

STATEMENT FOR THE RECORD

OF

**DALE BOSWORTH
REGIONAL FORESTER**

**NORTHERN REGION, FOREST SERVICE
UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE**

Concerning

**REVIEW OF THE WESTERN GOVERNORS ASSOCIATION
RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ADDRESSING WILDFIRE THREATS ON
FEDERAL LANDS**

Before the

**COMMITTEE ON AGRICULTURE
UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES**

October 4, 2000

MISTER CHAIRMAN AND MEMBERS OF THE COMMITTEE:

Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony for the record concerning the recommendations of the Western Governors Association for addressing wildfire threats on federal lands. I am Dale Bosworth, Regional Forester for the Northern Region of the Forest Service. Accompanying me today is Lyle Laverty, Regional Forester for the Rocky Mountain Region.

I appreciate your interest in what the agency is doing with respect to catastrophic wildfire. As the 2000 fire season continues, it is clear there is significant short-term rehabilitation and long-term restoration work that must be done.

I would like to discuss how the Forest Service is positioned to implement the report Secretary Babbitt and Secretary Glickman provided the President on September 8, 2000 in response to the wildfires of 2000.

The current fire 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. The Forest Service's firefighters and our interagency partners have done an outstanding job in these difficult conditions. So far this year, we have put out a remarkable 80,000 fires that burned 6.8 million acres across the western United States (2.5 million on Forest Service administered lands).

During his trip to visit fires in Idaho on August 9, 2000, the President requested a report from the Secretaries of Agriculture and the Interior outlining the Departments' recommendations for immediate and short-term activities to help rehabilitate burned areas and assist rural communities in recovering from the impacts of the 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 issued this Report, entitled *Managing the Impact of Wildfires on Communities and the Environment* (Secretaries' Report) on September 8, and the President has accepted it and its recommendations. The Secretaries of Agriculture and the Interior also met with the Western Governors Association (WGA) on September 16, 2000, regarding their report. As a result of this meeting, the WGA supports the Secretaries' Report and efforts the creation of a federal-state collaborative stewardship process to address the long-term issues of responding to future wildland fires, restoring fire damaged landscapes, and reducing the risk of fire to communities. We understand that this structure is addressed in the Conference Agreement for the Fiscal-Year 2001 Interior and Related Agencies Appropriations Bill.

I would like to discuss the major findings and recommendations in the Secretaries' Report. The Secretaries' Report emphasizes five key points:

1. We must continue to make all necessary firefighting resources available.
2. We must restore landscapes and rebuild communities.
3. We must invest additional resources in reducing fire risks with priority on reducing risks to communities, threatened and endangered habitat, and readily accessible municipal watersheds.
4. We must work directly with communities and our other partners including other Federal agencies, the States, Tribes, and local governments.

5. We must emphasize accountability in implementing these recommendations and ensure that the recommendations receive the highest priority.

Let me discuss each of these key points in turn.

We must continue to make all necessary firefighting resources available.

As a first priority, the Forest Service will continue to provide all necessary resources to ensure that firefighting efforts protect life and property. The Nation's wildfire firefighting operation is the finest in the world and deserves our strong support. The 2000 fire season is not over yet. While weather conditions have helped our firefighting efforts in Montana and Idaho, fires continue to burn. Very high to extreme fire indices continue to be reported in Oregon, Washington, California, Idaho, Arizona, Nevada, Montana, Wyoming, Arkansas, Texas and Oklahoma.

Investing in restoring landscapes and rebuilding communities.

The Forest Service will invest in restoring communities and landscapes impacted by the 2000 fires. Some communities already have suffered considerable economic losses as a result of the fires. These losses will likely grow unless immediate, emergency action is taken to reduce further resource damage to soils, watersheds, and burned over landscapes.

The Federal agencies will assess the economic needs of communities and, consistent with current authorities, commit financial resources to assist individuals and communities in rebuilding their homes, businesses, and neighborhoods. Existing loan and grant programs administered by the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), the Small Business Administration (SBA), and the Forest Service's rural development programs will provide this assistance. In addition, to expedite and simplify the delivery of assistance to communities, the Federal agencies will establish one-stop centers, where individuals, businesses, and communities can get answers to questions and apply for resources quickly with minimal red tape.

The Forest Service is already evaluating landscape restoration needs to help prevent further loss of life, property, and resources from excessive erosion, water quality degradation, and other damage from burned areas. We have 78 Burned Area Emergency Rehabilitation (BAER) teams in place, and they are in the process of treating more than 262,630 burned acres. More than \$31 million dollars has already been released for treating damaged acres. Activities on the ground include tree planting, watershed restoration, revegetation, and soil stabilization. In

completing this work, the Departments of Agriculture and the Interior will prioritize investments in landscape restoration to protect:

- Public health and safety (e.g. municipal watersheds);
- Unique natural and cultural resources (e.g. salmon and bulltrout habitat) and burned-over lands that are susceptible to the introduction of non-native invasive species; and
- Other environmentally sensitive areas where economic hardship may result from a lack of reinvestment in restoring damaged landscapes (e.g. water quality impacts on recreation and tourism).

Investing in reducing fire risks, especially near communities.

This year's fires reflect a longer-term disruption in the natural fire cycle that has increased the risk of catastrophic fires in our forests and rangelands. Because of a century-long policy of extinguishing wildland fires, studies show that today's wildfires typically burn hotter, faster, and higher than those of the past. At the same time because more people have moved into fire-prone areas adjacent to or intermingled with Federal and State wildlands, firefighting has become more complicated, expensive, and dangerous.

Addressing these issues will require significant investments to treat landscapes through the physical removal of undergrowth, the prevention and eradication of invasive plants, and the reintroduction of fire to forest and rangeland ecosystems. The Forest Service has increased its efforts to reduce risks associated with the buildup of brush, shrubs, small trees and other fuels nearly fourfold since 1994. This year the Forest Service will treat approximately 1.4 million acres.

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 Forest Service is developing a strategy to respond to the concerns raised by GAO that will be finalized very soon. It is currently under review. The draft strategy is a tactical blueprint that establishes agency-wide goals, objectives, and milestones that specifically address fuel treatment expectations. The draft strategy is consistent with the broad objectives outlined in the Secretaries' Report, and provides a process for prioritizing and focusing our treatments.

Some critics have expressed concern that the Administration's roadless area policy could increase wildfire risks and hinder both suppression and hazardous fuels management needs. The analysis in the draft Environmental Impact Statement

does not support these concerns. To the contrary, evidence suggests that fire starts may be fewer in unroaded than in previously roaded forests. The proposed roadless area protection policy would not affect the Federal agencies' ability to control wildland fires. Importantly, the draft roadless proposal provides an exemption for roads that are necessary to fight active fires. The agencies' success rate in extinguishing wildfires on initial attack is the same in roadless, wilderness, and roaded areas. Approximately 98 percent of all fires are extinguished before they grow large and out of control. In addition, the proposed roadless policy would allow road construction if a wildland fire threatened public health and safety.

Of the 89 million acres of National Forest System land that the Forest Service has identified as having a moderate to high risk of catastrophic fire, less than 16 percent are in inventoried roadless areas. Moreover, the Forest Service would prioritize efforts to reduce fuels in areas that have already been roaded because these areas tend to be much closer to communities and have higher fire risks.

Two fires in the Bitterroot National Forest serve as examples that fires in wilderness or roadless areas can be much less costly to fight. The Skalkaho Fire that burned 64,000 acres near communities, required 755 firefighters, and cost \$7.2 million. Meanwhile, a fire in the Selway-Bitterroot Wilderness burned 63,000 acres, required only 25 firefighters, and cost \$709,000 because of the lack of development needing protection.

At the same time, significant new information and the scope of this year's fires suggest that reversing the effects of a century of aggressive fire suppression will require additional resources, and will be an evolutionary process -- not one that can be accomplished in a few short years. Indeed, greater investments must be made in working cooperatively with communities and the States to reduce fire risks in high priority areas such as those near communities and in critical watersheds. In the short-term there are many opportunities to treat these high priority areas through prescribed burning and thinning.

Our request for new resources to reduce fire risks is entirely separate from our traditional forest management programs. The Forest Service's traditional forest management program focuses largely on harvesting large, commercially valuable trees. Similarly, salvage logging typically focuses on large, commercially valuable trees that have been damaged by fire, insects, disease, or some other natural disturbance. In contrast, our recommendations for reducing fire risks focus on removing brush, shrubs, small diameter trees, and downed material that have

accumulated near many communities during the last century. The Secretaries' Report stresses the need to work cooperatively with communities, citizens, state governments, and other federal agencies to remove this brush and small trees through small, controlled, intentionally set fires and mechanical thinning treatments.

Any harvest of commercially valuable timber would be handled separately through the Forest Service's normal commercial timber programs. Commercial logging is certainly not a panacea for reducing fire risks. However, there may be opportunities in appropriate circumstances, using funds other than from wildland fire management, to capture the economic value of some fire-damaged trees. The Forest Service will continue to consider the option of harvesting fire-damaged trees when appropriate, with priority placed on those areas where roads already exist and on achieving important ecological objectives on the ground. Such timber sales would proceed only after all environmental laws and procedures are followed and affected communities are afforded the opportunity to participate in the process.

We must work directly with communities and our other partners including the States, Tribes, and local governments.

Working with states, local communities and our other partners is a critical element in restoring damaged landscapes and reducing fire hazards near homes and communities. To accomplish this, the Secretaries' Report recommends expanding the participation of local communities in efforts to reduce fire hazards and the use of local labor for fuels treatment and restoration work. The Forest Service would also improve local fire protection capabilities through financial and technical assistance to State, local, and volunteer firefighting efforts. The Secretaries' Report also recommends learning from the public, encouraging grassroots ideas and local solutions for reducing wildfire risk, and expanding successful outreach and education efforts to homeowners and communities through programs such as FIREWISE, which successfully educates homeowners about how to reduce fire risks to their homes and property.

We must be accountable for completing projects to reduce fire risks.

Finally, the Secretaries' Report recommends establishing a cabinet-level management structure to ensure that the actions recommended by the Departments receive the highest priority. The Secretaries of Agriculture and the Interior will co-chair this effort, assess the progress towards implementing the tasks recommended in the Secretaries' Report, and provide periodic reports to the President. Among other things, the new management team would be responsible for ensuring that appropriate performance objectives are established and met, ensuring that adequate

financial and other resources are made available, establishing a system for identifying and addressing implementation issues promptly, and ensuring that the environmental reviews required by the National Environmental Policy Act, and all other environmental requirements, are undertaken and completed on a timely basis.

Regional integrated management teams will be accountable for accomplishing fuels treatment, restoration, and fire preparedness work. A number of existing, regional integrated management teams are in place to assist in the setting of regional priorities for land restoration, fuels treatment, and community cooperation and outreach. The Forest Service recommends that these regional structures be utilized and/or retooled, as appropriate, to provide a focal point for these initiatives.

Local teams, working closely with communities, the Department of Commerce and other appropriate agency partners, would manage projects on the ground. These integrated teams would identify specific land restoration, fuels treatment, and preparedness projects; coordinate environmental reviews and consultations; facilitate and encourage public participation; and monitor and evaluate project implementation.

Funding Needs

The Secretaries' 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. The Secretaries' Report identifies a need for an additional \$1.57 billion for the Departments of Interior and Agriculture in FY 2001 to implement the recommendations. This flexible contingent emergency funding will be used to reimburse fire-fighting accounts strained by this year's fire season. It will also fund fire preparedness, fire operations, State and volunteer fire assistance, forest health management, and economic action programs related to accomplishment of the Secretaries' Report's recommendations.

Funding levels in different categories are approximate, and will be adjusted as needed as the year progresses. While the Conference Report for the Interior and Related Agencies Fiscal-Year 2001 Appropriations makes some changes to the funding levels recommended by the President, reasonable estimates for likely program components of this funding are:

- \$203,547,000 for Fire Preparedness;
- \$338,971,000 for Fire Operations;
- \$276,000,000 for the Emergency Fire Contingency;

- \$42,994,000 for State Fire Assistance;
- \$10,790,000 for Volunteer Fire Assistance;
- \$12,000,000 for Forest Health Management;
- \$12,500,000 for the Economic Action Program.

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 Forest Service achieve this important goal of reducing the threat of catastrophic wildfire across the landscape and implement an effective recovery and rehabilitation program.

The Forest Service is also reviewing its performance measures and strategic plan goals and objectives to ensure that measures accurately reflect the outcomes anticipated from the work and actions contemplated by the Secretaries' Report. The outcomes associated with the additional funding are significant, and we estimate the following:

- 455,000 acres of fuels management on federal lands targeted to high priority areas including wildland-urban interface areas. This is in addition to the President's fiscal year 2001 request for treating 1.345 million acres;
- 315,000 acres of fuels management on wildland-urban interface areas on non-federal lands (through cost-sharing);
- At least 750,000 acres of rehabilitation and restoration of burned areas;
- 4,300 volunteer fire departments in high-risk areas receiving increased assistance for training and equipment, and increase of over 1,800 from the President's fiscal year 2001 request, and;
- 8,000 new jobs created.

Implementation Strategy for the Secretaries' Report

The Forest Service is preparing to implement the Secretaries' Report. Additionally, Forest Service Chief Mike Dombeck developed the following principles to guide our efforts to address rehabilitation needs and reduce future risk of unnaturally intense wildland fires to communities and natural resources:

- Assist state and local partners to take actions to reduce fire risk to homes and private property through programs such as FIREWISE;
- Focus rehabilitation efforts on restoring watershed function, including protection of basic soil, water resources, biological communities, and prevention of invasive species;

- Assign highest priority for hazardous fuels reduction to communities at risk, readily accessible municipal watersheds, threatened and endangered species habitat, and other important local features, where conditions favor uncharacteristically intense fires;
- Restore healthy, diverse, and resilient ecological systems to minimize uncharacteristically intense fires on a priority watershed basis. Methods will include removal of excessive vegetation and dead fuels through thinning, prescribed fire, and other treatment methods;
- Focus on achieving the desired future condition in collaboration with communities, interest groups, and state and federal agencies. Streamline process, maximize effectiveness, use ecologically conservative approaches, and minimize controversy in accomplishing restoration projects within existing law and regulation;
- Monitor to evaluate the effectiveness of various treatments to reduce unnaturally intense fires while restoring forest ecosystem health and watershed function;
- Encourage new stewardship industries and collaborate with local people, volunteers, Youth Conservation Corps members, service organizations, and Forest Service work crews, as appropriate, and;
- Focus research on long-term effectiveness of different restoration and rehabilitation methods to determine those methods most effective in protecting and restoring watershed function and forest health. Seek new uses and market byproducts of restoration.

Summary

We will continue to provide 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 fight fire.

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. We are 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 safe and effective use of prescribed fire. Our strategic approach and guiding principles will enable us to 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 to achieve our goals.