

**Statement
of
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**Before the
United States Senate
Committee on Energy and Natural Resources
Subcommittee on Public Land and Forests**

**Concerning:
S.32 “The Southwest Forest Health and Wildfire Prevention Act of 2003” and
S.278 “Mount Naomi Wilderness Boundary Adjustment Act”**

February 27, 2003

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee:

Thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today. I am Jim Reaves Director, Vegetation Management & Protection Research. With me today is David Cleaves, National Program Leader for Fire Systems Research. I would like to present the Administration's views on S.32 – the Southwest Forest Health and Wildfire Prevention Act of 2003 and S.278 – the Mount Naomi Wilderness Boundary Adjustment Act.

S.32 – The Southwest Forest Health and Wildfire Prevention Act of 2003

S.32 would establish three institutes in the interior West that would promote the use of adaptive ecosystem management to reduce the risk of wildfires and improve the health of forest and woodland ecosystems. We support the intent of S. 32 to institutionalize research on adaptive management processes and ensure that sound scientific research products reach, and are utilized by, land managers in the field. We have some concerns regarding how the bill is currently drafted and would like to work with the sponsors on modifications to the

bill. We commend Senator Kyl and the other sponsors of this bill for recognizing the importance of research needs in this area.

A trend that has become increasingly apparent during the last few years is that wildland fires, especially in the West, are becoming larger and burning hotter. These fires are increasingly more difficult to control and cause much more environmental damage. During the 2002 fire season nearly 73,000 fires burned 7.2 million acres and damaged or destroyed 3,000 structures. While most of this fire damage was in the West, the potential for significant property losses and resource impacts from wildland fire and degradation of forest health occurs in many other areas of the country. The issues and problems of fire and fuel management are truly national in scope.

In addition to the direct damage caused by wildfires, harmful non-indigenous plant species such as cheatgrass invade burned over areas, predispose them to even greater fire risk, and threaten healthy ecosystems and biological diversity. Forests where fire has been excluded are also at increased risk from insect and disease infestations; and can experience significant shifts in composition away from the most desirable tree species for wood products or wildlife.

We agree with S. 32 that meeting these challenges effectively and efficiently requires a solid foundation in scientific knowledge and the ability to rapidly convert new scientific insights into technology and tools. We also agree that more research attention should be given to fire and forest health, not only in the interior West, but also throughout the US.

Current Fire Research

Congress recognized the need for scientific information and tools to support fuel and fire management programs and established the Joint Fire Science Program (JFSP) in 1998. The JFSP is a partnership of six federal wildland management and research organizations represented by a 10-member Governing Board that oversees and manages the program. Since its inception the JFSP has partnered with 45 universities and funded 178 research projects in 43 states, Puerto Rico, and the District of Columbia.

Beginning in 2001, additional research funds were made available through the National Fire Plan. National Fire Plan research, led by 78 research teams in the Forest Service regional research stations addresses firefighting, fuels management, restoration and rehabilitation, and community preparedness to directly support the goals of the Ten-Year Comprehensive Fire Strategy. The NFP-funded research teams support research in all 50 states, including 329 cooperative studies with 56 universities, non-government organizations, and private sector partners across the country. In addition to university partnerships, both the JFSP and the NFP are working with State and local agencies, not-for-profit groups such as Tall Timbers Research Station and The Nature Conservancy, as well as several for-profit companies. More than one third of the NFP funding in the first two years of the program has been invested with universities and other partners.

Research conducted under both the JFSP and the NFP addresses national and regional priorities and receives national level oversight to ensure coordination and applicability of products. Funds are allocated competitively with the involvement of fire managers and other users in the determination of needs and the selection of projects. Accountability is assured through annual progress and accomplishment reports. The strength of the two programs is their ability to design their research with the help of managers in the agencies and to deliver research results and tools through established training programs and other mechanisms.

S. 32 focuses on the problem of fire research in a portion of the interior West. However, wildland fire risks and forest health concerns are national in scale and growing in size and complexity. We agree that many problems need to be addressed on a regional basis. We also believe that the scarcity of funding for fire research relative to the problem demands a national perspective and national oversight. In particular, the measure appears to create an expectation that affected agencies will be required to provide allocations to the centers without regard to overall budgetary constraints, and lead to a further diluting of scarce fire research funding. Oversight and coordination are necessary to assure that critical diversity of scientific talent and critical funding masses be directed at problems for the protection of all regions and minimize disruptions to other ongoing research endeavors.

Recommendations:

We think S. 32 should not only address the problem of fire in the interior West, but also address this issue nationwide. This approach would enhance existing collaborative efforts to investigate and develop management tools that would enable public and private land managers to manage fires and prevent the spread of invasive species throughout the Nation.

Some changes we recommend for S. 32 include:

- Clarify the definition of adaptive management and the scope of work of the centers relating to forest and rangeland ecosystems research;
- Ensure that research comports with criteria related to quality, relevance and performance;

- Participate in meeting national needs on complex problems and permit the Departments latitude in the identification of the optimal locations for the establishment of the centers created under this bill;
- Provide federal research and land manager oversight of the program, including setting of priorities and direction, to lead to selection of projects and products that are awarded on a merit-based, competitive, and peer reviewed process;
- Ensure accountability through ongoing monitoring and periodic evaluation of funded activities;
- Build on existing fire research and technology transfer capacity to avoid unnecessary duplication of efforts and resources;
- Improve coordination of existing federal, state, university, and private research capacity, and establish non-federal cost-share requirements; and
- Utilize and improve existing authorities for centers of excellence such as Cooperative Ecosystem Studies Unit program and the granting programs of the Cooperative States Research, Education, and Extension Service.

We would like to work with the Subcommittee as it further considers S.32.

S. 278—Mount Naomi Wilderness Boundary Adjustment Act

The Department supports S. 278, a bill that would adjust the boundary of the Mount Naomi Wilderness in the Wasatch-Cache National Forest in Utah. We believe the boundary adjustment will create a higher level of wilderness value by improving the area's solitude, scenery, and pristine qualities. We supported similar legislation that was considered during the 107th Congress.

The boundary adjustment would exclude approximately 31 acres of land currently part of the Mount Naomi Wilderness and, subject to with valid existing rights, would add 31 acres

to the wilderness area. The bill also requires the Secretary to manage the 31 additional acres pursuant to the Utah Wilderness Act of 1984 (Public Law 98-428).

This adjustment would allow for the alignment of the Bonneville Shoreline trail, which is a multi-county recreational trail. The trail is designed predominately for heavy non-motorized use, which does not conform to use as a wilderness trail. The boundary adjustment would also eliminate the need for a power line easement within the wilderness area, which is also a non-conforming use.

This concludes my statement and we look forward to working with the Subcommittee. I would be happy to answer any questions you may have.