

**STATEMENT OF
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DEPUTY CHIEF
FOREST SERVICE
UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE**

Concerning

**THE GENERAL ACCOUNTING OFFICE REPORT ON A COHESIVE
STRATEGY TO ADDRESS CATASTROPHIC WILDFIRE THREATS**

**Before the
COMMITTEE ON BUDGET
UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES**

September 13, 2000

MISTER CHAIRMAN AND MEMBERS OF THE COMMITTEE:

Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today concerning the wildland fire situation and the GAO report on the need to develop a strategy to address catastrophic wildfire threats in our western national forests. I am Randle Phillips, Deputy Chief for Programs and Legislation of the Forest Service.

I appreciate your interest in what the agency is doing with respect to catastrophic wildfire. The 2000 fire season is one of the worst in recent memory, and it is not over yet. Fire has burned over approximately 6.6 million acres of federal, State, tribal, and private land so far this year. The Forest Service has spent over \$650 million in its attempt to contain these fires and prevent loss of life and property, and protect critical natural resources. Six battalions of military have assisted our fire-fighting efforts, and specialists, equipment, and crews have been called in from several other countries to supplement our resources.

I would like to cover two major topics today:

- The GAO Report and the Forest Service's response;
- The President's request for a report strategizing restoration efforts and actions to reduce wildfire effects on communities;

Before I get into the details of these topics, I would first like to briefly discuss some of the reasons why we are in this dire situation today.

This fire season is a result of extremely hot and dry weather conditions in the west. The weather phenomenon known as La Nina, characterized by unusually cold Pacific Ocean temperatures, changed normal weather patterns when it formed two years ago. It caused severe, long-lasting drought across much of the country, drying out our forests and rangelands. The situation was exacerbated by the fact that the drought followed several seasons of higher-than-normal rain, which fueled the growth of grasses and other plants that quickly dried when the rains stopped. This left millions of acres susceptible to fires. To make matters worse, this weather pattern also spawned a series of mostly dry thunderstorms with heavy lightning across the West. Because of the drought conditions, lightning strikes have ignited more new fires than would normally be associated with such storms.

The current season corresponds to a historical pattern of extensive wildfires during similar unusual weather conditions. The result has been an extended, severe fire season with wildfires burning simultaneously across the western United States. Forest Service's fire fighters and their interagency partners have done an outstanding job in these difficult conditions. So far this year, they have put out a remarkable 76,000 fires.

This year's fires also reflect a longer-term disruption in the natural fire cycle that has increased the risk of catastrophic fires in our forests and rangelands. During the last century, fires have been aggressively extinguished in the West. As a result, the annual acreage consumed by wildfires in the lower 48 states dropped from 40 to 50 million acres a year in the early 1930s to about five million acres in the 1970s. During this time, firefighting budgets rose dramatically and firefighting tactics and equipment became increasingly more sophisticated and effective.

While the policy of aggressive fire suppression has successfully protected homes and forests during the last century, it has also inadvertently prevented fire from naturally cleaning out brush, shrubs, downed material, and small trees that can fuel fires making them hotter and more difficult to control. In some cases, peat management practices including timber harvesting and grazing practices may also have been a contributing factor to the loss of large, fire resistant trees and the over accumulation of brush. Invasive species such as cheatgrass, which is pervasive on today's Western landscape, have also caused problems. Cheatgrass is one of the

first plants to establish after a fire, and it grows earlier, quicker, and higher than native grasses. Then it dies, dries, and becomes fuel for fires.

In short, decades of aggressive fire suppression have drastically changed the look, fire behavior, and ecological condition of western forest and rangelands and ironically increased the cost and difficulty of suppressing fires. Forests a century ago were less dense and had larger, more fire-resistant trees. For example, in northern Arizona, some lower elevation stands of ponderosa pine that once held 50 larger trees per acre, now contain 200 or more smaller trees per acre. In addition, the composition of our forests have changed from more fire-resistant tree species to non-fire resistant species such as grand fir, Douglas fir, and subalpine fir. As a result, studies show that today's wildfires, typically burn hotter, faster, and higher than those of the past.

In addition to the unnatural fuel buildup developing in our forests and rangelands, wildland firefighting has become more complex in the last two decades due to dramatic increases in the West's population. Of the ten fastest growing states in the U.S., eight are in the interior West. While the national average annual population growth is about one percent, the West has growth rates ranging from 2.5 to 13 percent. As a result, new development is occurring in fire-prone areas, often adjacent to Federal land, creating a "wildland-urban interface"--an area where structures and other human development meet or intermingle with undeveloped wildland. This relatively new phenomenon means that more communities and structures are threatened by wildland fire. This relatively new phenomenon means that more communities and structures are threatened by fire. Wildland firefighters today often spend a great deal more time and effort protecting structures than in earlier years. Consequently, firefighting has become more complicated, expensive, and dangerous.

The Forest Service and its interagency partners have increased their efforts to reduce risks associated with the buildup of brush, shrubs, small trees and other fuels in forest and rangelands through a variety of approaches, including controlled burns, the physical removal of undergrowth, and the prevention and eradication of invasive plants. In 1994 the Forest Service was treating approximately 385,000 acres across the United States to reduce hazardous fuels. Today, we have successfully increased annual treatment almost four-fold. Last year we treated approximately 1.4 million acres. Reversing the effects of a century of aggressive fire suppression will take time and money targeted to high priority areas of protecting people, homes, critical watersheds, and wildlife habitat.

Today, high-risk areas such as the wildland/urban interface have become our high priority for treatment. There are many opportunities to treat these high priority areas to reduce fuels. Our approach, with needed new investments, focuses on protecting communities at risk from unnaturally intense fires by removing small, generally non-commercial fuels through a combination of thinning, prescribed fire, and working with landowners to reduce fuel buildups and other hazardous conditions on their own property.

The work anticipated to address fuels reduction and other needs associated with the President's Report would be done under all existing environmental laws. Full public involvement will be done, with collaboration between the agency, cooperators, and with the public.

At the request of the New Mexico delegation, we recently outlined our approach for reducing fire risks by removing small-diameter trees and non-merchantable material in the wildland/urban interface. I would like to submit for the record Chief Dombeck's May 23, 2000, letter to the New Mexico delegation.

The GAO Report and the Forest Services Response

The General Accounting Office (GAO) issued a report in April, 1999, titled: *Western National Forests: a Cohesive Strategy is Needed to Address Catastrophic Wildfire Threats* (GAO/RCED-99-65). The GAO asserted, "The most extensive and serious problem related to the health of national forests in the interior west is the over-accumulation of vegetation."

Regional Forester Lyle Laverty led a team that has developed a draft report, known as the cohesive strategy, to respond to the concerns raised by GAO. The report is not operational in nature, but rather is a strategic blueprint that utilizes coarse-scale national data to assess the problem of fuel buildup across the west.

In addition to this data, the draft report calls on the agency to consider fire management strategies that would be consistent with current forest plans or within the context of revising or amending forest management plans. The strategies mentioned in the report that may be useful for the agency to consider are those that remove brush, small trees, and other fuels through mechanical methods or controlled burning or a combination of both. It will be up to regional and local Forest Service leadership to collaborate with the public and use the best science to decide the most effective fire strategies in the context of determining the right balance of management among all of the resources within ecosystems. Two

examples of this already happening are the planning efforts underway for the Sierra Nevada Mountains and the Interior Columbia River Basin.

With regard to implementation, it is important to realize that the first round of forest management plans that were written in the 1980's did not include fire management strategies, with the exception of some of our southern forests, because the overall national policy was still "extinguish all fires at all costs." Therefore, many innovative approaches to reduce fuels in forests and near communities are stymied by these outdated forest plans. However, the opportunity to change these plans has never been better. As required by law, the agency is presently revising or has plans to revise most of its 150 or more forest plans, a process that will take most of the next five years or more to complete. As Congress discusses the amount of money to be made available for fuel treatment, it must also consider the money needed to revise and amend forest plans. Innovative projects to fire proof communities and forests must be supported and in compliance with innovative forest plans.

In the past year, we have also issued reports addressing large fire costs and workforce capacity and configuration. Teams are in place to begin implementing the recommendations of these reports. As you can see, we have been working on many fronts to deal with fire management issues.

The President's Request for a Report Outlining Restoration Efforts and Actions the Agencies can Take to Reduce Wildfire Effects on Communities

During his trip to visit fires in Idaho on August 9, 2000, the President requested a report from the Secretaries of the Interior and Agriculture outlining the agencies' plans for immediate and short-term activities that will help rehabilitate burned areas and assist rural communities to recover from the impacts of fires. In addition, the President asked us to develop actions to help protect communities and natural resources from the risk of future unnaturally intense fires. The Secretaries have completed the report and the President has accepted the report (hereafter referred to as the President's Report) and its recommendations. I would like to share the major findings and points made in the President's Report with you today.

The President's Report covers five major areas:

- Continuing to make all necessary firefighting resources available to protect communities and forests as the fire season continues;
- Restoring landscapes and rebuild communities and landscapes impacted by the fires;

- Investing in projects to reduce fire risk by removing brush, shrubs, and small trees;
- Working directly with communities to increase local firefighting capacity and reduce fire hazards, and;
- Being accountable through creation of a cabinet-level coordinating team.

The President's Report builds on many of the actions that we are already taking. However, given the magnitude of the fire season and its effects, there is clearly a need for additional action and resources than would otherwise be possible within our baseline programs.

Continuing to make all necessary firefighting resources available

The President's Report's recommendations reinforce the need to have additional initial attack and extended attack resources. It also reinforces the need to address firefighter pay equity issues. As a first priority, the Departments will continue to provide all necessary resources to ensure that firefighting efforts protect life and property.

Restoring landscapes and rebuilding communities

Burned area emergency rehabilitation teams are already mobilized and conducting preliminary assessments and rehabilitation projects needed to help prevent further loss of life, property, and resources from the first damage-producing storms that may cause excessive erosion, water quality degradation, and other damage from burned areas. In addition to this work, we will invest in landscape restoration efforts such as tree planting, watershed restoration, and soil stabilization and revegetation.

The recommendations in the President's report would also expand our efforts working with the National Association of State Foresters, the National Fire Protection Association, and local firefighting organizations to help ensure that home protection capabilities are improved and to educate homeowners in fire-sensitive ecosystems about the consequences of wildfires and techniques in community planning, homebuilding, and landscaping to protect themselves and their property. Our FIREWISE program has been very successful in helping homeowners and communities reduce damage to their houses.

Investing in projects to reduce fire risk by removing brush, shrubs, and small trees

As stated earlier, we are steadily increasing our capacity to reduce hazardous fuels and are focusing these efforts on the wildland/urban interface, but the scale of the problem is beyond our current means. The President's Report recommends

increased resources to continue making progress in reducing fuels, particularly in the wildland/urban interface areas. The recommendations are entirely consistent with our draft cohesive strategy for hazardous fuels reduction.

Working directly with communities to increase local firefighting capacity and reduce fire hazards

Working with local communities is a critical element in restoring damaged landscapes and reducing fire hazards near homes and communities. This will be pursued through expanding community participation, increasing local capacity, and learning from the public.

Being accountable through creation of a cabinet-level coordinating team

The President's Report establishes a Cabinet-level coordinating team to ensure that the actions recommended by the Departments receive the highest priority. The Secretaries of Agriculture and the Interior will co-chair this team, and integrated management teams in the regions should take primary responsibility for implementing the fuels treatment, restoration, and preparedness programs.

Funding and Budget Issues

The report to the President identifies a need for an additional \$1.57 billion per year for the Departments of Interior and Agriculture starting in FY 2001 to implement the recommendations. This funding will be used for fire preparedness, fire operations, State and volunteer fire assistance, forest health management, and economic action programs related to accomplishment of the report's recommendations.

Increasing funding for the work that needs to be accomplished will require new investments. Congress and the Administration must work together to address this issue in order to help the agencies achieve this important goal of reducing the threat of catastrophic wildfire across the landscape and implement an effective recovery and rehabilitation program.

Summary

The Forest Service and other federal agencies with firefighting responsibilities are committed to minimizing the losses from future unnaturally intense fires such as those in New Mexico, Idaho, Montana, and across the interior West. The Forest Service is committed to working with communities to implement a strategy to restore and maintain healthy ecosystems on National Forest System lands. That means reducing hazardous fuels, while ensuring cautious and consistent protocols in any use of prescribed fire.

We will continue to provide the national leadership and to work with our federal, State, and local firefighting cooperators, and Congress to ensure that the federal firefighting agencies and their cooperators have the resources needed to assist in educating home and land owners about fire risks, fire risk reduction strategies, and to protect the public, property, and resources when fires occur.

As I have stated before, it is also essential to recognize that hazardous fuels buildups in the West occurred over many decades. Restoring the health and resilience of these ecosystems while protecting nearby communities from the effects of catastrophic fire will take many years. That reality, however, is no excuse for inaction. Our strategic approach, which will be led by the Departments of Agriculture and the Interior, will treat areas that pose the highest risk to people, property, and natural resources, and to do so in the most expeditious manner possible. This will require partnerships, resources, and common sense approaches that avoid needless controversy.

This concludes my statement. I would be happy to answer any questions you or the members of your task force might have.