

**TESTIMONY of  
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UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE—FOREST SERVICE  
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Concerning  
WILDFIRE RESPONSE AND RECOVERY EFFORTS IN CALIFORNIA**

Chairman Rouda, Ranking Member and Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today to discuss wildfire response and recovery efforts in California. My testimony today will focus on the 2017-2018 fire seasons, as well as the forecasted 2019 wildfire activity this summer and fall. I will also provide an overview of the Forest Service's wildfire mitigation strategies, including ways the Forest Service is working with its many partners to improve forest conditions and help communities prepare for wildfire.

**2017 AND 2018 WILDFIRES AND RELATED RECOVERY EFFORTS**

In the past two years, California has experienced the deadliest and most destructive wildfires in its recorded history. More than 17,000 wildfires burned over three million acres across all land ownerships, which is almost three percent of California's land mass. These fires tragically killed 146 people, burned down tens of thousands of homes and businesses and destroyed billions of dollars of property and infrastructure. In California alone, the Forest Service spent \$860 million on fire suppression in 2017 and 2018.

In 2017, wind-driven fires in Napa and neighboring counties in Northern California tragically claimed more than 40 lives, burned over 245,000 acres, destroyed approximately 8,900 structures and had over 11,000 firefighters assigned. In Southern California, the Thomas Fire burned over 280,000 acres, destroying over 1,000 structures and forced approximately 100,000 people to evacuate.

The 2017 Creek Fire burned 15,619 acres, destroyed 123 structures and resulted in 115,000 residents being evacuated. Also, in 2017, the Rye Fire burned a total of 6,049 acres, threatened over 5,000 structures, including Six Flags Magic Mountain, along with several communities and impacted traffic on one of California's main arteries, Interstate 5.

In 2018, the 459,123-acre Mendocino Complex became the largest wildfire complex in California history. The 229,651-acre Carr Fire ravaged the City of Redding, California, with significant structure loss and the Camp Fire tragically claimed 85 lives and destroyed 18,804 structures in the Town of Paradise, California.

**Wildfire Recovery**

Restoration and rehabilitation after wildland fires is critical to the future health of the forest and safety of adjacent communities. For example, in the Creek Fire area, the Forest Service has repaired affected trails, completed emergency culvert maintenance and installed sandbags and erosion fencing to help minimize erosion and protect the trails, streams and cultural resources. Los Angeles County and

Angeles National Forest crews completed road stabilization to ensure safe driving conditions and to minimize sedimentation into creeks.

In the Ranch Fire area, we are in the planning phase of the 40,000-acre North Shore restoration project on the Upper Lake Ranger District. The project area involves the communities on the north and east shores of Clear Lake, as well as land within the boundaries of the Berryessa Snow Mountain National Monument. The project will include restoring vegetation, capturing remaining economic value of forest products, removing fire-killed trees, restoring recreation opportunities, maintenance of roads and supporting research.

The Forest Service is carrying out salvage, reforestation and maintenance projects in the area impacted by the Camp Fire. In addition, the Butte County Resource Conservation District has obtained a grant from Sierra Nevada Conservancy for the National Environmental Policy Act analysis to support the reforestation of 400 acres of National Forest System lands in the Concow Basin. The Forest Service is also partnering with CAL FIRE to develop potential prescribed fire operations in the Concow Basin.

### **2019 FIRE YEAR**

This past winter, California experienced an extremely wet season that extended well into May. This much needed precipitation replenished reservoirs and delayed the start of the fire year in higher elevation forested lands. However, the late season precipitation worsened the wildfire outlook for lower elevation foothills and grasslands by providing thick grass and brush that, once dried, will provide fuel for wildfires from August into November.

In California, there has been a total of 4,845 fires this year (as of August 19), covering approximately 62,521 acres (across all jurisdictions); this compares to a total of 5,478 fires and approximately 1,029,384 acres at this time last year. Of the fires in California so far this year, 4,163 fires (and over 36,000 acres) are under state and local jurisdiction, while approximately 530 fires (and over 21,379 acres) are under the jurisdiction of the Forest Service. While there has been a slow start the 2019 fire year, a significant threat remains.

In Southern California, the damage produced by the drought and bark beetles will continue to increase the potential for large fires for years to come. Most of Southern California away from marine layer influences, will likely experience above normal large fire potential by the start of September

In Northern California, the fuel loading of this year's grass crop is well above normal for a fourth consecutive year. Warmer and drier than normal conditions are expected through November. The high elevation snow pack has led to high soil and fuel moisture values at elevations above 6,000 feet, which will likely keep large fire potential at the lower end of normal for the remainder of the season. Lower and middle elevations will likely see increasing grass and brush fires in August, with the potential of fires growing to large sizes above normal.

Together with our partners, we have a world-renowned wildland fire organization that is ready to respond. The Forest Service, nation-wide, can mobilize approximately 10,000 firefighters, 900 engines, up to 32 airtankers and up to 200 helicopters, along with other equipment. Through contracts and agreements, we can also mobilize additional resources as needed.

## **REDUCING FIRE RISK AND IMPROVING FOREST CONDITIONS**

The Forest Service manages 18 National Forests in the Pacific Southwest Region, which encompasses over 20 million acres across California and assists state and private forest landowners in California, Hawaii and the U.S. Affiliated Pacific Islands. National Forests supply 50 percent of the water in California and form the watersheds of most of the major aqueduct systems and more than 2,400 reservoirs throughout the state.

Currently, more than 25 million acres of California wildlands are classified as very high or extreme fire threat. Approximately 25 percent of the state's population – 11 million people – lives in this high-risk area, including thousands of communities, from small mountain towns to suburbs and large urbanized cities across the state. Many of these wildlands are fire dependent, requiring fire as a critical process for maintaining health and resiliency. Actively managing these fire-dependent landscapes and implementing fuel reduction projects can reduce the frequency and the impact of severe wildfire events.

Last August, the U.S. Department of Agriculture launched the Shared Stewardship Initiative that brings states and other stakeholders together to prioritize cross-boundary investments to improve forest conditions. As lead agencies in California, the Forest Service and the California Natural Resources Agencies are close to signing a Shared Stewardship Agreement that will establish a framework to jointly promote ecologically-based forest and rangeland management in California. This will help us to maintain and restore healthy, fire resilient and sustainable forests and rangelands that will continue to provide benefits to people now and into the future, while reducing risks to communities, natural and built infrastructure and first responders. Together, we will develop tools, structure and systems to increase the pace and scale of forest stewardship and achieve our mutual goal of treating a combined one million acres per year in California's forest and rangelands.

In recent legislation, the Forest Service has acquired additional capacity for shared stewardship across broad landscapes. We will capitalize on the authorities created by the 2018 Omnibus Bill and 2018 Farm Bill. For instance, Region 5 has seven Good Neighbor Agreements where the State and local governments are helping to improve forest health and fire resilience. In addition, several projects are under development using the "Wildfire Resilience" Categorical Exclusion and the 20-year stewardship contracting authority provided through the Fiscal Year 2018 Omnibus Bill.

The 2014 Farm Bill Categorical Exclusions (CEs) are being used on National Forest System lands for projects in watersheds experiencing or at risk of insect and disease outbreaks on up to 3,000 acres. Designating watersheds using the Insect and Disease CEs allows us to more efficiently implement treatments across the landscape. Since the establishment of the insect and disease CE, National Forests in Region 5 have signed a decision memo for 35 projects using the CE that will treat up to 105,000 acres.

### **Hazardous Fuels Reduction**

The Forest Service, through its Hazardous Fuels management program, continues to focus on lowering wildfire risk through prescribed burns, timber sales and mechanical treatments with the principal aim of mitigating the spread and severity of wildfire and promoting resilient ecosystems. Hazardous fuel treatments include multiple vegetation manipulation techniques that remove or modify wildland fuels to reduce the likelihood of ignition, lower fire intensity, or limit the spread of invasive species and diseases that can increase the fire risk. These treatments promote the natural role of fire by reducing the likelihood of uncharacteristically intense wildland fire. These activities also reduce potential impacts to

communities and increase opportunities for wildland firefighters to safely and effectively engage wildfires.

In 2018, the Forest Service completed over 313,000 acres of hazardous fuel treatments in California, with 250,000 of these acres treated mechanically. Many of these treatments are in the Wildland Urban Interface. So far this year, Region 5 of the Forest Service has already completed half of the hazardous fuels target of 221,000 acres. In addition to mechanical fuels reduction work and prescribed burning, we also use some naturally-ignited wildfires during favorable weather conditions as tools to aid in reducing risk and severity of catastrophic wildfire when doing so meets land management objectives.

#### *Prescribed Fire and Creating More Resilient Forests*

California's forests have evolved with fire for centuries – the landscape requires fire to maintain a healthy balance by removing dead and dying vegetation, recycling nutrients and creating space for new vegetation to grow. Due to a century of fire suppression combined with land development and loss of indigenous burning practices, many of California's forests have become uncharacteristically dense, making them subject to insect and disease outbreaks as well as larger, hotter wildfires.

The application of prescribed fire presents one of the best opportunities for reducing risk to firefighters and the public long-term while achieving our land management objectives on a meaningful scale. Studies have shown that prescribed fires and fires managed for a resource objective result in a fraction of the emissions from large wildfires. And while the costs associated with fire suppression is at an all-time high, fires managed for resource objectives typically cost taxpayers less than half of a fire with a full suppression strategy. Similarly, the use of prescribed fire is one of the least costly forest management tools available. In 2018, the Forest Service completed over 63,000 acres of prescribed fire – the largest number recorded since 2001.

### **PROMOTING FIRE-ADAPTED COMMUNITIES**

The Forest Service works together with our Federal, state, tribal, local and non-government organization partners to help communities be prepared for wildfire and to further the goals and implementation of the 2011 National Cohesive Wildland Fire Management Strategy. The agency is involved in the following efforts to help communities prepare for wildfire.

#### *Building Capacity for Prevention, Mitigation, Control and Suppression of Wildfires*

The first responders on almost 75 percent of wildfires are local fire departments or state agencies. Collaboration between the Forest Service, the Department of the Interior and non-federal government entities is important for an effective, all-lands approach to wildland fire management.

Through the National Fire Capacity program, the Forest Service supports and assists State Foresters and local communities in building capacity for the prevention, mitigation, control and suppression of wildfires on non-federal lands. Training funded by the program provides for effective and safer initial response to wildfire. In California, the FY 2019 program will assist over 500 communities through a statewide outreach and education campaign that will benefit communities throughout the state.

#### *Assisting Communities and Homeowners Prepare for Wildfire*

Funding provided through the National Fire Capacity program is also used to support Fire Safe Councils across the country. The California Fire Safe Council (CFSC) is a statewide non-profit organization formed to mobilize Californians to protect their homes, communities and environments from wildfire. Local fire safe councils are comprised of local volunteers who work integrally with

Federal, state and local governments, as well as other community members, to address the community's risk to wildfire and create fire adapted communities and resilient landscapes. Among other services, CFSC manages a grants clearinghouse and serves as a pass-through entity to local fire safe councils for available funds for fire-risk reduction activities for residents and landowners.

Over the past five years, over 500 communities have been assisted through these National Fire Capacity grant funds for outreach and education projects, community wildfire risk planning and hazardous fuel/community mitigation projects, which align with the tenets of the National Cohesive Wildland Fire Management Strategy.

#### *Aiding Local Volunteer Fire Departments*

Through the Rural Fire Capacity Program, the Forest Service provides technical and financial assistance to rural fire departments in communities of less than 10,000 people. The program supports local fire preparedness and suppression efforts and provides funding for equipment, training and expansion of volunteer fire departments where little or no fire protection is available. Recipients match grants dollar-for-dollar to maximize the value of the federal investment. In FY19, the program is helping 141 local fire departments in California which serve 695 communities. This assistance helps strengthen the California Mutual Aid system by enhancing local fire departments' ability to assist with fire suppression on Federal, state and local lands.

#### *Wildfire Prevention*

In California, more than ninety percent of wildfires are human-caused. The Forest Service, along with its many partners, are engaged in several public education initiatives aiming to reduce the incidence of human-caused wildfire and related suppression costs.

Wildfire Prevention Education Teams support wildland fire prevention and educational needs prior to and during periods of high wildland fire danger. Teams are highly effective in their ability to reduce human-caused wildland ignitions and are equipped to develop and implement on-site prevention assessments and plans. In early August, the Forest Service deployed its first California Wildland Fire Prevention and Education Team on the Klamath National Forest.

#### **CONCLUSION**

Federal, state and local governments and private landowners can work together across larger landscapes to create healthy forests. However, it will take many years of work to reverse the trend we have experienced over the past several years and larger wildland fires over a protracted fire season presents a "new normal" that we cannot ignore.

This concludes my remarks. I would be happy to answer any questions. Thank you for the opportunity to testify.