and included suggested criteria for categorizing interface communities and evaluating the risk to those communities. The January 4 list is a starting point. It needs to be refined, possibly narrowed, and focused so that we can set treatment priorities for the coming years. The list of communities far exceeds our hazardous fuel reduction capabilities.

Revising the list is a formidable task. Working closely with the Western Governors' Association, we have developed a process to address this daunting task. Some communities are much more vulnerable to wildland fire than others. Our next task becomes one of identifying, again in collaboration with our Tribal, State and local partners, the communities in the vicinity of Federal lands that are most at risk, which are the places where we will begin hazardous fuels reduction work. The results of this effort will be published in the Federal Register later this spring. The Federal Register Notice will identify the full extent of the high-risk wildland urban interface problem along with communities where hazardous fuels reduction treatments will not be planned, and the reasons why.

The revised lists of communities at risk in each State will be developed by an interagency team consisting of representatives of the Department of Agriculture, Department of the Interior, State Foresters, and Tribes. Representatives from other Federal agencies such as the Departments of Energy and Defense will be included where appropriate. Others who may be invited to participate include representatives of county government, local fire response organizations, State emergency management offices, and community forestry organizations. A specific process for refining the urban wildland communities list has been developed by the Forest Service, the Department of the Interior, and the National Association of State Foresters. We envision that these teams will continue and will serve the long-term goals of identifying, prioritizing and implementing fuels treatment projects, to ensure that the long-term needs of communities vulnerable to wildland fire are addressed.

Existing project proposals in these identified urban wildland communities that have approved plans and completed environmental compliance will have the highest priority for fuels treatment, and work is already underway in many of these communities. DOI's projects will cover about 300,000 acres. Additional projects that can be readied for implementation this fiscal year will receive the next priority. Finally, for those newly identified projects or projects not ready for implementation, the planning process will be initiated toward future treatments and implementation schedules will be developed.

A cornerstone of the National Fire Plan has been enhancing the communication for preparedness and strategic planning among all partners in the wildland fire management arena. To facilitate this objective, all of the National Fire Plan Coordinators from the Department of the Interior and its bureaus, as well as the Forest Service, and representatives from the Environmental Protection Agency, Council on Environmental Quality and others, assembled in Denver on February 21 and 22, 2001, to share concerns and issues, clarify roles and expectations, validate the importance of success, and define a management structure for collaboration at the geographic area level throughout the country. This meeting provided a springboard to unify State, Tribal and Federal efforts to cooperate across jurisdictions, coordinate plans and activities, and collaborate with local governments to implement efficiently and effectively the goals and commitments outlined in the National Fire Plan.

Conclusion

We appreciate the opportunity to testify at this hearing. We are grateful that Congress has afforded firefighting agencies an opportunity to reverse the trend of deteriorating health for our forest and rangeland ecosystems. We view the funding for FY 2001 as an investment that will, in the future, help save communities, money, our natural resources, and the lives of firefighters and the public.

Like any long-term investment, it will require patience. It took many decades for fuels build up to reach their current levels. The demands on public land and its resources will only increase in the future. It will take time for all of us, the Federal agencies, our Tribal, State and local partners, rural fire districts, elected officials and others, to ameliorate the volatile and dangerous situation that currently exists in many parts of our country. The Department of the Interior has made a commitment to see this process through to a successful conclusion. We intend to honor this commitment, and we look forward to your continued support.

Thank you, again. I will be happy to answer any questions from the committee.