

**Statement of
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U. S. Department of Agriculture**

**Before the
Energy and Natural Resources Committee
U. S. Senate**

April 27, 2011

INTRODUCTION

Mr. Chairman thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today to provide an overview of the current drought situation in New Mexico and how it relates to the status of the U.S. Forest Service's wildfire suppression capabilities in the Southwest Region.

WILDLAND FIRE MANAGEMENT

The Forest Service, in cooperation with partner agencies in the Department of the Interior, is perhaps the premier wildland firefighting organization in the world. We work together with our State, local, and tribal government partners 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 managing wildfire with firefighter and public safety being the first priority in any fire management activity. We are prepared for the 2011 wildland fire season and are staffed to provide effective fire management.

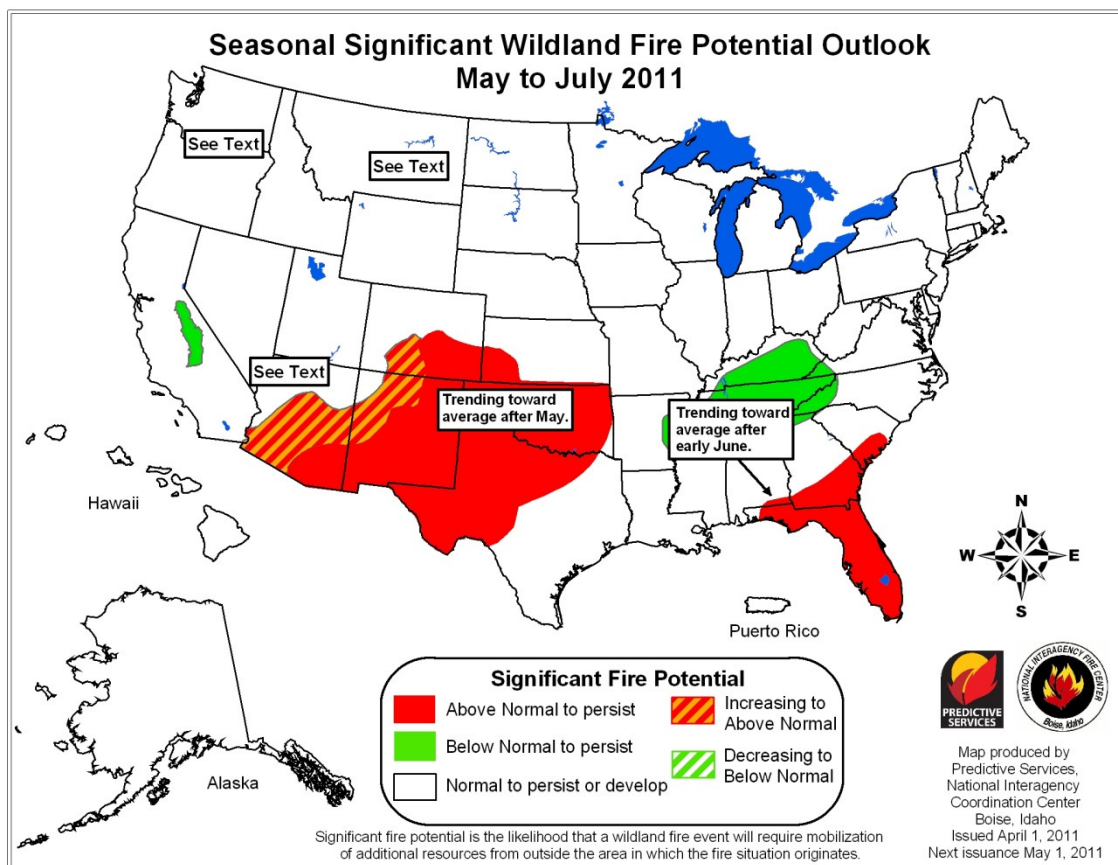
We will continue our commitment to aggressive initial attack of wildland fire, where appropriate, with full attention to firefighter and public safety. Last year, our initial attack success rate was 98%. Further, our commitment to informed, performance based strategies will reduce firefighter exposure 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 future wildland fire risks. 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. These commitments are fully in line with the recently completed National Cohesive Wildland Fire Management Strategy signed off by the entire wildland

fire community: federal, tribal, States and local officials. The wildland fire community, through the auspices of the Wildland Fire Leadership Council, has developed the Cohesive Strategy. This ground breaking blueprint provides a common underpinning for all entities with statutory responsibilities for wildfire. This is a national collaborative effort among wildland fire organizations, land managers, and policy making officials representing federal, state and local governments, tribal interests, and non-governmental organizations. In addition, the federal, non-federal and tribal wildland fire management partners will continue work this fiscal year on Phase II, Development of Regional Assessments and Strategies, and complete the implementation of the Cohesive Strategy next year in Phase III, a national risk trade-off analysis.

FIRE RISK IN NEW MEXICO

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 New Mexico. Unusually dry areas with above normal potential for significant fire will most likely expand westward across New Mexico through the spring and persist over much of the state from May through July (See Figure Below).¹

¹ National Interagency Fire Center Predictive Services.
http://www.predictiveservices.nifc.gov/outlooks/monthly_seasonal_outlook.pdf



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WILDLAND FIRE PREPAREDNESS

The 2011 wildland fire season has begun in many parts of the country. As of April 21, 2011 a million acres have burned this calendar year. Most of this has been in Texas and Oklahoma with 124,450 acres burned in New Mexico. The total number of acres burned is above the ten-year average for this time of year.

To prepare for the 2011 fire season the Forest Service, along with our partners in the Department of the Interior, the tribes, and the States 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. All federal and state wildland fire

² “See Text” in figure refers to narrative description in the National Interagency Fire Center Predictive Services. Monthly seasonal outlook report.

http://www.predictiveservices.nifc.gov/outlooks/monthly_seasonal_outlook.pdf

agencies are represented in the National Multi-Agency Coordination Group. This group provides oversight to the National Interagency Coordination Center, located at the National Interagency Fire Center in Boise, Idaho, and coordinates wildland firefighting needs throughout the nation. Resources are prioritized, allocated, and, if necessary, re-allocated. 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. In New Mexico, firefighting resources are often mobilized from the northern Rocky Mountains in the spring, when fire season in the northern States is still low.

If conditions become extreme and U.S. firefighting resources are determined to be in short supply, assistance is available under standing international 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.

Firefighting Forces

Responses to wildland fires in the United States involve not only the resources of the Forest Service, but also 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 fire departments, which serve a critical role in our initial attack, and in many cases extended attack, success. We could not achieve the successes we have without them.

For the Forest Service in the Southwestern Region of Arizona and New Mexico, there are 110 Forest Service wildland fire engines available for fire assignment along with an additional 40 engines from other agencies. This spring, the Southwest Area's 22 Type 1 crews (interagency hotshot crews) will be available nationally into September-October. The Southwest Area will start the season with 30 – 35 Type II crews.

Aviation

Nationally, the wildland firefighting agencies continue to employ a mix of fixed and rotor wing aircraft. The number of these aircraft may fluctuate depending on contractual and other agreements. 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 an additional 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 air tanker support.

Due to the fire risk in the Southwest, I have requested that “exclusive use” Type 3 helicopters be located on the Gila National Forest (Silver City, New Mexico) and the Coronado National Forest (Sierra Vista, Arizona) earlier than usual. I have also requested that the national helitanker contract availability dates start three weeks earlier than normal with 2 heli-tankers stationed at tanker bases in Prescott, Arizona, and Silver City, New Mexico.

Budget

The Forest Service Wildland Fire Management Account suppression funds for FY 2011 are similar to FY 2010. In addition, the Forest Service has enough carryover balances to allow us to respond to a worse than average fire season without transferring funds from non-fire accounts. The FLAME Wildfire Suppression Reserve Fund, established by the FLAME Act of 2009, is intended to minimize the need to transfer funds from non-fire accounts to the Wildland Fire Management Appropriation for fire suppression. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, for securing the FLAME account which has enabled the fire community to stabilize its fire budgeting.

IMPACTS OF A CHANGING AND EXPANDING FIRE ENVIRONMENT

The impacts of a high risk fire environment have adverse effects on natural resources and have socio-political ramifications as well. Wildfire has a natural and valuable role in many ecosystems helping to regulate forest and rangeland composition. 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 such as significant impacts to municipal water supplies. 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. The Integrated Resource Restoration line item as proposed in the President’s FY 2012 budget, is a needed tool that will enable the agency to get more of this work done. In FY 2010, the Forest Service treated over 2 million acres in hazardous fuels, with the majority of acres in the wildland urban

interface. By mid-April 2011, we have already treated over ¾ of a million acres. In Arizona and New Mexico, to date we have treated over 71,000 acres.

Working closely with our partners, we are continuing to restore watersheds and reduce fuels to enable these forests to be more adaptive to stresses like drought. For example, prescribed fire treatments continue in the Santa Fe Watershed to reduce the probability of severe, high-intensity wildfire threatening the city's municipal watershed and impacting the local community and livelihoods. 7,000 acres of the Watershed were analyzed, followed by thinning and prescribed burning on 5,260 acres. The city of Santa Fe hopes to fund analysis and treatment of an additional 1,000 acres in pine stands in the upper reaches of the Watershed.

In addition, the Collaborative Forest Landscape Restoration Program (CFLRP) has become a very valuable tool in our adaptive and restoration efforts. The 210,000-acre Southwest Jemez Mountains project was one of 10 CFLRP projects selected nationally and received \$392,000 in 2010. The project which involves Santa Fe National Forest and its CFLRP fund partner, Valles Caldera National Preserve (VCNP), focuses on thinning and prescribed burning to restore more natural fire regimes. These efforts will be conducted over many ecosystems, from grasslands and low elevation piñon-juniper woodlands to upper montane coniferous, sub-alpine and alpine forests and across multiple administrative boundaries. The project area chosen spans 12 small watersheds within the Jemez River Watershed and across boundaries of the Santa Fe National Forest, Valles Caldera National Preserve, and Jemez Pueblo. The cross-jurisdictional landscape presents an opportunity for collaboration among several agencies and stakeholders on the strategy of treatments.

One community we are focusing on is Ruidoso as it is rated one of the "most at risk" communities in New Mexico. In 2006, the Lincoln National Forest and the Mescalero Apache Tribe signed the *16 Springs Stewardship Project* under the authority of the Tribal Forest Protection Act (TFPA, Public Law 108-248). This was the first Forest Service stewardship contract under the TFPA authority, which permits the Federal Government to enter into contracts and agreements with American Indian Tribes for work on public lands bordering or adjacent to tribal lands.

The project strategically thins identified forest stands, providing specialized employment in harvesting, transporting, and processing commercial saw logs and small-diameter biomass. Currently, the commercial saw logs provide and maintain jobs at small local sawmills and a pallet mill in El Paso, Texas. The small-diameter biomass generated will support a new wood pellet mill, currently under construction north of Alamogordo, and provide critical material for facility development and testing. In the future, the biomass will provide the Mescalero Apache Tribe with material to operate a 6-megawatt power generation facility. The project has a cascading affect on maintaining and creating jobs within local tribal communities and area municipalities, enhancing the Mescalero Apache Tribe and Lincoln National Forest relationship.

The fuel reduction work we do nationally not only reduces community fire risk, it is an important contributor to the economic health of many communities as many of the trees that are removed can go into milling infrastructure and create green jobs. We plan to match or exceed these accomplishments in the future.

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