

**Statement of  
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**Department of the Interior**

**Before  
House Committee on Appropriations  
Subcommittee on Interior, Environment and Related Agencies  
Concerning  
Options for Wildfire Suppression Funding**

**April 1, 2009**

**INTRODUCTION**

Mr. Chairman, Mr. Simpson, and members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to testify today on Federal wildland fire management and options for funding this activity. Though the Department of the Interior (DOI) and the Department of Agriculture (USDA) are offering separate statements today, I want to assure you that we continue to work closely together in wildfire management, and we have coordinated the preparation of our statements to provide the Subcommittee a well-rounded presentation of the management challenges we share as well as our recent efforts to meet these challenges more effectively.

**A CHALLENGING ENVIRONMENT**

Wildland fire and wildland firefighting are influenced by a complex myriad of environmental and social factors. Fires in recent years have become larger, consuming more acres, and fire seasons have grown longer due to climate change<sup>1</sup>, and persistent drought and hazardous fuels accumulations.<sup>2</sup> The historical expansion of development within the wildland urban interface (WUI) has increased the complexity of fighting wildland fire. These trends are not expected to change. In fact, it is expected that climate change will continue to result in environmental responses that bring greater probability of longer fire seasons and bigger fire events in most regions of the country. Weather shifts and cumulative drought effects will increase fuels accumulations and may result in larger amounts of total fire on the landscape and potentially more large fires. Additionally, although current economic conditions have slowed development in wildlands, regional shifts in population and demographic trends point to more seasonal recreational homes

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<sup>1</sup> Joyce, L.A. et al. (2008) Chapter 3 National Forests in US Climate Change Science Program: Preliminary review of adaptive options for climate-sensitive ecosystems and resources> A Report by the U.S. Climate Change Science Program and Subcommittee on Global Change Research.[Julius, S.H., J.M. West (eds.), J.S. Baron, L.A. Joyce, P. Kareiva, B.D. Keller, M.A. Palmer, C.H. Peterson, and J.M. Scott (Authors)]. U.S.Environmental Protection Agency, Washington, DC, USA, 873 pp.

<sup>2</sup> Westerling. A.L., H.G. Hidalgo, D.R. Cayan, T.W. Swetnam. 2006. Warming and Earlier Sproing Increase Western U.S. Forest Wildfire Activity. Science.313 (5789): 940-943.

and full time residency in areas adjacent to public lands. These factors, as well as the management framework and decisions during some fire incidents, have caused costs to rise and increased annual fire suppression expenditures that have frequently exceed the 10-year average.

## **STEPPING UP TO REDUCE RISKS TO COMMUNITIES AND RESOURCES**

As stewards of more than 500 million acres of Federal land – about one-fifth of the total U.S. landmass – Interior faces many management challenges. Together with our partners, we have taken significant steps to manage our fiduciary responsibilities to protect lives, private property, and Federal resources from the threats of wildland fire.

### ***Preparing for the Coming Fire Season***

To prepare for conditions anticipated in the 2009 Fire Season, the USDA and DOI continue working 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 with the help of information from the National Interagency Fire Center Predictive Services group.

The Departments are ready for the 2009 wildland fire season. The agencies will be staffed at levels to provide safe, effective fire management. We will have available firefighting forces – firefighters, equipment, and aircraft – comparable to 2008 with more than 14,000 firefighters, and we will have equal or greater numbers of aviation, engines and other equipment assets on the ground. The agencies will expand strategic centralized management of aviation assets and pre-position these in order to constantly improve management effectiveness and increase cost efficiency.

While continuing the past commitment to attack fires before they can escape to become large, damaging incidents, we will also fight these fires more strategically with the aid of new decision support systems, managing these fires to allow for multiple objectives. We will provide for firefighter and public safety while permitting a full spectrum of fire management response, from aggressive suppression for fires that are a threat to populated areas and significant investments to less intensive management and monitoring in areas where fire will promote healthy landscapes. Our efforts will be commensurate with current and predicted risk, values to be protected, availability of resources, and land, resource and fire management objectives. Additionally, we will continue to actively work with communities to expand their capacity to protect themselves from damaging wildland fire.

### ***Reducing Hazardous Fuels Across the Landscape***

Interior agencies together with the Forest Service have made much progress reducing hazardous fuels across the landscape and making communities safer. From 2001 through 2008, we have treated over 29 million acres on federal lands, including approximately 21.6 million acres treated through hazardous fuels reduction programs and over 7 million acres of landscape restoration accomplished through other land management activities.

We will continue our focus on hazardous fuels treatments in wildland-urban interface areas and in fire-adapted ecosystems that present the greatest opportunity for forest restoration and to reduce the risk of severe fires in the future.

The American Recovery and Reinvestment Act provided Interior agencies \$15 million for hazardous fuels reduction on federal lands. We will leverage these funds with those the Forest Service received for hazardous fuels reduction to greatly expand the effort to reduce dangerous accumulations of fuels, create private sector jobs and help support local economies. We will begin these projects promptly and complete them efficiently.

We fully share the Government Accountability Office concern that Interior agencies should take steps to better ensure that funds for reducing hazardous vegetation that could fuel wildland fires are allocated to effectively reduce risk. We are committed to continue improving our processes for allocating hazardous fuels reduction funds, including looking at both risk reduction and cost effectiveness of treatments. The agencies have also been advised to develop an integrated investment strategy to identify options and funding to reduce fuels and address wildland fire - work which is well underway. We look forward to working with the Congress and the Administration to develop and adopt such a strategy.

## **LOOKING FORWARD TO MEET CHALLENGES**

### ***Responsible Management of Our Resources***

The Department takes very seriously its management and oversight role for the responsible use of wildland fire management funds. Interior has collaboratively adopted a method developed by the Forest Service, the Ecosystem Management Decision Support System, to identify priority areas and integrate hazardous fuels treatments. By implementing a hazardous fuels prioritization and allocation system, the agencies are able to more effectively implement individual projects to have the greatest impact at reducing risk to communities, lives, property, and ecosystems. Interior is now able to consistently allocate funds to bureaus, and we will focus next on prioritizing hazardous fuels treatments that can be compared regionally. Future development will continue active collaboration among the agencies.

This Administration also makes the protection of communities, the environment, and firefighter safety a priority. As we described earlier, many factors increase firefighting complexity - together these have contributed to increased expenditures by the Departments. The inflation-adjusted 10-year average for wildland fire suppression of the two Departments (\$1.3 billion in FY 2008) is twice the FY 2001 inflation-adjusted level of \$641 million. As a result, the Wildland Fire Management budget has grown to become a significantly larger area of the resource work accomplished by the Departments.

The Departments have adopted substantive management reforms to mitigate this cost trend. The Departments and partners have 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 and raise efficiency. At the same time we have instituted management controls with increased attention to cost and will manage our operations within the amounts appropriated to manage wildland fire. However, we recognize that despite our best efforts, Mother Nature may intervene with the result that costs exceed appropriated amounts. We are pleased that the Committee has indicated interest in working with the Administration to address the impacts of growing fire suppression costs. We welcome your ideas and expect that the Administration and Congress can work together towards a solution to the challenge of funding wildfire suppression.

### ***Wildland Fire Management in the Future***

Earlier this year the agencies completed the Quadrennial Fire Review (QFR). While it does not constitute peer-reviewed science, the QFR does provide a strategic assessment process conducted every four years to evaluate current mission strategies and capabilities against best estimates of future environment for fire management. This integrated review is a joint effort of the fire staffs of the five federal natural resource management agencies and their state, local, and tribal partners that constitute the wildland fire community. The objective is to create an integrated strategic vision document for fire management.

The 2009 QFR concluded that “the effects of climate change will continue to result in greater probability of longer and bigger fire seasons, in more regions in the nation.” The study found that shorter, wetter winters and warmer drier summers, resulted in larger amounts of total fire on the landscape. As a result, fire managers must be prepared to cope with annual wildfire seasons that could burn an estimated 10-12 million acres annually on both Federal and non-Federal lands over the next five years.

### ***2010 Budget Request***

As of today the full details of the President’s 2010 Budget Request have not been released. While we can’t discuss the 2010 budget proposal in detail for Wildland Fire Management, we can confirm the Budget for the Forest Service and the Department of the Interior reflects the President's commitment to wildfire management and community protection by establishing new contingent reserve funds, totaling \$357 million, dedicated to addressing catastrophic wildfires, in addition to fully funding the ten year average of suppression costs adjusted for inflation at \$1.5 billion. This \$1.9 billion in funding is coupled with program reforms that ensure fire management resources are focused where they will do the most good.

As mentioned above, the President’s 2010 Budget establishes a new discretionary contingency reserve for wildfire suppression. However, funding is only one part of wildland fire management policy. The President’s Budget also 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. We look forward to working with this Committee on this very important priority of the Administration after the 2010 budget is released.

The Administration recognizes that firefighting costs have often exceeded the 10-year average, causing the Department to rely on both Section 102 transfers from non-fire accounts and supplemental appropriations to cover the costs of its firefighting responsibilities. While this transfer authority is essential to ensure there will never be a lapse in emergency firefighting activities due to a lack of funding, this practice is cumbersome and, coupled with the shifting of personnel resources from program work to work associated with wildfire suppression response, can disrupt the efficient operation of other Departmental programs. To help alleviate this problem, and be more transparent about the real costs of wildland firefighting, the 2010 Budget also establishes a new, dedicated suppression fund, separate from Suppression Operations in the Wildland Fire Management account, to cover the costs of catastrophic wildfires. This \$75.0 million discretionary contingent reserve provides funding that is only available for fighting catastrophic wildfires after the appropriated 10-year average is exhausted, and the President issues a finding that funds in this separate account are necessary for wildland fire suppression.

By establishing a dedicated fund for catastrophic wildfires, fully funding the inflation-adjusted ten year average of suppression costs, and providing program reforms, the Budget minimizes the need for agencies to transfer funds from non-fire programs to pay for firefighting when their appropriated suppression funds are exhausted. We believe this will significantly improve our ability to address funding needs in fire suppression while avoiding disruption to other programs. In addition, the 2010 budget continues funding for the hazardous fuels reduction program. This program is critical to reducing fuel loads, and therefore, reducing fire size and fire severity, factors that drive up the cost of wildland fire fighting.

Upon submission of the details of the 2010 Budget, the Administration looks forward to ongoing discussions with this Committee regarding how we will build upon these efforts to further enhance strategic allocation of resources, performance, and accountability.

In closing, I'd like to offer the Committee the Interior Department's commitment to continue working with both you and the Administration on the challenges and opportunities facing this program. Thank you for the opportunity to appear today before your Committee, and now I'd be happy to take any questions that you may have.