

**TESTIMONY of
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BEFORE THE
UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
COMMITTEE ON AGRICULTURE— SUBCOMMITTEE ON CONSERVATION AND
FORESTRY
SEPTEMBER 29, 2021
Concerning
“The 2021 Wildland Fire Year: Responding to and Mitigating Threats to Communities”**

Madam Chair, Ranking Member and members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today to discuss wildfire management and the 2021 Fire Year. Wildfires threaten urban and rural communities, Tribal Nations and their interests, farm and ranchland, municipal water supplies, timber, recreation sites, and important wildlife habitat.

The Forest Service has a continuing need and responsibility to partner with all communities to prepare for wildfires. The Forest Service does not work alone in managing wildfires across the nation – wildfire requires an all-of-government response, including major contributions from States, Tribes, and local government, contractors, partners, and volunteer organizations. These partnerships have evolved over many years, creating a robust interagency capability to support wildfire suppression across the country.

Early in the year, the National Interagency Fire Center forecast predicted above normal fire potential for much of the West. As a result, the Administration took a number of steps to prepare for this fire year by bolstering firefighter pay, extending temporary firefighters to ensure effective response throughout the fire year, making additional aircraft available, continuing transition to a more permanent firefighting workforce, invoking the Defense Production Act to mitigate a potential shortage of firehose, and leveraging satellite and emerging technologies to rapidly detect new wildfires.

2021 Fire Year

Our nation is enduring another devastating wildfire year, one that has cut destructive swaths through many States, including California, Oregon, Washington, Montana, Idaho, and Arizona. Complicating our efforts has been managing the effects of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, including the negative impacts on the health and availability of firefighting resources and supply chains. As of September 27, 2021, there have been 45,971 fires that have burned over 5.9 million acres across all jurisdictions. Sadly, we are also mourning the loss of a number of lives throughout the country due to wildfire activity, including 4 federal firefighters who made the ultimate sacrifice in protecting our communities. The impact to communities cannot be overstated. While assessments are ongoing, to date, over 4,500 homes, commercial properties, and outbuildings have been destroyed, along with an untold amount of property damage and loss of livelihood for many.

Fire year 2021, like 2017, 2018 and 2020, has been devastating in not only the size and frequency of large wildfires but also in terms of sustained activity. Since early spring, much of the Western United States has seen intense fire activity that has not fully abated. Significant drought across the Western United States produced conditions ripe for fire from the start of the summer. Substantial lightning events occurred early, and fires began simultaneously across multiple geographic areas. Our ability to mobilize resources was immediately constrained as we had personnel engaged in fighting fires in their home geographic area and could not leave to support other geographic areas as they have traditionally done. Prioritization of critical resources began early, and the demand for resources continues to be high across the system.

Numerous large fires, including the nearly 1-million-acre Dixie fire, have burned in and around communities across Arizona, California, Oregon, Washington, Idaho, and Montana. Smoke impacts from these fires have been widespread across the western States and have occasionally spread all the way to the East Coast. Resources have been constrained and the interagency wildfire system, of which the Forest Service is a part, has had to make many tough decisions to ensure firefighting resources were prioritized to fires with the greatest threat to public safety.

We entered into National Wildfire Preparedness Level 5 on July 14, 2021, indicating the highest level of fire activity and significant strains on firefighting resources. This is the earliest date in a decade and the second earliest date on record moving to this highest Preparedness Level. We remained at Preparedness Level 5 for 69 days, the longest stretch on record. During this stretch an average of 22,900 firefighters and support personnel were assigned to wildfires each day.

Due to local fire conditions, temporary closure orders have been put in place in some areas to provide for public safety and reduce the potential for new fires, including a temporary closure of national forests in California. Implementing fire restrictions, burn bans, or associated closures is a particularly difficult decision that we do not take lightly. The closures in California helped decrease the potential for new fire starts at a time of extremely limited firefighting resources. They also enhanced firefighter and community safety by limiting exposure that occurs in public evacuation situations, especially as COVID-19 continues to impact human health and strain hospital resources. Closure decisions are not made by the Forest Service in a vacuum. We work with our partners, state agencies, and communities to establish criteria for closing and re-opening our forests as conditions warrant. This risk-informed decision making with our partners led to us reopening California's national forests two days earlier than planned.

Response requires a whole of government approach, and I want to personally thank our partners who answered our call for assistance to bolster our capabilities: the Department of Defense who provided active military from Joint Base Lewis-McChord in Washington, eight C-130 and two RC-26 aircraft, and continued access to critical satellite and other imagery; the Defense Logistics Agency; our international partners in Australia, Canada, and Mexico; and the Fire Department of New York City's All Hazard Incident Management Team. States also received significant assistance from their National Guard units. We are grateful for all of our partners around the country and around the world who continue to pitch in to help our nation through yet another difficult fire year.

Taking Care of Firefighters and Communities

Wildland firefighters are the backbone of our ability to protect communities and vital infrastructure from wildfires. Wildland fire forecasts are consistently predicting fire seasons that start sooner, end later, and are more severe throughout the nation. Fire seasons have become fire years. With this change in condition, it is imperative to ensure a robust year-round workforce available to respond at any time, that is supported and equitably compensated, has a better work-life balance, and is available to undertake preventive actions like hazardous fuels management treatments during periods of low fire activity. As the complexity of the firefighting environment grows exponentially, our recruitment and retention of firefighters has been further complicated by our inability to offer a set of uniform competitive wages and benefits for permanent and seasonal employees. Federal wages for firefighters have not kept pace with wages offered by state, local and private entities in some areas of the United States. Firefighters must be fairly paid for the grueling work they are willing to take on. Additionally, in difficult fire years such as this one, annual Federal pay cap limitations can make it challenging for agencies to appropriately target compensation to our critical front-line employees and management officials who the U.S. government relies upon to lead our most difficult issues and at times dangerous incidents. We have seen highly trained personnel leave the Forest Service; we have experienced some inability to recruit new employees; and we are in a constant mode of training new employees. In addition, our federal wildland firefighting workforce is stressed like no time in history. Suicidal ideation, depression, and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder affect firefighters at levels far above what is found in general society. The Administration will work with Congress on longer-term much needed compensation, benefit, and work-life balance reforms for Federal wildland firefighters.

It is time for a significant change in our federal wildland fire system. The Forest Service is partnering with the Department of the Interior, the Office of Personnel Management, and Executive Office of the President to identify policy and legislative solutions to these challenges. As the President committed, permanent firefighting personnel up to the General Schedule (GS)-9 level, were provided a performance award payment equivalent to a ten percent award; temporary firefighters received a \$1,300 award; and permanent and temporary firefighters in a GS-1, GS-2 or GS-3 position were additionally compensated to ensure they make \$15 per hour. Over the last two years, the Forest Service has converted 500 firefighting positions from temporary to permanent. The Administration also supports the premium pay cap waiver in the FY2022 Continuing Resolution that passed the House of Representatives. This provision will ensure that Federal firefighters will be compensated for the work they have and will complete this year. Most critically, going forward the Forest Service is working directly with firefighters and union officials to listen to their concerns and co-create solutions that serve their needs into the future. We look forward to working with Congress to support and modernize the federal wildland fire fighter workforce

Maintaining the health and safety of all our employees as they move around the country is fundamental to our continued success. Preventing the spread of COVID-19 among our first responders and communities is critical. COVID-19 protocols established in 2020, remain in place again this year. As a result, the Forest Service and our interagency partners have seen success with our COVID-19 prevention and mitigation measures. The learning culture of the wildland fire agencies allows for lessons-learned to be shared in real time across fire incidents.

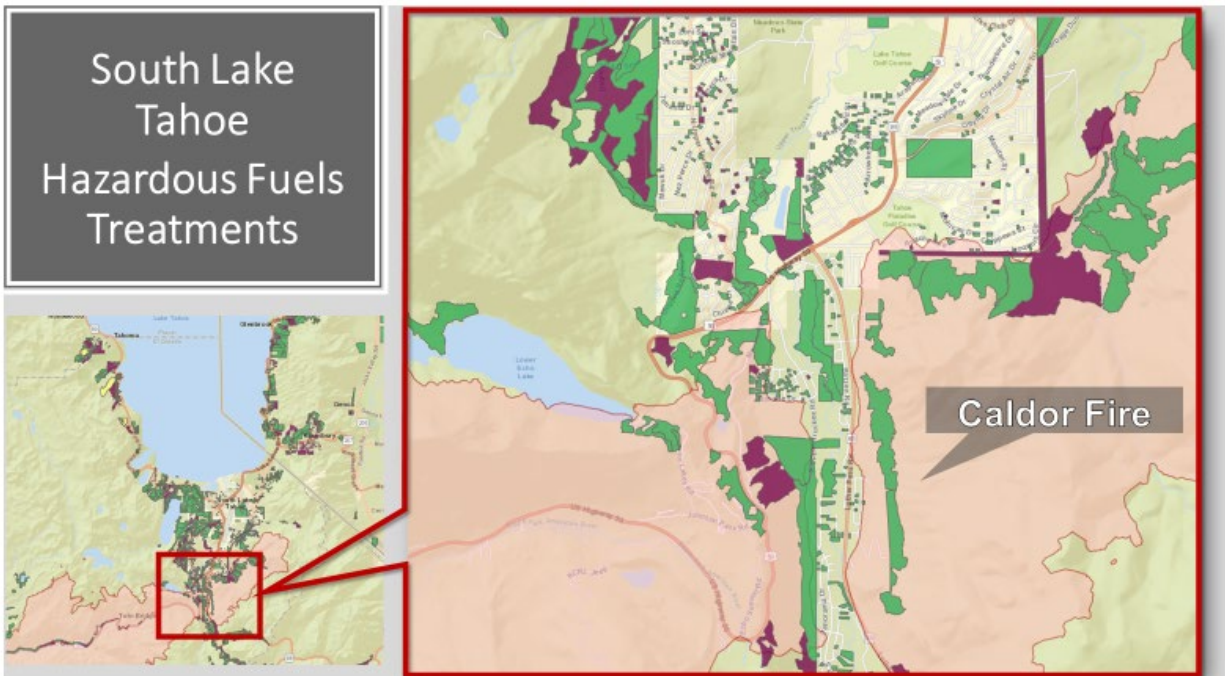
The Forest Service continues to work with community leaders and local law enforcement to ensure their needs are met, and wildfire threats and capacity are clearly understood when planning firefighting strategies and evacuations.

Smoke from large wildfire events poses significant risks to public health and safety. The Interagency Wildland Fire Air Quality Response Program has developed approaches for early warning of wildfire smoke impacts through efforts at the Forest Service Pacific Northwest Research Station and partner agencies. Successful outcomes include working with the Environmental Protection Agency to provide fire and smoke information on the popular [AirNow.gov](https://www.airnow.gov) website and phone application. Air Resource Advisors provide Smoke Outlooks that inform approximately 21 million people, many in rural and underserved communities. Community preparation for wildfire smoke allows public health officials to be aware and prepare for effects on individuals vulnerable to smoke impacts.

Reducing Fire Risk Across All Lands

Devastating wildfires are the most significant threat to the ability of our forests to sequester carbon, support local economies, and provide clean water and other important resources to communities. About 63 million acres, or 32 percent, of National Forest System lands are at high or very high hazard for wildfires that would be difficult to contain. This is, in part, a result of 110 years of fire overly aggressive suppression policies as well as climate change. Forest Service research has identified hundreds of communities at high risk from wildland fire. To reduce this risk there is a need to significantly scale up hazardous fuels reduction treatments across landscapes and in partnership with communities in the most at-risk places.

An example of how fuels treatments help protect communities was seen in the Caldor Fire. On August 14, 2021, the Caldor Fire started on the Eldorado National Forest in California. Due to a historically dry season, the fire made unprecedented runs, with growth rates ranging from 10,000 to 40,000 acres per day in the direction of the Lake Tahoe Basin. The fire remained very active day and night. The fire was both fuels and wind driven and exceeded fire growth expectations in areas with significant natural barriers that would normally redirect or stall a fire. Despite the difficulty in managing this fire and the demanding fire environment, there are success stories to be found in the fuels reduction treatments completed around Lake Tahoe and the surrounding communities. As the Caldor Fire moved east, pushed by high winds and dry fuels, it encountered both thinning and prescribed fire treatments (see as green and purple polygons in the map below) that moderated fire behavior, allowed more time for evacuation efforts, and created safer and more conducive conditions for firefighters. There is no doubt homes were saved because of the efforts of firefighters, but those efforts were made safer and more effective due to the thinning and prescribed fire treatments in the wildland-urban interface.



The Forest Service carries out approximately three million acres of fuels reduction treatments annually. The Department of the Interior, States, Tribes and others also treat about one million acres annually. Unfortunately, this is not at the scale necessary to address the problem. Without reconsidering the way we treat hazardous fuels on federal and non-federal land, and address the impacts of climate change, we will remain in this current wildfire crisis. Destruction from wildfires will continue to threaten communities across the West. We will work with partners to focus fuels and forest health treatments more strategically and at the scale of the problem, using the best available science as our guide.

To address the highest risk acres at the scale needed, we work collaboratively with States, Tribes, local communities, private landowners, and other stakeholders to:

- Strategically treat 20 million acres on priority National Forest System lands, in the west, over and above our current level of treatments; and
- Strategically treat 30 million acres of other priority Federal, State, Tribal, and private lands, in the west.

Forest Service research and risk based modeling has identified hundreds of communities at high risk, and can inform where and how to place treatments that will truly make a difference. We know that treatments need to be done across jurisdictions to be effective, and there are collaborative frameworks in place to enable cross-boundary treatments, including Cohesive Strategy projects, Joint Chiefs Restoration Partnership projects, Good Neighbor Authority agreements, and Shared Stewardship agreements.

The Biden administration's American Jobs Plan calls for protecting and restoring "nature-based infrastructure—our lands, forests, wetlands, watersheds, and coastal and ocean resources." As

part of the plan, the President has called on Congress “to invest in protection from extreme wildfires.” In addition, the USDA Climate-Smart Agriculture and Forestry Strategy has called for expanding the area of fuels treatments by two to four times nationwide to reduce wildfire risk.

The President has made it clear that reducing the risk of wildfire and creating climate resilient forest landscapes is a top priority including a significant increase of over \$280 million in wildfire risk reduction programs within the FY2022 President’s Budget. Additionally, the administration supports the new investments within the Bipartisan Infrastructure Deal that would enable the Forest Service to treat landscapes in the right places and at the right scale that is commensurate with the wildfire problem our nation faces.

Recovery Post-Wildfire

The Forest Service has a lot of work to do to restore functioning ecosystems following the 2020 and 2021 wildfires. For example, wildfires create over 80% of reforestation needs, including approximately one million acres that burned with high severity in 2020 alone. The Forest Service currently addresses only 6% of post-wildfire replanting needs per year, resulting in a rapidly expanding list of reforestation needs. The Agency has plans for the reforestation of over 1.3 million acres of National Forest System land; however these plans only address one third of National Forest System reforestation needs, estimated to be four million acres and growing. As we work to recover from wildfire, the Agency emphasizes planting the right species, in the right place, under the right conditions, so forests will remain healthy and resilient over time.

Employee care and recovery is a critical part of our work. Many national forests sustained destruction of infrastructure as well as significant environmental damage in the 2020 and 2021 wildfires. As a result of the 2020 wildfires alone, 110 Forest Service structures were damaged or destroyed, including: employee housing on the Arapaho and Roosevelt National Forests in Colorado; ten structures at the Brush Creek Work Center on the Plumas National Forest in California; and government quarters that housed 64 employees in Oregon. In September 2020, the Forest Service stood up a team to aid in the care and recovery of employees, administrative units, communities, and short-term and long-term natural resource needs. Several systems, organizations, and procedures have been developed that have supported employee well-being and employee’s needs at work resulting from the 2020 and 2021 wildfires. Some of these include an increase in mental health assistance for employees through peer-to-peer employee resources and contract services provided on incidents, and reimbursement to eligible employees when they were under evacuation orders.

Conclusion

The USDA Forest Service is committed to keeping our communities and firefighters safe as fire seasons grow longer and more severe. The dedication, bravery, and professional integrity of our firefighters and support personnel is second to none. Many have lost their own homes as they helped save their communities. As we work with our many partners to assist communities impacted by wildfires, we are committed, through shared stewardship, to change this trend in the coming years.

The Forest Service looks forward to working with this Subcommittee to take the steps forward needed to pay and support our wildland firefighters, reduce wildfire risk to communities across the western United States, and restore ecosystems and infrastructure affected by wildfires.