

**Statement of
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**Before the
Subcommittee on Economic Development, Public Buildings, and Emergency
Management
Transportation and Infrastructure Committee
U. S. House of Representatives**

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INTRODUCTION

Mr. Chairman and members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today to provide the status of the U.S. Forest Service's wildfire suppression capabilities. Additionally, I will provide information regarding the Agency's emergency preparedness capabilities for all hazard responses and incident management support.

WILDLAND FIRE MANAGEMENT

The Forest Service, in cooperation with the partner agencies in the Department of the Interior, have the best wildland firefighting organization in the world and together with our State, local, and tribal government partners work to maintain our operational excellence and continually improve the safety and effectiveness of the fire management program.

The Forest Service takes seriously its role in protecting people, property and valuable natural resources from wildfire. We are prepared for the 2011 wildland fire season and are staffed to provide effective fire management.

We will continue our commitment to successful initial attack of wildland fire, where appropriate, with full attention to firefighter and public safety. Our commitment to risk informed performance based strategies will reduce firefighter exposure to unnecessary risk during fire incidents. Additionally, we will continue to provide assistance to Fire Adapted Communities that have been or may be threatened by wildfire to enable these communities to reduce risks of wildland fire. In providing this assistance, we will

continue to make hazardous fuels treatment in wildland urban interface areas a priority, assist localities in building their response capability, and work collaboratively with local communities to understand the role of fire and find ways to mitigate risk and to foster individual responsibility for property protection.

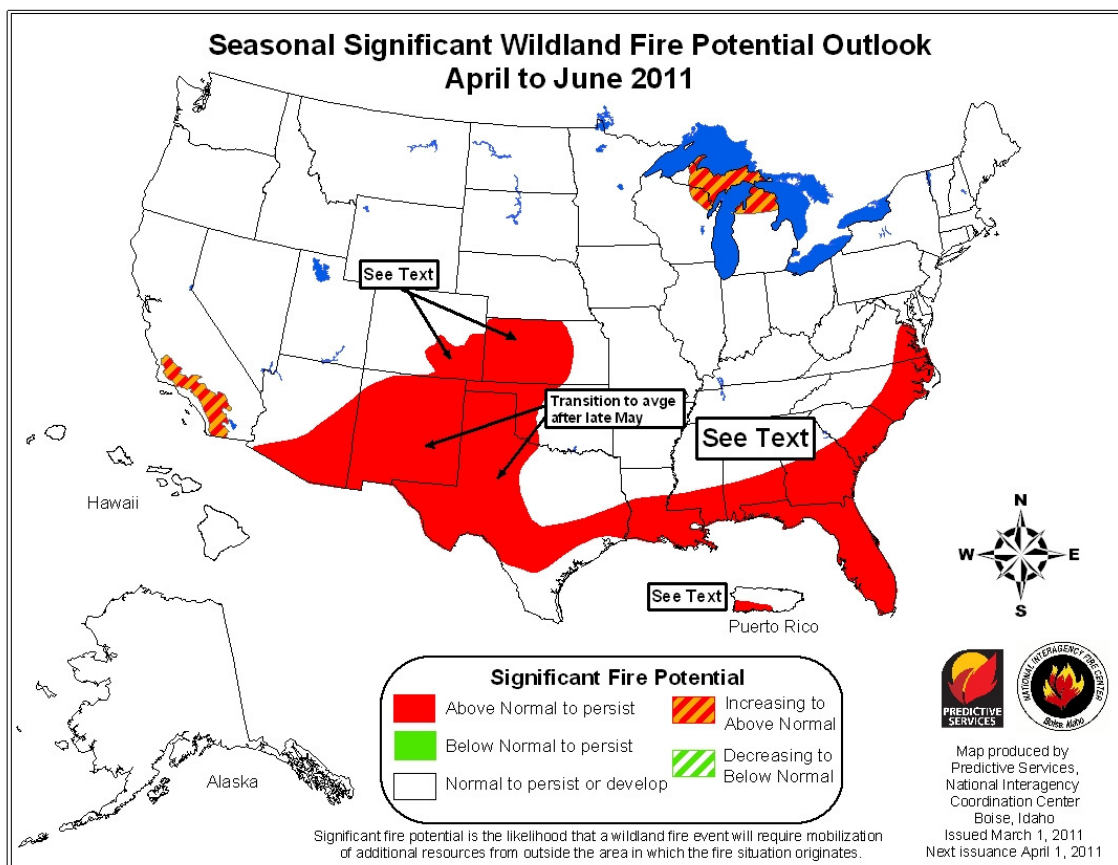
Wildland fire and wildland firefighting are influenced by a complex set of environmental and social factors. In recent years, fires across all jurisdictions have become larger, impacting more acres, due in part to persistent drought and hazardous fuels accumulations. In addition, the expansion of development in the wildland urban interface has increased the complexity of fighting wildland fire. These trends are not expected to change. In fact, it is expected that effects of persistent drought in some areas will continue to increase the probability of longer fire seasons and bigger fire events and declining forest health conditions in many regions of the country. However, one of the best tools we have for treating these lands is the careful management of fire itself, which can reduce fuels and increase the diversity of the forested landscape.

To assist in mitigating these factors, the wildland fire community, through the auspices of the Wildland Fire Leadership Council, has developed the Cohesive Wildfire Strategy. This ground breaking document provides a common underpinning for all entities with statutory responsibilities for wildfire. This is a national collaborative effort between wildland fire organizations, land managers, and policy making officials representing federal, state and local governments, tribal interests, and non-governmental organizations. In addition, next year the federal, non-federal and tribal wildland fire management partners will work on Phase II of the Cohesive Strategy.

2011 WILDLAND FIRE SEASON OUTLOOK

The 2011 wildland fire season has begun. Over 429,957 acres have burned this calendar year as of March 21, 2011, predominately in the southeast, Texas and Oklahoma¹. February was warmer than typical across sections of the intermountain west and the mid-Atlantic states. The total number of fires and acres burned are above average for this time of year.

Drought is forecast to persist or worsen across much of the southern half of the nation. The Interagency Fire Predictive Services group is calling for above normal fire potential across this area, including Southern California and Colorado, through June. The Interior West and northern part of the country is expected to experience normal fire potential throughout this time period (See figure below).



WILDLAND FIRE PREPAREDNESS

To prepare for the 2011 fire season, the Forest Service along with our partners in the Department of Interior have worked to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of our firefighting resources. Fire managers assign local, regional, and national firefighting personnel and equipment based on anticipated fire starts, actual fire occurrence, fire spread, and severity.

Firefighting Forces

Responses to wildland fires in the United States involve not only the resources of the Forest Service, but also includes permanent and seasonal employees from other federal agencies, states, tribal governments, local governments, contract crews, and emergency/temporary hires. For the 2011 fire season, the available firefighting forces – firefighters, equipment, and aircraft – are comparable to those available in 2010 with more than 16,000 firefighters available from the Department of Agriculture and Department of the Interior. The levels of highly-trained firefighting crews, smokejumpers, Type 1 national interagency incident management teams (the most experienced and skilled teams) available for complex fires or incidents, and Type 2 incident management teams available for geographical or national incidents also are comparable to those available in 2010. Additionally, the Forest Service and the federal

wildland fire fighting community work with State and local departments, which serve a critical role in our initial attack success. We could not achieve the successes we have without them.

The National Interagency Coordination Center, located at the National Interagency Fire Center in Boise, ID, coordinates wildland firefighting needs throughout the nation. Resources are prioritized, allocated, and, if necessary, re-allocated by the National Multi-Agency Coordinating group, composed of management representatives of major fire organizations headquartered at NIFC. Prioritization ensures firefighting forces are positioned where they are needed most. Fire resources such as personnel, equipment, aircraft, vehicles, and supplies are dispatched and tracked through an integrated national system.

If conditions become extreme and U.S. firefighting resources are determined to be in short supply, assistance is available under standing agreements for firefighting forces from Canada, Mexico, Australia, and New Zealand. Under specified instances the Department of Defense, and specifically National Guard resources may also be available to assist.

Aviation

The wildland firefighting agencies continue to employ a mix of fixed and rotor wing aircraft. Key components of the Forest Service 2011 aviation resources include 19 contracted large air tankers, up to 26 Type 1 heavy helicopters, 41 Type 2 medium helicopters on national contracts, and 52 Type 3 light helicopters on local or regional contracts. The Forest Service also leases 13 Aerial Supervision fixed-wing aircraft, owns and operates 1 fixed-wing and 2 aerial supervision helicopters, owns 8 Smokejumper aircraft and contracts for 4, owns 2 heat detecting infrared aircraft, and contracts 2 single engine air tanker aircraft (SEATs). Additionally, there are nearly 300 call-when-needed helicopters available for fire management support as conditions and activities dictate. The Forest Service maintains a contract for a 100- passenger transport jet to facilitate the rapid movement of firefighters during the peak of the fire season. The Forest Service also coordinates closely with the Department of Defense (DoD) in maintaining 8 Modular Airborne Fire Fighting Systems (MAFFS) that can be deployed in Air National Guard and Air Force Reserve C-130s. The MAFFS program provides surge capability for large fire airtanker support.

Likewise, the Department of the Interior, the lead contracting government entity for SEATs, will maintain a mix of aviation resources to include almost 70 call when needed SEATS, over 100 call when needed light helicopters, 9 exclusive use Type 2 helicopters, contracts for 4 water scooper aircraft, contracts for 7 smokejumper aircraft, and 5 leased Aerial Supervision fixed-wing aircraft in 2011 similar to the aircraft used in 2010. This resource readiness is comparable to the past several years, and we believe an effective approach. We will continue to preposition fire fighting resources based on anticipated fire conditions, values at risk, and historic fire occurrence.

IMPACTS OF A CHANGING AND EXPANDING FIRE ENVIRONMENT

The impacts of an unnatural fire environment have adverse effects on natural resources and as social-political ramifications as well . Wildfire has a natural and valuable role in many ecosystems. Currently, many ecosystems across the country are out of ecological balance and are in need of restoration. This ecological imbalance results in ecosystems that are more threatened by wildfire due to factors such as increased fuel accumulation and infestation by invasive pests. These ecosystems contribute to higher fire risks and extreme fire behavior with severe fire effects. By managing vegetation and restoring natural function and land resiliency, we can change fire behavior and the impacts of fire. Through a combination of mechanical treatment and managed fire, we can help improve the health of some fire adapted ecosystems and prevent heavy accumulations of highly flammable fuels.

To mitigate increased costs and to improve management the Forest Service has adopted substantive reforms. Along with State and local partners, the Forest Service has spent significant effort and resources over the past several years to coordinate capability, improve inter-governmental communication, and employ management controls to ensure effective response, raise efficiency, and manage operations within the amounts appropriated to manage wildland fire.

We must re-double our efforts to invest resources in not just suppression, but hazardous fuels reduction, restoration activities, and community assistance. The President's Budget reflects the commitment of this Administration to implement program reforms to allow wildfire to reassume its ecological function on the landscape and ensure fire management resources are focused where they will do the most good.

The FLAME Act of 2009 established the FLAME Wildfire Suppression Reserve Fund to support the cost of large or complex wildfire events. The FLAME Fund is intended to minimize the need to transfer funds from non-fire accounts to the Wildland Fire Management Appropriation for fire suppression. The FLAME Fund also may be used as a reserve when amounts provided for wildfire suppression are exhausted.

The Administration looks forward to working with the Congress as we strive to improve the safety, cost-effectiveness, and accountability of our management of wildfire. We will continue to work to effectively address wildfires, restore fire adapted landscapes, and seek adequate resources for hazardous fuels, fire science, assistance to others, and preparedness. Our work in this regard will assist in the creation of new wood-based industries to create jobs, through programs supporting wood-to-energy and alternative fuels from wood. The cohesive strategy mentioned earlier is the blueprint that will guide these efforts in the future.

FIRE MANAGEMENT IS EVOLVING TO A NEW ERA

The wildland fire program in the Forest Service is strong and moving in a positive direction. We are committed to continued improvement to increase our effectiveness and maximize our efficiency. The Departments of Agriculture and the Interior continue to face challenges that make management of wildland fire complex and demanding. However, we have taken steps to manage costs and are adopting techniques to apply before and during fire incidents that work to ensure leaders are aware of fire management activity risks, operational efficiencies, and appropriate use of research and technology to reduce fire-related impacts. Specifically, these actions include:

- We will continue to focus on hazardous fuels treatments in wildland-urban interface areas and in fire-adapted ecosystems where risks are highest to infrastructure such as municipal drinking water supplies.
- We will continue to constantly improve decision-making during a wildland fire. The Forest Service and the Department of the Interior are using the Wildland Fire Decision Support System to give managers better information to estimate risk and better ways to predict what may happen during a fire. The decision support system is intended to guide and document wildfire management decisions. The process provides situational assessment, analysis of hazards and risk, implementation actions, and documentation of decisions and rationale for those decisions. In layman's terms, firefighters on the ground will have the predictive maps that enable them to make the most informed decisions. For fires that escape initial attack, we will use these science-based computer models and couple them with improved risk management approaches as part of the agency's continuing effort to safeguard lives, protect communities and important natural resource values, and restore ecosystem health. These fire management reforms are aimed at improving fire management decisions, increasing firefighter and public safety, and are anticipated to provide cost-effective and accountable outcomes from investments made in managing fire on the landscape.
- We will continue to work on enhanced response and efficiency that comes from sharing resources on a nation-wide basis, managing aviation resources, pre-positioning of firefighting resources, and improving aviation risk management for safe engagement.
- We will continue after-action review of fire incidents to apply lessons learned and best practices to policy and operations.
- The Forest Service is analyzing the optimal mix of helicopters and air tankers and developing a cost benefit analysis of the options.

ALL HAZARD RESPONSE

In addition to fire fighting, the Forest Service and DOI have developed a robust skill set in providing assistance with other types of incidents across the country when the President declares that an emergency or major disaster exists. We work closely with other federal and state agencies during these responses. Responses to these incidents is accomplished through the use of the Incident Command System (ICS). ICS is a scalable, standardized, on scene emergency management system specifically designed to allow its users to adopt an integrated organizational structure that can span jurisdictional boundaries. For example, interagency incident management teams (IMT) were ordered and dispatched on September 11, 2001, to New York City and to Arlington, VA. Both of these teams successfully integrated into a complex mix of jurisdictions and operated in a unified command structure. The same can be said during other emergency situations such as the Columbia Space Shuttle recovery, Hurricane Katrina response, the Deep Water Horizon cleanup, and other declared disasters.

Additionally, the Forest Service hosts four interagency National Incident Management Organization (NIMO) teams for 2011. These four, seven-member full-time Type I Incident Management Teams' full time job is dedicated to emergency response. In addition, before the fire season began, the NIMO teams have worked collaboratively with selected National Forests that are historically at higher risk of large fire to build capacity through strategic pre-season planning and training. These efforts in particular have been cutting edge and enabled the Forest Service to stay ahead of the wildfire curve, while helping communities stay out of harms way.

CONCLUSION

This concludes my statement. I would be happy to answer any questions that you may have.

ⁱNational Interagency Fire Center, National Year-to-Date Report on Fires and Acres Burned by State and Agency, March 21, 2011