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**SUBCOMMITTEE ON NATIONAL PARKS, FORESTS AND PUBLIC LANDS
HOUSE COMMITTEE ON NATURAL RESOURCES
CONCERNING
FIRE PREPAREDNESS AND HAZARDOUS FUELS REDUCTION ACTIVITIES**

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INTRODUCTION

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to testify on wildland fire preparedness for the 2007 fire season and hazardous fuel reduction activities. Since the Department of the Interior (DOI) and the Department of Agriculture (USDA) work closely together in fire management, the two Departments are providing a joint statement.

WEATHER, WILDLAND URBAN INTERFACE, AND WOOD

Multiple factors contribute to wildland fire. These factors include weather, fuel type, terrain, location with respect to the wildland urban interface (WUI), and other highly valued landscapes, and managerial decisions made before and during fire incidents. In addition, changing temperatures and prolonged drought across many portions of the West and Southeast, an expansion of the WUI and an increase in the number of people living in the WUI, continued accumulation of wood fiber, and substantial increases in highly flammable invasive species, such as cheatgrass, are converging to increase the risk of catastrophic loss from wildland fires. In combination, these trends present continuing challenges in our efforts to decrease the number and cost of fire incidents.

Over the last few years, we have reported regularly to Congress on these challenges. The 2005 Quadrennial Fire and Fuels Review by DOI and USDA examined the growth of the WUI, the area where structures and other human developments meet or intermingle with undeveloped wildland. The review found that 8.4 million new homes were added to the WUI in the 1990s, representing 60 percent of the new homes constructed in the United States. The rate of growth is triple the rate of construction outside of the WUI. Also, the recent Audit Report by the Office of Inspector General "Forest Service Large Fire Suppression Costs" found that the majority of Forest Service large fire suppression costs are directly linked to protecting property in the WUI. These reviews illustrate the challenge of addressing wildland fire in land areas such as locations in the WUI where fire suppression is inherently more expensive.

Another challenge is addressing the accumulation of flammable biomass on our public lands, a major cause of fire risk. The Departments have worked aggressively to reduce the amount of hazardous fuels on Federal lands and restore the health of our public forests and rangelands, utilizing the authorities provided under the President's Healthy Forests Initiative and the Healthy Forests Restoration Act to expedite action. In 2006, more than half of the total acres treated were inside the WUI. We will maintain this emphasis with a goal to treat approximately 2 million acres in high-risk wildland urban interface areas through the hazardous fuels reduction program in 2007.

2007 WILDLAND FIRE SEASON OUTLOOK

Most of the eastern, central and northwestern U.S. has a normal outlook for significant wildland fire potential in 2007. A portion of the Southwest is predicted to have a below-normal wildland fire season. This area includes northeastern New Mexico, and small parts of southeastern Colorado, western Oklahoma, and northern Texas, where it borders New Mexico. Wildland fire potential is expected to be higher than normal across much of the Southwest, California, portions of the Great Basin, the Northern Rockies, a small portion of the Northwest, Alaska, and the Southeast. The amount of precipitation many areas receive in the early summer periods is an important factor in the severity of the fire season.

The critical conditions influencing the 2007 wildland fire outlook are:

- Drought conditions are expanding and intensifying across large portions of the West and Southeast, and drought relief is not expected in these areas through the season.
- Low snow pack, warmer-than-normal forecast temperatures, and early snow melt over most of the West will likely dry out timber fuels and could cause an early onset of fire season in some areas.
- Abundant new and carry over fine fuels are expected to green-up and cure early, leading to an active and prolonged grassland fire season.
- Another hotter than normal summer is projected for the West. Depending on heat levels and timing of higher temperatures, higher elevation fuels could dry quickly and be susceptible to ignitions.

The fire season is already producing incidents that are evidence of our concern about the 2007 fire season. Drought and high temperatures have resulted in the burning of over 1.1 million acres in the Southern Area, including areas located in the Big Turnaround, Sweat Farm Road, Bugaboo Scrub and Florida Bugaboo fire complex in Northern Florida and Southeastern Georgia. More than 161,000 acres have burned in the Eastern Area, including the Ham Lake fire in Northern Minnesota and in Canada, which burned for over eighteen days, due to drought conditions and winds.

WILDLAND FIRE PREPAREDNESS

To prepare for these natural conditions anticipated in 2007 Fire Season, the USDA and DOI are working to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of our firefighting resources. New management efforts are allowing for increased mobility of firefighting forces and aviation assets.

Firefighting Forces

For the 2007 fire season, we have secured firefighting forces – firefighters, equipment, and aircraft – comparable to those available in 2006. As has already been demonstrated during the fires in the Southeast, we leverage our firefighting ability by shifting our firefighters and equipment as the fire season progresses. Fire managers assign local, regional and national firefighting personnel and equipment based on anticipated fire starts, actual fire occurrence, fire spread, and severity with the help of information from Predictive Services.

More than 18,000 firefighters will be available, including permanent and seasonal Federal and State employees, crews from Tribal and local governments, contract crews, and emergency/temporary hires. This figure includes 92 highly-trained Hotshot firefighting crews and about 400 smokejumpers nationwide. There are 17 Type 1 national interagency incident management teams (the most experienced and skilled teams) available for complex fires or incidents. Thirty-eight Type 2 incident management teams are available for geographical or national incidents.

Initial attack of a fire is handled by the closest available local resource regardless of agency jurisdiction. Generally this means that the agency with management jurisdiction and protection responsibility for the location of the fire, such as a national forest, Tribal lands, Bureau of Land Management unit, wildlife refuge, or national park, will handle initial attack. Often, our partners at the local community or county level are the first to respond.

Two interagency National Incident Management Organization (NIMO) teams were staffed in 2006, and are operational with two seven-member full-time Type I Incident Management Teams ready to respond to wildland fire incidents. The teams are headquartered in Atlanta, Georgia and Boise, Idaho and will help wildland fire agencies improve future fire management programs. Currently, the Atlanta NIMO team is assisting the Florida State incident management team on the Florida Bugaboo fire. Last week, the Boise NIMO team concluded nearly 40 days of assisting FEMA in its tornado disaster response operation in Greensburg, Kansas. Both teams will be called to assist in wildland fire incidents this season, and when they are not on assignments, they will implement the NIMO Implementation Plan, which calls for improvements in wildland fire program management in the areas of training, fuels management, cost containment, and leadership development, among others.

The National Interagency Coordination Center, located at the National Interagency Fire Center in Boise coordinates critical firefighting needs throughout the nation. In the event of multiple, simultaneous fires, firefighting resources are prioritized and allocated by the National Multi-Agency Coordinating group, composed of national fire directors headquartered at NIFC. Prioritization ensures firefighting forces are positioned where they are needed most. Fire managers dispatch and track personnel, equipment, aircraft, vehicles, and supplies through an integrated national system. If conditions become extreme, assistance from the Department of Defense is available under our standing agreements, as well as firefighting forces from Canada, Mexico, Australia, and New Zealand using established agreements and protocols.

Aviation

The wildland firefighting agencies continue to employ a mix of fixed and rotor wing aircraft. Key components of our 2007 aviation assets include 16 civilian large air tankers on federal contracts, along with 41 Type 1 and Type 2, or heavy and medium, helicopters on national use exclusive-use contracts; and 84 Type 2 and 3 helicopters on local or regional contracts. Additionally, there are nearly 300 call-when-needed Type 1, 2 and 3 helicopters available for fire management support as conditions and activity dictate.

Although both the large and single-engine air tanker programs have evolved in recent years, we are confident that we have appropriate and cost-effective assets in place or available to respond to the air support needs in the field. Twenty three Single Engine Air Tankers (SEATs) will be on exclusive-use contracts for the 2007 fire season and about 80 available on a call-when-needed basis. Some states and local areas also contract their own SEATs.

In addition, there will be two water-scooper airtankers on exclusive-use contracts and an additional one available on a call-when-needed basis for the 2007 fire season. Additional water-scooper aircraft will be available through agreements with state and county firefighting agencies. As in the past, military C-130 aircraft equipped with Modular Airborne Fire Fighting Systems (MAFFS) will be available to supplement our large air tanker fleet as needed. Six MAFFS are available this year.

MITIGATING WILDLAND FIRE RISK TO COMMUNITIES AND THE IMPACTS OF FIRE ON THE ENVIRONMENT

We have dangerous fire and fuels conditions in areas in the United States and the situation is becoming increasingly complex. However, we now treat more fuels than ever, and we collaborate with our local, state and tribal partners more than ever before. Our focused effort to remove accumulation of hazardous fuels in our forests and grasslands is having a positive effect on the land and is helping to reduce wildland fire risk to communities.

Some of our specific accomplishments in reducing hazardous fuels include:

- Despite an unprecedented wildfire suppression workload, the Forest Service and DOI improved fuel conditions and ecosystem health on 4 million acres of land in 2006, of which 2.6 million acres were treated through hazardous fuels reduction programs and 1.4 million acres of land restoration accomplished through other land management activities.
- The Federal land management agencies will have treated nearly 25 million acres from 2000 through 2007, including approximately 20 million acres treated through the hazardous fuels reduction programs and about 5 million acres of landscape restoration accomplished through other land management activities.
- In 2006, the Administration treated many overstocked Federal forests. Hazardous fuels treatments resulted in qualitative improvements of at least 994,000 acres in fire regimes classes 1, 2, or 3 that moved to a better condition class. In addition, the Administration has begun measuring the percentage of total National Forest System land for which fire risk is reduced through movement to a better condition. The Administration is continuing

to work on metrics for forest health changes that will help demonstrate the outcomes of projects that remove fuels.

- USDA and DOI, in collaboration with our non-federal partners, continue to increase the community protection emphasis of the hazardous fuels program. Community Wildfire Protection Plans are essential for localities to reduce risk and set priorities. Over 1100 CWPPS covering 3,000 communities have been completed nationally and an additional 450 plans are progressing toward completion.
- The LANDFIRE project has now been completed for the western third of the mainland United States. The data are being used in setting hazardous fuel treatment priorities by local field units and regionally, and are used in managing large, long duration wildfires burning across landscapes. USDA and DOI are also testing methods of modeling fire risk with LANDFIRE data to help better inform hazardous fuel treatment prioritization.
- USDA and DOI are developing methods for effectively allocating fuels reduction funds and measuring the effectiveness of those treatments in terms of community risk reduction. The agencies will identify national priorities within the fuels program and focus funding on those priorities, develop more effective measures of risk reduction through the introduction of systematic risk analysis tools for fire hazard analysis and fuels treatment implementation, and strengthen the project criteria for WUI fuels treatments.
- The “Implementation Plan” of the “10 Year Comprehensive Strategy” was updated and released in December of 2006. The goals and guiding principles from the 2001 document are constant, but performance measures and implementation tasks have been updated to reflect the progress made toward National Fire Plan goals in the past five years and build upon our success.

Collaboration among communities and local Forest Service and DOI agencies’ offices has resulted in highly effective and successful hazardous fuels reduction projects. One example is the New Harmony (Utah) Community Fire Plan that called for coordinated treatments on forested lands managed by the State of Utah, the Bureau of Land Management, Dixie National Forest and individual property owners. Between 2002 and 2004 the agencies and landowners completed fuel treatments that reduced fire intensity in the treated areas helping fire fighters to more safely protect the community during the 2005 Blue Spring Fire. In another example, the use of Healthy Forests Restoration Act (HFRA) authorities enabled federal agencies and local communities to quickly begin clean-up and fuels reduction in the wake of hurricanes that devastated Gulf Coast communities and surrounding forests in 2005. The Forest Service and DOI worked closely, using HFRA authorities, to facilitate the National Forests of Mississippi to successfully remove over 1.3 million tons of hazardous fuel from over 100,000 acres, salvaging over 240 million board feet of timber. Nearly 1000 miles of fuel breaks were constructed and another 500 miles will be completed this year to protect homes in the wildland urban interface.

In this challenging fire season, citizens who live or vacation in fire-prone areas must take personal responsibility to protect their individual homes. Valuable information about how to increase their safety and protect their homes and property is available through the FIREWISE program. Homeowners can learn how to protect their homes with a survivable, cleared space

and how to build their houses and landscape their yard with fire resistant materials. Information about the FIREWISE program can be found at www.firewise.org, sponsored by a consortium of wildland fire agencies that includes the Forest Service, the DOI, the National Fire Protection Association, and the National Association of State Foresters.

USDA Office of Inspector General – Progress on Implementation of the Healthy Forests Initiative

In September 2006, the USDA Office of Inspector General, Southeast Region, concluded an Audit Report on the Implementation of the Healthy Forests Initiative. The OIG audit recommended that the Forest Service implement a consistent analytical process for assessing the level of risk that communities face from wildfire, strengthen its prioritization of projects, and improve performance measures and reporting standards in order to better communicate the outcome of treatments. The Forest Service concurred with the five recommendations of the report and developed an action response and estimated completion date for each. An update on progress includes:

- In August 2006, the Forest Service completed development of the Hazardous Fuels Prioritization and Allocation Process - a national methodology to assess the risk and consequence of wildfire that prioritizes the allocation of hazardous fuels funds to the Regional level. The Forest Service applied the Hazardous Fuels Prioritization and Allocation Process framework to assist in the allocation of fuels funding in the last quarter of FY 2006 and to allocate hazardous fuels funds for FY 2007. DOI is working with Forest Service to adapt the Hazardous Fuels Prioritization and Allocation Process to meet BLM's vegetation and landscapes and will begin a pilot implementation process.
- In December 2006, the Forest Service completed work with the DOI and other partners in the Wildland Fire Leadership Council to update the 10-Year Implementation Plan. National performance measures were set and Program Assessment and Rating Tool (PART) measures assess performance based on achievement of desired conditions.
- In December 2006, the Forest Service completed accomplishment reporting with additional detail (i.e. acres moved to better condition class) in the FY 2006 Forest Service Performance Accountability Report (PAR). The FY 2007 PAR report will incorporate new outcome measures from the 10-Year Implementation Plan and will report accomplishments by Region.
- In February 2007, the Forest Service changed appropriate annual targets to multi-year averages and included emphasis on outcomes rather than outputs in the agency FY 2007 Program Direction and future President's Budgets. All accomplishment and budget documents for FY 2008 and beyond reflect the new PART performance measures that demonstrate agency performance by focusing on risk reduction and restoration outcomes.
- Due in July 2007, the Forest Service will refine the Hazardous Fuels Prioritization and Allocation Process with updated data sources for the FY 2008 allocation, develop a methodology to determine outcomes of all activities to achieve desired condition (i.e. wildfires), and monitor and update severity mapping through the LANDFIRE.
- Due in October 2007, and still in progress, the Forest Service will require documentation of Regional methodology as part of General Management Reviews with seven Regions to be reviewed in FY 2007 and change the National Fire Plan Operations and Reporting System and FACTS databases to incorporate geospatial information for all hazardous fuel treatments.

MANAGING THE COST OF FIGHTING WILDLAND FIRE

Suppression costs have escalated in recent years, as wildfire seasons have generally lasted longer and the acreage burned has grown. The external factors noted earlier in this testimony influence the number and severity of incidents. While safety is our primary concern, our Departments do share concerns about the cost of fires and are committed to doing all we can to contain these costs.

Over the last several years, various studies and assessments dedicated to fire suppression costs have been conducted by the National Academy of Public Administration, the Wildland Fire Leadership Council, the Brookings Institution, and the Government Accountability Office (GAO). As a result of the reviews, more than 300 recommendations have been documented to suggest approaches to trim the costs of wildland fire suppression. The agencies have taken these reviews seriously, and the overall awareness and personal responsibility for cost-containment among the federal fire agencies has never been more acute.

In 2006, TriData, a Division of System Planning Corporation, under contract with the Forest Service, completed a review and analysis of 22 past cost containment reports and made recommendations regarding those which would yield the greatest savings. The TriData report determined there were 203 unique recommendations directed at improving wildfire suppression cost containment. Of those, the report identified 71 recommendations that represented potentially high to extremely high cost savings if implemented. As of August 2006, we have taken or are in the process of taking action on 57 of these recommendations. We have not implemented corrective actions on the remaining recommendations for various reasons, including that the recommendation involves actions beyond agency authority, the action must be deferred due to pending court decisions, or that recommendations were directed at isolated events. Both the Forest Service and DOI are working on a comprehensive report on recommendations for large fire cost reviews. We expect that report to be available later this year.

DOI and USDA are taking the issue of large fire cost containment very seriously and are actively moving forward to implement these important changes. The comprehensive list of management efficiencies has been developed to guide action over the short, intermediate and long-term and to produce results. The Forest Service and DOI are working together in collaboration and our staff is committed to action.

RECENT STUDIES

Government Accountability Office - Wildland Fire Management: Update on Federal Agency Efforts to Develop a Cohesive Strategy to Address Wildland Fire Threats:

In May 2006, the GAO issued a report entitled, "Wildland Fire Management: Update on Federal Agency Efforts to Develop a Cohesive Strategy to Address Wildland Fire Threats." The report reiterated its recommendation to develop a cohesive wildland fire management strategy. It also acknowledged the Departments' progress on LANDFIRE and Fire Program Analysis, but urged continued vigilance in ensuring that appropriate data is utilized. In response, we have collaborated with our partners on the following:

- Cohesive Fuels Strategy: USDA and DOI issued a Cohesive Fuels Strategy to set forth priorities for fuels reduction projects to guide investments in reducing risks of catastrophic wildland fires and enhance strategically placed ‘defensible space’ in areas at risk.
- LANDFIRE: USDA and DOI are presently completing an operations and maintenance plan for LANDFIRE. This plan includes provisions for ensuring that data is updated and maintained and that a stable organization will be available to provide such data for the users. The Wildland Fire Leadership Council will be reviewing this plan at its June meeting. Implementation of the plan will begin in 2008 as the project is completed and will continue uninterrupted into the future.
- Fire Program Analysis (FPA): One of the principal functions of the LANDFIRE program is to provide data to support Fire Program Analysis (FPA). FPA is on schedule, with the prototype expected to be delivered this summer and system delivery expected in 2008. FPA will enable managers to better evaluate the effectiveness of alternative fire management strategies in order to meet land management goals and objectives.

As we continue to strive aggressively to contain the costs of wildland fire suppression, our primary goal will continue to be the protection of life, property and resources. We share the GAO’s interest in prioritizing fuels treatment work and increasing accountability for cost containment and have taken many steps forward. We are hopeful that GAO and this Subcommittee are able to ascertain from the actions that have been taken and planned, that the agencies indeed have established strategies, goals and objectives for reducing costs of large wildfire suppression and improving hazardous fuels reduction. We believe that the 10-Year Strategy Implementation Plan, Office of Management and Budget PART Improvement Plan, Forest Service Strategic Plan, and new DOI Strategic Plan, along with the Management Efficiencies initiatives underway, demonstrate a commitment to constantly improve performance, efficiency and accountability.

Secretary of Agriculture’s Independent Panel - Brookings Institution

On May 22, 2007 the Brookings Institution released a report “Towards a Collaborative Cost Management Strategy – 2006 U.S. Forest Service Large Wildfire Cost Review Recommendations.” This report is by an independent panel that assessed agency performance on 20 large fires that burned 1.1 million acres across 17 national forests, five regions and six states that exceeded \$10 million in cost. The Brookings Institution’s Project Director acted as facilitator of the process and author of the report. The purpose was to determine if the agency exercised fiscal due diligence in managing specific incident suppression activities. The panel found that the Forest Service exercised appropriate and adequate fiscal diligence in suppressing wildfires in the record breaking 2006 season. The panel report also makes a series of recommendations for improvement that the agency will begin to act on immediately. The report is available at the USDA website <http://www.usda.gov/wps/portal>.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, Mr. Chairman and members of the subcommittee, we are prepared for the 2007 fire season. Where local areas experience severe fire risk, firefighters, equipment and teams will be assigned. We have a long-term and complex fuels and fire situation that will continue to need to be addressed by communities, tribes, states, and federal agencies. We appreciate your continued support and work as we move forward on these challenges. We are happy to answer any questions you might have.