

STATE OF COLORADO FOREST CONDITION BRIEFING
BEFORE THE
COLORADO GENERAL ASSEMBLY SENATE AGRICULTURE,
NATURAL RESOURCES, AND ENERGY AND HOUSE AGRICULTURE,
LIVESTOCK AND NATURAL RESOURCES JOINT COMMITTEE,
February 19, 2014 – Colorado State Capitol – Denver, Colorado
U.S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE - FOREST SERVICE
ROCKY MOUNTAIN REGION

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**National Forests in Colorado: Accelerating the Pace and Scale of Forest
Restoration through Partnership and Innovation**

Chairwoman Schwartz (Gail Schwartz), Chairman Fischer (Randy Fischer), and
Members of the Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to come before you today. I am Daniel Jirón,
Regional Forester for the Rocky Mountain Region of the US Department of
Agriculture - Forest Service. I appreciate being here today with Mike Lester,
Nancy Fishering, and J.R. Ford. Together, we are making a difference to improve
conditions of forests in Colorado.

Restoration and Resilience

Wildfire mitigation, clean water, and rural economies are important, and that is why restoring forest health and resiliency in Colorado is a top priority. In 2013, the Rocky Mountain Region, in partnership with the wood products industry, increased vegetation management and harvested enough timber to construct 25,000 homes. In Colorado, 64,500 acres of National Forest System lands were managed last year to improve forest health conditions and reduce wildfire hazards, an increase of approximately 10% annually over the past 5 years.

We continue our focus on landscape scale management, utilizing large planning areas, stewardship contracting, and collaborative forest restoration:

- Stewardship contracts allow the Forest Service to meet vegetation management objectives while contributing to local economies. Four long-term stewardship contracts are providing a sustained flow of wood products, providing raw materials for biomass plants, and local mills. For example, ten-year stewardship contracts in Archuleta and Eagle Counties (White River and San Juan National Forests) will help supply biomass energy plants in Pagosa Springs and Gypsum. These projects create jobs, improve forest health and resilience, and provide locally-sourced renewable energy.

- The recent passage of the Farm Bill reauthorized stewardship contracting and made Good Neighbor Authority permanent. In Colorado, Good Neighbor Authority treated more than 2,800 acres. For example, projects in Chaffee County, helped facilitate cross-boundary forest restoration activities. We appreciate our Congressional delegation's efforts to pass this important legislation.

- I would also like to share an update on two Collaborative Forest Landscape Restoration Projects. These projects leverage federal investments to reduce fire hazard in our communities and improve wildlife habitat, while providing forest products to local mills. The Uncompahgre Plateau and the Front Range Fuels projects have treated tens of thousands of acres on the Front Range and Western Slope.

- Insects and disease continue to drive our forest restoration objectives. In the western part of the State, from Mesa to Saguache counties, spruce and aspen forests have experienced substantial mortality over the last decade. The Grand Mesa, Uncompahgre, and Gunnison National Forest is conducting a landscape scale analysis to improve

conditions of up to 6,000 acres of forests annually, over the next 5 to 10 years. This large-scale planning effort allows us to spend more resources implementing projects to improve forest health and protect communities. The reopening of the mill in Montrose provides a key partner to help us continue our work in this part of the State.

- As a result of the West Fork Complex Fire, which burned more than 110,000 acres in Mineral and Hinsdale Counties (Rio Grande and San Juan National Forests), we continue to work with the Rio Grande Watershed Emergency Action Coordination Team. Many partners associated with this team assist county emergency services and identify opportunities to improve watershed condition. The Rio Grande National Forest exceeded timber targets for fiscal year 2013 and will continue to work directly with the timber industries impacted by the fire. We have accelerated our normal schedule in 2014 for competitive bids, and all sales will be released this quarter with the goal of providing an uninterrupted supply of timber.

- The devastating floods experienced last fall have made a substantial impact to our priorities within Colorado. A strong collaborative effort with the State, counties, and other partners has resulted in work to stabilize debris flows and repair critical infrastructure. We share Colorado's concern that fire suppression in the flood areas could be complicated, and have added aviation assets in preparation of the upcoming fire season.

- One of our safest and most effective ways to reduce hazardous fuels on the landscape is piling and burning dead trees. To treat more acres, we are capitalizing on opportunities to work together to reduce hazardous fuels. Last fall, the Colorado Air Pollution Control Division issued a smoke management permit for the Tunnel Hill fuels reduction project, outside of Winter Park, to burn 5 times as many piles as allowed under a traditional permit. Throughout the course of this demonstration, air quality remained well within federal guidelines. We value our collaboration with the Division on this successful project and look forward to future opportunities that allow similar large-scaled projects.

- Our cooperative efforts to address fires, floods, and forest health extend to Colorado's noxious weed management program that provides assistance to all landowners. We received your letter that articulated the need for continued emphasis on weed management. Over the past five years we have treated more than 100,000 acres of National Forests system lands across the State. We realize the need for additional cooperation on this critical issue that continues to impact forest health, wildlife habitat, water quality, and agriculture.

Conclusion

Forests in Colorado are a great investment and continue to provide many benefits to the people of this country. I appreciate the interest the General Assembly has shown in regard to maintaining healthy and resilient forests and grassland.

Together, we will continue to increase the pace and scale of forest management activities that result in healthy, diverse, and more resilient forests and communities.

This concludes my prepared remarks. I welcome questions from you and your committee at this time.