Statement of
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Oversight Hearing: Blue Ribbon Panel Report and
Aerial Firefighting Safety
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Mr. Chairman and members of the Committee, we are pleased to be with you this morning to discuss the United States Department of Agriculture's Forest Service (FS) and Department of the Interior's Bureau of Land Management (BLM) fire aviation program, and our efforts to ensure the safety of our firefighters and our contractors and to show what both agencies are doing to be adequately prepared for the upcoming fire season. With me today is Dr. Tony Kern, Assistant Director, Fire and Aviation Management, USDA Forest Service.

Background

The interagency aviation program is a large and complex program that has been operating aviation assets for natural resource purposes since the 1920s. The FS and BLM own, lease, or contract for nearly 1,000 aircraft each fire season, with annual expenditures in excess of $250 million in recent years. Aviation missions include fire retardant and suppressant delivery, reconnaissance, infrared imaging, aerial photography, leadplane and air supervision operations, and smokejumper delivery. The programs are managed with full interagency cooperation by approximately 200 personnel at the national, regional, state and local levels.

The fleet is extremely mobile during the fire season, and often operates in a high risk, low altitude environment in and around the wildland urban interface. Although they are primarily intended for initial attack, aviation assets are often deployed on large fires. The decision to deploy aircraft on a fire depends on many factors, including safety considerations for firefighters, the likely effectiveness of suppression from the air, the stage of fire suppression, the condition and terrain of the land, and fire behavior. The last several fire seasons, heightened by continued drought and the build up of fuels on public lands, have resulted in more intense and larger fires. These fires have placed increased demands on aviation resources and the interagency aviation program. We face several challenges in providing aerial firefighting capability during this fire season and into the future.

Last year proved to be one of the worst fire seasons in the last half century, one in which 73,000 fires burned approximately 7.2 million acres of land. The severity of the 2002 fire season was magnified by several fatal aerial firefighting accidents, including the crash of one C-130 aircraft, one PB4Y-2, and an Aerospatiale SA 315B Lama helicopter. In total, six aircrew members were killed in these incidents. In response to these tragedies, the FS and BLM jointly established an independent panel called the "Blue Ribbon Panel" to

investigate issues associated with aerial wildland firefighting in the United States. The report identifies eight key findings that are determined to be essential for planning a safe and effective fire aviation program. Mr. Chairman, we look forward to discussing the Panel's findings, and ongoing efforts to ensure that both the FS's and BLM's fire aviation program is adequately prepared to address wildfires in the upcoming fire season and beyond.

The Blue Ribbon Panel

The joint FS and BLM independent Blue Ribbon Panel was tasked with identifying weaknesses and "fail points" in the current aviation program, focusing on safety, operational effectiveness, costs, sustainability, and strategic guidance. These four areas were addressed as they relate to the various types of firefighting aircraft, including the operation and supervision of air tankers, leadplanes and air supervision modules, helicopters, and air attack platforms. With input from the public via town hall meetings held across the country and comments received from other interested parties, including Federal and state governments, industry, and other interest groups, the Panel developed eight key findings, which it believes are critical for planning a safe and effective fire aviation program. These key findings, more fully discussed in the chairman's testimony, are in the following areas: aircraft safety records; aircraft operations; staff training; aircraft certification; contracts; agency missions; culture, organizational structure, and management; and changing fire environments and new risks. The Panel did not advocate solutions or make recommendations, although it identified several strategic alternatives and organizational models.

Efforts to Improve the Fire Aviation Program

The Report identified various concerns about aircraft safety, including the airworthiness of aircraft that were operating outside of their original intended design and the appropriate levels of maintenance and training to ensure safe operations. The Report also identified a lack of training in contemporary aviation management areas that has contributed to an unacceptable accident rate. The FS and BLM have already taken several steps to address these issues.

First, the FS and BLM have not renewed contracts on nine C-130A and PB4-Y retired military air tankers that were determined to pose an unacceptable risk to public and firefighter safety. We are also requiring the remaining 33 air tankers to undergo an enhanced inspection program prior to returning to firefighting duty.

Because of serious safety concerns, we have retired 11 of our 19 existing Beech Baron 58-P leadplanes that exceeded the 6,000 hour safe life limit. Leadplanes are utilized to direct airtanker tactics and provide aerial supervision. Within the next couple of weeks, we plan on releasing a Request for Proposal to replace up to 10 of these planes with newer, more efficient, and safer aircraft through a long-term lease. Further risk mitigation steps include reducing the retardant load on the airtankers and reducing exposure through direction to the field to use the airtankers primarily for initial attack.

Second, the Agencies have prepared contingency plans to mitigate the loss resulting from suspension of certain airtankers. To address these shortages, the FS and BLM are planning to increase use of Single Engine Air tankers (SEATs) for initial attack and

reduce use of air tankers for large fire support. The SEATs will be pre-positioned as needed to improve initial attack coverage. Air tankers that are available for duty will principally be used for initial attack, as originally intended, instead of their increasing use as support for large fires. Recently, the BLM sponsored an intensive SEAT pilot training academy, which is a requirement for all pilots staffing these aircraft.

Third, the FS and BLM, through a contract with the Sandia National Laboratories, are also continuing to analyze the safety of all types of air tankers for their use in aerial firefighting. The Lab is analyzing the existing airfleet in three phases, focusing on: a) the Lockheed P-3 Orion, b) the Douglas Series (DC-4, DC-6 and DC-7), and c) the Lockheed P-2V Neptune.

a) **Lockheed P-3 Orion**: The Sandia Labs has forwarded its analysis of the Lockheed P-3 Orion air tankers to the FS, BLM, and the FAA. The FAA has evaluated the report and mission inspections are underway. It is anticipated that P-3 aircraft will be available in the near future;

b) **Douglas Series**: Analysis of the Douglas line of aircraft is underway. Because the Douglas aircraft are generally used for commercial purposes, they have a better-documented maintenance history than retired military aircraft. These aircraft are not available for firefighting use until the analysis and required inspections are completed; and

c) **Lockheed P2-V Neptune**: The final phase will be the analysis of the Lockheed P2-V Neptune. This analysis is not complete, but we look forward to receiving it. These aircraft are not available for firefighting use until the analysis is completed.

We are also working to increase the use of other types of aircraft to reduce our reliance on retired military planes. For example, the FS and BLM are contracting for additional Type I heavy helicopters for their use in conjunction with SEATs for initial attack and extended attack fires. We are also encouraging the private-sector large-air tanker industry to propose different airframes for consideration as next-generation air tankers. These aircraft can carry anywhere from 2,000 to over 11,000 gallons of retardant. Some of these aircraft could be available as early as 2004. Also, SEAT manufacturers are gearing up to provide additional aircraft by the 2004 contract year and future years.

The combination of these efforts will reduce our short-term reliance on large air tankers and provide a solution until those large air tankers that are qualified can be returned to service. It is our intention to closely coordinate with the Sandia National Laboratories and solicit the assistance and cooperation of the FAA in determining which air tankers can safely be returned to service. We are equally committed to partnerships with the private sector in developing newer technologies and reducing our dependence on aging, retired military aircraft.

The Forest Service recently completed on behalf of all fire management agencies an Aviation Action Plan for 2003. The Plan identifies specific actions to be taken to

improve fire management operations. It focuses on four critical areas — safety, preparedness, security, and cost containment — and provides direction to assure safety, appropriate staffing, management oversight, planning, and training for wildland fires.

Given the scope of the Blue Ribbon Panel's Report, it will take some time to fully address the other identified issues. We will continue to strive to improve program efficiency and cost effectiveness in all areas of the wildland fire program, including the fire aviation program, as directed by the President's proposed FY 2004 budget. In particular, we will continue to develop and begin using the new interagency fire planning system to optimize cost effectiveness for fire readiness resources. Throughout this work, our primary emphasis has been and will continue to be the safety of the public as well as our firefighters and contractors. Accordingly, our efforts will ensure a coordinated approach to developing a safe and effective aerial firefighting program in which all firefighting agencies are in lockstep.

Conclusion

While early indications are that this fire season could be as challenging as last year's, the FS and BLM are continuing to improve the safety and effectiveness of its fire aviation program. Fire aviation continues to play an integral role in combating wildland fires. We feel that the steps described above have adequately prepared both the FS and BLM to address this year's fires. This concludes our remarks. We'll be happy to answer any questions that you may have.