

**Statement of  
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**Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources  
Oversight Hearing  
*"Wildfire Management in the Midst of the COVID-19 Pandemic"*  
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Chairman Murkowski, Ranking Member Manchin, and members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony on the Department of the Interior's (DOI) Wildland Fire Management program during the COVID-19 pandemic. I am here today to assure the Committee that, despite COVID-19, DOI is ready, willing, and able to fight wildland fires across the United States, including in Alaska and Hawaii. My testimony will highlight many of the on-going efforts and plans to maintain effective wildfire response and actively manage vegetation to limit wildfires, while mitigating the risks to our firefighters and the public associated with COVID-19.

Each year, DOI and its interagency partners are faced with unique challenges in preparing for the wildfire season, and this year is no different. The onset of COVID-19 requires that the interagency wildland fire management community rethink the way that it traditionally manages wildfires and protects firefighters, communities, and resources from wildfire risk. That is, COVID-19 presents yet another risk, among the many that we face every year, that we must address. Thus, while our operational response will look different this year, our commitment to meeting wildland fire management objectives is no less than what we have delivered in previous years.

For example, every year the DOI sends wildland firefighters across state borders to support our interagency, state and tribal partners in wildfire response. This year we have planned carefully and strategically for wildfire suppression during the pandemic, and are currently implementing safe, efficient fire suppression operations with our firefighters working as "family units" to protect people, property, and themselves. In 2020, the BLM has already sent smokejumpers to Colorado, Nevada, and Utah in response to wildfires; wildland firefighters in New Mexico and Arizona have responded to several incidents; and engine crews from Montana were sent to Arizona on two separate occasions, including to fight fires in a national forest. DOI resources are moving throughout the country from as far away as Lake City, Florida, to Fairbanks, Alaska.

The Department would like to thank Congress for recent action on the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act (CARES Act). Funding from the CARES Act is critical to ensuring that firefighters have the resources and equipment that they need to safely and effectively fight wildfires this season.

As always, the success of our Wildland Fire Management program is predicated on the extraordinary coordination with our interagency, state, tribal, and local partners. These partnerships are vital to the DOI's success in carrying out its stewardship responsibilities, particularly fuels management work and essential restoration efforts. They are also integral to the interoperable approach that is the hallmark of the nation's response to wildfires.

### **Summary of the 2019 Fire Year and 2020 Outlook**

Outside of Alaska, last year was relatively mild for wildfire activity. A total of 50,500 wildfires burned nearly 4.7 million acres of land, with both indicators being well below the 10-year average. However, more than half of the number of acres burned occurred in Alaska, far exceeding the ten-year average for the state. In fact, 70 percent of the nation's largest wildfires occurred in Alaska.

So far in 2020, we are seeing increased levels of wildfire activity in the Great Basin, Southern, and Rocky Mountain geographic areas. Based on the most recent "Seasonal Outlook" compiled by the National Interagency Fire Center's (NIFC) Predictive Services Program, we can expect potential for above normal fire activity in 2020. Following a dry fall and winter, drought has emerged and expanded across California, Oregon, and Nevada. Mountain snowpack has melted at a faster than average rate. Long-range forecast data predicts overall warmer and drier than average conditions this summer for the West. The combination of these factors is expected to lead to an above normal wildland fire potential across the West this year, especially for Northern California and Oregon. While NIFC's Predictive Services specialists closely analyze weather, vegetation, and other factors that affect fire activity, predictions can quickly change if weather and other factors alter current conditions.

The DOI's support of wildfire response in 2019 and early in 2020 extended beyond the nation's border to Australia, where 149 DOI personnel were deployed to support operations in one of the most devastating bushfire seasons in that nation's history. The United States has agreements in place with a number of international partners, including Australia, where reciprocal fire support provides a valuable backstop when activity increases and resources are limited; likewise, Australia and New Zealand deployed nearly the same number of firefighters to the United States in 2018 to support firefighting operations across northern California and the Northwest.

### **Reducing Wildfire Risk**

While the interagency wildland fire community continues to plan for the challenges presented by COVID-19, DOI is also maintaining its focus on priority work to reduce wildfire risk. Last fiscal year (FY), DOI completed a total of 1.4 million acres of fuels management treatments, nearly double the benchmark required by the President's Executive Order (E.O.) 13855, and the Secretary's Order (S.O.) 3372 on promoting active land management to reduce wildfire risk. So far in FY 2020, DOI has completed

620,000 acres of treatments, which is approximately half of all planned treatments for the year and more than 80 percent of the benchmark established in the E.O.

In support of the E.O., the DOI has adopted more aggressive fuels management practices, moving to a risk-based approach to increase fuels treatments. Fuels treatments decrease invasive species, create strategic fuel breaks, and reduce threats near communities. Furthermore, the Administration has proposed new categorical exclusions (CX) under the National Environmental Policy Act to streamline routine timber salvage and pinyon juniper removal from sagebrush habitats, which will reduce future wildfire fuels loads on public lands.

The Bureau of Land Management (BLM) also recently released the Record of Decision for the Final Programmatic Environmental Impact Statement for Fuel Breaks in the Great Basin, which would support the construction of up to 11,000 miles of fuel breaks to control wildfires within a 223 million acre area spanning six western states (California, Idaho, Nevada, Oregon, Utah, and Washington). As part of the implementation, the BLM plans to use manual, chemical, and mechanical treatments, including prescribed fire, seeding, and targeted grazing, to construct fuel breaks along roads and rights-of-way on BLM-managed lands. The BLM recently initiated a planning effort which aims to complement these fuel breaks with future fuels reduction treatments.

The BLM also recently began the process of updating its forest management rules to increase efficiency and to improve the agency's ability to conduct active forest management on public lands. Active forest management contributes to reducing fuel loads and the potential for catastrophic wildfires that can devastate forests and surrounding communities. The proposed amendments streamline the procedures governing forest management decisions by eliminating the unnecessary post-decision protest period and allowing a single forest management decision to cover all forest management activities addressed in an environmental review document. This will help identify any issues earlier in the environmental review process, enhancing the BLM's ability to resolve them before implementing forest management activities.

In further support of the E.O. and S.O., the DOI Office of Wildland Fire is working with the National Association of State Foresters and the U.S. Forest Service to develop and implement the "Shared Wildfire Risk Mitigation (SWRM)" geospatial platform. The SWRM facilitates cross-jurisdictional mitigation planning through the collaborative identification of completed mitigation actions, planned mitigation actions, and values-at-risk. This synchronization enables a unified approach to reducing wildfire risk, having a broader and more impactful bearing on communities-at-large.

Additionally, the Wildland Fire Leadership Council (WFLC), an intergovernmental committee of Federal, state, tribal, county, and municipal officials, is assisting efforts to support the increased use of prescribed fire. While prescribed fire is an effective tool for reducing wildfire risk, the effects of the smoke from prescribed fires is not well-understood vis-à-vis the smoke generated from wildfires. In collaboration with the Centers for Disease Control and Protection and the Environmental Protection Agency,

WFLC is supporting a Health Impact Assessment to better understand this relationship and to help communicate the lower health risks of controlled prescribed fires compared to uncontrolled wildfires.

Finally, we continue to take meaningful steps to improve DOI's Wildland Fire Management program and have included a comprehensive workforce management proposal in the FY 2021 President's Budget request. *DOI's Plan to Transform the Firefighting Workforce* includes an increase of \$50 million to build a stable, professional, and permanent federal wildland fire workforce that is better aligned with the challenges of prolonged fire seasons and the need to more aggressively address fuels management to reduce wildfire risk. The proposal would benefit firefighter recruitment and retention across all DOI fire bureaus; it also supports tribal workforce development that is critical to protecting the economic stability of tribal lands and assets.

### **Planning for COVID-19**

A critical element of wildland fire management is the continual assessment of risks and the development of durable mitigation measures. While we cannot fully eliminate the risks to the firefighting workforce associated with COVID-19, or with firefighting more generally, experts throughout the wildland fire management community are collaborating on guidance for how best to limit firefighter exposure to COVID-19 so that wildfires can be managed safely and effectively.

The planning to mitigate the spread of COVID-19 is being informed by broader coordination within the wildland fire management community and various standing interagency management organizations, including the Fire Executive Council (FEC), the Fire Management Board (FMB), the National Wildfire Coordinating Group (NWCG) and the National Multi-Agency Coordinating Group (NMAC). Each of these organizations play a critical role in assessing risk and developing recommendations for how best to limit the exposure of firefighters to COVID-19 before, after, and during operational periods.

Early in the COVID-19 response planning, three Area Command Teams were tasked by NMAC to coordinate with Federal, state, local and tribal health officials to develop Wildland Fire Response Plans for each geographic coordination area. The plans recommend strategic and tactical protocols to mitigate the potential impacts and exposure of firefighters to COVID-19. They consider key actions specific to those regions in order to maintain a continuity of operations for all aspects of wildfire response. The plans also include the potential effects of smoke emissions on COVID-19 on both firefighters and the public, which is an extension of the requirements for Air Resource Advisors on incidents, pursuant to the Dingell Act P.L. 116-9. All nine plans are complete and will be updated as new or refined recommendations are adopted, and local units are stepping these plans down to inform their respective operations.

Contributing to the network of COVID-19 mitigation planning is the work of the Medical and Public Health Advisory Team (MPHAT), which is an interagency group of medical

health experts from DOI, USDA Forest Service, and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. The MPHAT is tasked with coordinating with local health officials and providing recommendations on medical and public health measures that are determined to be most effective in protecting firefighters. To date, MPHAT has established protocols on screening for COVID-19 and guidance on the prevention and management of COVID-19 during wildland fire operations. The latter guidance broadly covers public health practices such as social distancing; cleaning and disinfection; personal hygiene and wellbeing; and the use of personal protective equipment.

In consideration of these and other recommendations, practical adjustments are being executed in our operational response. Our priority will remain safe, aggressive, initial, and extended attack. The DOI is on track to have the same number of firefighters as last season, which includes 4,500 temporary seasonal, career seasonal, and permanent employees. We will also have a complementary mix of firefighting aircraft, including access to 100 single engine airtankers, 370 helicopters, 18 scoopers and numerous other support aircraft. Collectively, we will use aircraft and our ground-based assets to the fullest extent to reduce the duration of wildfires and curb the number of wildfires that are managed for resource purposes.

Additionally, we plan to undertake other practical mitigation measures to support social distancing, such as transitioning as many basecamp administrative functions as possible to virtual or telework status; utilizing additional vehicles to travel to and from incidents; designing multiple smaller camps populated with fewer firefighters; limiting interactions between crews; and utilizing additional temporary facilities for crew quarters and staging for initial attack.

Taken together, these preparations and the work of the numerous interagency groups involved in COVID-19 mitigation planning will provide the foundation for coordinated and effective wildfire response. This commitment is essential to achieving overall success.

## **Conclusion**

Thank you for your support of DOI's Wildland Fire Management program and your interest in the planning efforts for the current fire season. I welcome any questions that you may have.