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Preliminary Report Identifies More than \$1 Billion in Costs Resulting from 2003 Wildfires

ALBANY, CA, July 25, 2005- The expenditures resulting from the Old, Grand Prix, and Padua Fires, which burned in San Bernardino and part of Los Angeles Counties in 2003, have been calculated at over \$1.2 billion, according to a preliminary report released today by the USDA Forest Service Pacific Southwest Research Station's Forest Fire Laboratory, located in Riverside, CA.

“Most cost estimates for wildfires start and stop with the cost of fighting the fire. This report shows that the suppression costs for the 2003 fires are an extremely small piece of the puzzle,” said Alex Dunn, Planning Specialist for the San Bernardino National Forest, who authored the report while on assignment to the Riverside Forest Fire Lab. “In fact, the \$61 million spent fighting the Old, Grand Prix, and Padua Fires represents only 5 percent of more than \$1.2 billion in total expenditures.” The report states that although the cost of suppression may be a good indicator of the total expense in remote areas, this figure underestimates the costs in more populated areas. Dunn explains: “Fires that burn in urbanized ecosystems—that destroy property, damage critical infrastructure, shut down roads and rail lines, evacuate tens of thousands, close businesses, and impair watersheds that people depend on for clean water—cost orders of magnitude more than fires in less populated areas.” Direct losses resulting from the Old, Grand Prix, and Padua fires accounted for more than half of the more than \$1.2 billion spent, however damage to watersheds is also a significant expense according to the report. Dunn explains that “Many of the water cleanup costs are being spent by water districts and public

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works departments as far away as Orange County. That's a long way from where many of us assume the impacts of these fires occurred."

Although the \$1.2 billion in expenditures associated with the 2003 wildfires may seem staggering, Dunn reports that the total economic costs may actually be much higher. "A number of social and ecosystem costs weren't even included," he added. Long-term social and ecosystem costs of wildfires are often unaccounted for, according to Dunn. "When I talked with some of the organizations still working to help people displaced or emotionally traumatized by these fires, I realized their job is far from over." The Red Cross estimates they will spend \$1.2 million to close open cases. Additionally, lost recreation opportunities during and after the fires remain unknown. "Many of the burned areas on the National Forest that were closed for recovery just opened to the public on July 1 of 2005," Dunn added. Ecosystem costs not calculated in the report include losses of habitat for threatened and endangered species. Dunn explains: "It is very difficult to put a dollar value on habitat, but it's important to realize how valuable it is, considering how little is left in Southern California."

The preliminary results emphasize the importance of active fuel management, according to San Bernardino National Forest Supervisor Gene Zimmerman. "This report shows that the costs of our fuel reduction projects are minimal when compared with the potential benefits of doing the work." Zimmerman added that the Forest Service would continue to focus on fuel treatments that protect local communities. "If we can prevent just one major incident with our fuel treatment work, we will have recouped our investment." Zimmerman goes on to add that, "If we look at the big picture, it's about making a serious and long-term commitment to restore these fire-adapted ecosystems. We have to first get the fuels to a manageable level, and then focus on maintaining them in a condition that won't require an emergency effort in the future. The vegetation isn't going to stop growing, and neither will the population. If we get to a point and think we are 'done' and stop treating the Forest, we risk being in the exact same situation down the road."

The full report is available at: www.fs.fed.us/r5/sanbernardino/

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