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"Using Natural Solutions and Community Engagement to Reduce Damaging Impacts of Wildfire in the United States"

Subcommittee on Conservation and Forestry

United States House of Representatives, Committee on Agriculture

Oversight hearing on the 2015 fire season and long-term trends

October 8, 2015

I am pleased to be here today to discuss the current fire season, and more importantly, what actions citizens and the Congress need to take to change the current outlook of damaging long-term trends. I want to thank Chairman Thompson and Ranking Member Lujan Grisham for inviting The Nature Conservancy (TNC) to participate in this hearing.

Personal Background: My name is Christopher Topik; I am the Director of The Nature Conservancy's *Restoring America's Forests* Program. The Nature Conservancy is an international, non-profit conservation organization working around the world to protect important lands and waters for people and nature. Our mission is to conserve the lands and waters upon which all life depends. I have been working on forest ecology, management and policy full time since 1980 and since 1995 I have been deeply involved at the national level on fire management policy and funding issues. A key feature of my work on the Hill for 15 years involved fire issues, including efforts to enhance the hazardous fuels reduction, devise and implement the National Fire plan in 2001, the FLAME Act of 2009, the Joint Fire Science Program, and numerous oversight hearings and foster independent investigations on fire policy and practice.

For the past four years I have had the honor and great experience of working for The Nature Conservancy throughout the United States. My specific project features thirteen large scale forest restoration partnership efforts with the USDA Forest Service and many others that touch down in 23 states. I have had the opportunity to visit all of these sites and to examine in some detail how collaborative methods can foster community engagement that provides the basis for forest restoration and accomplishments on the ground, benefitting people, water and wildlife. I also work closely with the Fire Learning Network, a 12 year partnership led by The Nature Conservancy but including hundreds of partners, and the recent offspring, the Fire Adapted Communities Learning Network. Also of note to this hearing, for the past three years I have served on the USDA Federal Advisory Committee (FACA) for Implementation of the National Forest System Land Management Planning Rule as a conservation or watershed organization representative. I also have been involved with and deeply committed to the National Cohesive Wildland Fire Management Strategy, which I believe offers the greatest hope to get all levels of government to work together for a balanced, science driven cohesive effort to deal with good and destructive fire in the US.

Introduction: No doubt others at today's hearing will discuss the damaging aspects of the current fire season and the projections for continued fire stresses in the future. We are already experiencing longer fire seasons, more frequent drought and extreme weather, heavy fuel loadings due to past over-zealous fire suppression, and the suburbanization of our wildlands putting more people and infrastructure at risk.

I want to use my short time here today to discuss steps that can help turn around the current negative trends we are seeing that affect budgeting, community safety and the continued provision of clean water, wildlife and our outdoor open space. In short, I believe that citizens, society, and governments can foster greater use of natural solutions to learn to live with fire and to reduce catastrophic fire. But this takes commitment, including funding at all levels of government and industry, to perform strategic actions that make our communities and fire-prone lands fire resilient. I also am concerned that much of the previous discussion on the Hill has focused too much on timber harvest as the solution to the fire problem when we know that the tremendously damaging fires experienced have been largely in woodland, brush, and areas that are not suitable for commercial tree harvest, such as the Valley fire which destroyed 1,958 structures in California last month and cost close to $60 million to suppress.

- Today I will begin by urging Congress to reform the way that fire suppression is currently funded; absent that fix, other actions will continue to be more challenging and less likely to succeed.

- Then I will discuss the need to fund and implement the National Cohesive Wildland Fire Management Strategy by all governmental levels, and the opportunities to engage more sectors to devise innovative projects and support.

- Finally, I will discuss administrative techniques to enhance the efficiency and scale of fire risk reduction projects and the need for the use of more "good" fire to reduce megafire risk. This includes community engagement and investment in proven techniques to network fire adapted communities.

I. Need for fire suppression funding fix

Fire response is the only kind of natural disaster that consumes regular federal agency appropriations thereby limiting operations on our vast federal public lands. The current fire suppression funding model and cycle of transfers and repayments has negatively impacted the ability of federal and state agencies to implement conservation activities. If we don't fix the current inadequate system for funding fire suppression, we will continue to have many barriers to the cooperative and cohesive work that is needed to make communities and lands safer and fire resilient.

The USDA Forest Service (USFS) and Department of the Interior (DOI) are the two entities responsible for federal fire suppression. Fire suppression funding levels are currently based on the previous ten-year average of suppression costs. The ten-year average includes early years when suppression levels were lower and recent years when

suppression costs have been very high. For example, in fiscal year (FY) 2004, $597 million was allocated to suppression by these two departments, and in FY 2015, $1.6 billion was allocated, but the Forest Service required an additional $700 million to cover emergency needs. State fire suppression expenditures doubled from 1998 to 2014 to $1.6 billion. And this does not include the additional $1.4 billion these Departments spent in FY 2015 in the preparedness accounts to support the fire staff and apparatus. The result is that (with ground conditions worsening, climate change, and increased populations moving closer to forests) the federal ten-year average does not provide the levels necessary for actual emergency suppression needs. However, when suppression money runs out, both the USFS and DOI have authority to transfer funds (also known as 'fire borrowing') from within their budgets to make up for the shortfalls, impacting non-suppression programs. Unfortunately, the cost of suppression has significantly increased, leading to transfers on an almost annual basis. The transfers lead to canceled and delayed projects impacting overall agency budgets and programs, including many conservation programs important to society and TNC. And even the common, seasonal threat that fire borrowing will occur impacts the efficiency of government actions and can halt partnering and shared fire risk reduction projects from happening during the small windows of time available.

I do not advocate that we stop fire suppression activities. The values of nature and people deserve and require that we take appropriate fire suppression actions during fire emergencies. Certainly care needs to be exercised regarding fire suppression costs, but protecting life and property are the key requirement of government. I do think there is an unrealized opportunity to manage fire incidents so where safe, benefits of wildfire can accrue. This may or may not save immediate money on the suppression end, but it certainly will reduce costs of fuel treatments and also reduce future fire risk.

Currently, the USFS and DOI are impacted in two ways, at the front end *and* back end of the fiscal year. As suppression costs continue to rise, USFS and DOI budgets remain relatively flat. Therefore as more funding is allocated to the ten-year average for suppression, less is allocated to all other areas of the USFS and DOI budgets. Programs are short-changed at the beginning of the budget process as more is allocated to suppression and less to the programs. As an example, the ten-year average at the USFS increased $115 million from FY15 to FY16. That added funding comes out of the hides of other programs in the Interior and Related Agencies Appropriations budget. In ten years, suppression is projected to increase another $700 million per year.

And yet, as the ten-year average for suppression consumes more of the USFS and DOI budgets, it remains insufficient to fund suppression through the end of the fiscal year. As the USFS and DOI flex their transfer authorities, programs are hit again when their budgets are transferred from to make-up for the suppression shortfall. In many cases, even the threat of transfer has impacts - when the agency is directed to stop spending – can halt important agency activities. There are dozens and dozens of examples of the negative impacts of these fire transfers, for example:

- In the East, approximately 56 million board feet of timber was impacted by loss of marking contracts and agreements in FY 2013.

- In Pennsylvania, roads repair, invasive species treatment, timber stand improvement, wetland restoration, and erosion control projects were canceled or delayed, and visitor requests and needs were not met due to the delayed hiring of recreation positions resulting in postponed planned recreation programs and projects in FY 2012.

- In New Mexico, hazardous fuels management, road decommissioning, and land acquisition projects were canceled in FY 2012. In FY 2013, oil and gas, Continental Divide trails, and land acquisition projects were delayed or canceled.

In most years, transfers are repaid through an emergency supplemental. However, oftentimes this does not translate into projects "picking up where they left off," and the repayments are often redirected to other projects. This past year the Forest Service had to transfer $700 million from non-suppression programs. I do thank the Congress for the recently enacted short-term Continuing Resolution for FY 2016 that includes an emergency supplemental repayment for those transfers.

Emergency supplementals are not always used to repay transfers. Over $1 billion of transfers from FY 2012 and FY 2013, combined, came off the top of the following fiscal years' (FY 2013 and FY 2014) Interior appropriation bills, leaving less for the remaining agencies and programs funded by the Interior appropriations bill. What was a strain only to DOI and USFS became a strain on *all* agencies and programs funded through the Interior appropriations bill.

This cycle of ineffective fire suppression funding is inefficient and unsustainable. I urge the Congress to pass the bi-partisan Wildfire Disaster Funding Act (H.R. 167, S. 235, WDFA) to break this cycle and guarantee up-front funding for firefighters while reducing the need to transfer funds from non-suppression accounts.

The solution to fire funding must be three-fold and include:

1. access disaster funding,
2. minimize impacts from transfers, and
3. address the increasing costs of suppression over time.

The purpose of disaster funding is to provide assistance for "expected" disasters, like hurricanes, floods, and tornados. Like for these types of disasters, there is an expectation for fire funding needs. The argument can therefore be made that fire response be funded similarly to other natural disasters in order to reduce inefficiencies within agency budgets. On a yearly basis, the USFS and DOI plan for a wildfire season that will require suppression funding. Unfortunately, there has not been room in their budgets to fully account for suppression because of the significant impacts to other agency programs, including the very ones -- like restoration and hazardous fuels reduction -- that would reduce the risk and cost of fire activities.

The Wildfire Disaster Funding Act (WDFA) was introduced in the 113th Congress and reintroduced at the very beginning of the new 114th Congress. It is the most bipartisan piece of legislation offered so far in this entire Congressional session and now has well over 100 cosponsors in the House. WDFA aims to improve the fiscal planning for expected disasters by funding a portion of federal firefighting through a budget cap adjustment to the Balanced Budget and Emergency Deficit Control Act of 1985, as amended by the Budget Control act of 2011. This would relieve the USDA Forest Service (USFS) and Department of the Interior (DOI) from the increasing costs of suppression and the impacts that result from transfers when suppression funding is exhausted before the end of the fiscal year. WDFA provides the three-fold solution necessary to solve fire funding: 1) access disaster funding, 2) minimize impacts from transfers, and 3) address the increasing costs of suppression over time.

II. Need for balanced implementation of the three legs of the Cohesive Strategy

The National Cohesive Wildland Fire Management Strategy (Cohesive Strategy) is the most meaningful way to get all layers of government, finally, working together: including cities, counties, states, Tribes and our federal departments of Agriculture, Interior, Defense and Homeland Security. This is vital because impacts of fire affect most aspects of life in our country, including our water supplies, the air we breathe, the recreational open space that we cherish, our wildlife and fish, and vital wood products that are needed by society. The Nature Conservancy is deeply engaged in these issues at the national policy level. We are also engaged in many projects at the state and local levels that help get work done on the ground, and help train communities and broaden the constituency for conservation action.

The Cohesive Strategy action plan was the result of an intense four year, multi-government level collaboration that produced an action plan in April of 2014. All levels of government, especially Congress, need to provide resources and engagement to make this work. If implemented and supported, disaster cost will be reduced, while enhancing many other benefits to society and nature.

The Cohesive Strategy has three goals:

- resilient landscapes,
- fire-adapted communities, and
- safe and effective fire response.

Currently, most governmental resources and attention go to fire response in the form of fire suppression. This work is vital to protect people and resources. Yet, as discussed above, these emergency actions have largely over-shadowed the need for the other two legs of the Cohesive Strategy stool. I fear the United States now has a very unstable programmatic 'stool', with one very long leg for fire suppression and two very short legs for the vital work to make communities and landscapes more fire resilient and safer. Congress, the states, Tribes, counties and cities, working with citizens and using science, need to increase funding and attention to implement a more balanced approach to fire management in America.

The work to restore and maintain resilient landscapes is at the heart and soul of The Nature Conservancy's activities. We've been performing controlled burns for more than 50 years on our properties. We have tremendous experience in this arena. Since 1988 The Conservancy has burned over 2 million acres safely. The Conservancy values fire as a conservation tool and as a means to reduce the risk of damaging fires and reduce the incidence of mega-fires. The Conservancy for over 12 years has run the Fire Learning Network in cooperation with the Forest Service and the Department of the Interior (http://www.conservationgateway.org/fln). The Fire Learning Network is a terrific program that helps bring together science and stakeholder engagement skills to create enabling conditions for the restoration of fire adapted ecosystems. Also, my project, "Restoring America's Forests" includes 13 major forest demonstration sites that touch down in parts of 23 states. We are working with local partners including the Forest Service and the Interior Bureaus to tackle, solve, and share methods on some of the prickliest issues in forest management. We also work hard on the Collaborative Forest Landscape Restoration Program, a key effort to implement new methods of forest and fire management with citizen involvement.

The second part of the Cohesive Strategy, enhancing fire adapted communities, is also a vital area where we help withstand fire losses and help communities learn to live with fire. The stated goal of members of the Fire Adapted Communities Learning Network (http://facnetwork.org) is "to help society live safely with wildfire." This program is discussed in greater depth below.

The third part of the Cohesive Strategy, fire response, means more than just better firefighting; it also means enhanced ability to manage wildfire to get beneficial result from events while protecting key infrastructure. It's also important for fire response that we and many others work with communities *before* emergencies, so they know what to expect when fire emergencies happen. This is a key part of community engagement. It's vital we all, including NGOs like TNC, stay engaged and help communities and help all the myriad layers of government work together. All taken together, this is what's needed for us to help accomplish common, locally based visions that will help protect communities, enhance our environment and habitats, and our watersheds to continue to provide natures bounties of water, air, wildlife, open space, and various products.

III. Innovative funding at state and local levels for risk reduction projects

The fire problem is an issue that needs much more than a federal response. There are many opportunities for states, Tribes, counties, cities and the private sectors to increase their collaborative work to enhance both the wildlands that surround them as well as enhance community fire resistance and forest resilience. TNC is committed to partner and collaborate across the country to help build coalitions needed to create new state and local sustainable revenue streams to improve forest health and protect water supplies in order to meet society's growing demands for water. I believe the Wildland Fire Leadership Council, a formal body that includes all levels of government, has the ability to encourage and foster greater action that invests in projects, local building and community guidelines or codes, and pooled resources to reduce fire danger in the long term.

Many industries are negatively impacted by fires and they should consider increasing their roles in risk reduction. For instance, just last week I participated in a disaster forum here in the House, sponsored by the Property Casualty Insurers Association. The insurance industry has a long history of successful involvement in various risk reduction actions. So it is encouraging that they are looking to increase their engagement in the wildfire issue. Similarly, there are great opportunities for tourism and recreation, and all industries and agriculture that require healthy, sustainable sources of fresh water. Banking and electric utilities are also threatened, let alone the 44 million people at risk that live in wildland/ urban interface and intermix. Currently, fire trends are a major stressor to water, especially in the arid regions of the West where water sources are in the forested mountains that are at risk of catastrophic fires.

The Rio Grande Water Fund, discussed by our TNC staffer Laura McCarthy at this Committee's hearing on April 29, 2015, is another excellent way of creating partnerships to generate innovative solutions to prioritize work and deliver additional funding for fire risk reduction, forest improvement, and water security efforts.

IV. Efficient forest and fire management

There is a lot that can and must be done to increase efficiency at all levels of government action despite the shortage of funding and resources required to do fire risk reduction and community safety projects. I think we need careful analysis to see where forestry projects and other actions are needed and will have a greater return in investment to reduce fire risk. I believe that there are many areas where forest conditions are unhealthy, especially in the fire driven, lower elevation pine forests of the West, South and Southeast. The model of extensive forest thinning to reduce fire risk is appropriate in some places, but there are more areas, at higher risk of fire, where it is not applicable. We should not get too distracted from the need to provide defensible space and community safety as the best way to deal with fire in many areas, especially many highly populated ones.

The Agriculture Act of 2014 included a provision to provide enhanced authorities for the Forest Service in areas where insects and disease may be a concern. I very much would like to see how that authority, and others, can foster larger scale and scope projects before we remove the public input and science based analysis currently required for forestry projects under the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA).

I also see a lot of opportunities to use existing authorities with much more intensity to foster more large, cross boundary projects. There may also be legislative opportunities to increase the use of large scale NEPA projects that provide the analysis and clearances for many projects over wide areas. This could act similar to programmatic NEPA in many areas where forest thinning, followed by controlled fire, is the necessary treatment. Similarly, I think that the categorical exclusion from detailed environmental analysis provision of the NEPA can be used more broadly where the landscape and impacts are well understood and previous and ongoing monitoring demonstrate the efficacy of the treatments. Categorical exclusions should not be given just for the good intent of project proponents; there needs to be clear and transparent triggers, including public involvement and sound science, before fast tracking projects. I think investment

in monitoring would also lead to better future projects, informed by previous results, and this then can be used to foster faster, bigger and more effective work in the future, including the use of programmatic scale and categorical exclusion for routine work.

My work on the USDA Federal Advisory Committee (FACA) sanctioned National Advisory Committee for Implementation of the National Forest System Land Management Planning Rule has shown me how the new forest planning regulation for the Forest Service can lead to better integration of projects and community needs for fire resistance. Forest plans guide all activities for at least 15 years, so they offer a direct way to involve the public in ascertaining where and when work needs to get done on the ground with the greatest impact to the broader landscape, including towns and watersheds. We need to encourage local governments, especially counties and Tribes, to engage in the forest planning process and use it to reduce fire risk to nature and communities.

Climate change is exacerbating the fire problem as our forests are becoming warmer, drier and subject to both more extreme weather events and longer fire seasons. The Forest Service itself expects severe fires to double by 2050, according to the US Global Change Research Program. The third biggest fire year since 1960 was in 2012, with 9.3 million acres burned— the Forest Service is estimating 20 million acres to burn annually by 2050. This year so far over 9 million acres have burned and October historically has featured devastating fires in California. We are already seeing these impacts: the Four Corners region of the Southwest has documented temperature increases of 1.5-2 degrees Fahrenheit over the last 60 years.

The recent comprehensive climate science synthesis for the US Forest Sector suggests that, whereas currently forests sequester fully thirteen percent of the nation's fossil fuel carbon emissions, trends in forest cover loss due to fire, urbanization and other impacts will make forests a net emitter of carbon by the end of the century. This is another major reason why society should invest in keeping forests as forest. Besides all the historical and substantial benefits of forests mentioned above, maintaining forest cover is probably one of the most cost effective ways our nation has to mitigate climate change simply by helping forests adapt and become more resilient.

V. Learning to live with fire: need for better and more use of safe fire;

It is clear from most of the fire science and social science literature that fire is a key part of nature, and will continue to be such despite human efforts to stop it. Much of North America incudes natural ecosystems where fire plays a necessary and normal role so species and the environment are fire adapted. As we occupy and alter more and more of the landscape, we also must learn to live with natural processes and use them for our benefits. Different ecosystems need different types of fire to remain healthy. Likewise, the human-created infrastructure in these varying types of wildlands require different strategies if they are to continue to co-exist with nature.

In those areas where the cultural use of fire was not lost or where it has been reestablished we have a much greater chance of minimizing destructive megafire: this includes some southern areas dominated by longleaf pine and increasingly, areas of shortleaf pine in places like Arkansas. Other pyrogenic landscapes, such as the chaparral

or brush of extensive areas in California and surrounding states will most certainly burn at some time. And they can burn explosively. So defensible space, sufficient ingress/egress routes and burning during windows of safety are essential.

There are also millions of acres of dry forests, especially in the western pine zone, where our previous over-zealous and successful fire suppression has led to extensive areas of overstocked forests that can burn explosively. Many of these areas would benefit from strategic forest thinning, followed by careful burning, to return them to the frequent, low intensity fire regimes that dominated for thousands of years before the 20th century and fire suppression. The Forest Service estimates that there are about 11 million acres in the National Forest System that are not in reserved areas or municipal watersheds that would benefit from strategic thinning and burning. I encourage those here today to focus on these areas that are a known priority rather than pursue more general demands to increase timber harvest everywhere, unless it is needed for other social or ecological needs.

I also encourage the Committee to look at examples of successful programs that are teaching people how to live with fire while increasing community understanding and cohesion. The Fire Leaning Network (http://www.conservationgateway.org/fln) fosters collaboration for restoration and integrated fire management (with an emphasis on controlled burning) in landscapes across the country. This modest program helps stakeholders learn how to work with each other, while also benefitting from being in a national network that increases knowledge-sharing and generates new ways of doing business.

Much of the discussion on the Hill lately has focused on big ticket ways to fight fire better, such as more airtankers, or on enhancing extensive forest treatments by decreasing or eliminating environmental or legal review. I firmly believe that greater investment and encouragement of these programs that enhance human interaction and understanding are much more cost-effective. This summer the Forest Service alone spent a record $243 million in a single week during the massive fire build up. This is probably 50 times the total annual investment made for social science guided efforts that help communities protect themselves. I suggest a more balanced portfolio would be cost effective and result in both healthier ecosystems and communities.

Another well-understood need is the need for more controlled burns in fire-prone ecosystems. Almost everyone agrees that more healthy fire on the landscape, from grasslands, to brush lands, and to forests would be beneficial. There have been substantial increases in recent years, yet we are having a hard time making dramatic increases in acres treated. The scale of treatment is not even close to being commensurate with the need for restoration and maintenance. Besides the clear need for more controlled burns on all ownerships of fire-prone lands, we also need to be more aggressive about using wildfire events, where safe, to increase acres treated. Fire use is not without risks, but if leaders and society better understood the benefits, we could implement much more healthy and low impact burning. I am encouraged by the desire of the Wildland Fire Leadership Council to take on the issue of smoke management so that we can better understand the trade-offs between suffering from smoke during controlled conditions versus during catastrophic and enduring fire events.

VI. Need for community engagement

The most cost effective and under-valued solution to harmful fire is structured engagement of communities at risk. It is essential to develop local skills and local visions for how communities should take action to protect themselves and their surrounding wildlands. Different places will have different needs and differing cultures will, and should, generate different solutions. As a nation we don't hesitate to respond in massive fashion during immediate emergencies, but we are not so good at funding the preparedness that we all know has a great return on investment. It is encouraging that the US Fire Administration is taking a more holistic view of fire preparedness and hazard mitigation; other governmental bodies and industries should do the same.

A relatively new example of a cost effective program is the Fire Adapted Communities Learning Network (http://facnetwork.org). This program is just two years old but it already involves 17 geographic sites, ranging from small communities in the wildland matrix to huge cities, like Austin, Texas. The purpose of the network is to significantly accelerate the spread and adoption of concepts and actions that will help communities help themselves become better adapted to fire.

The values of the Fire Adapted Communities Learning Network are:

- Adaptation is critical to a positive future.
- Collaboration and partnerships are keys to successful adaptation.
- Investment in local-level capacity, partnerships and responsibility yields the best outcomes.
- Supporting the coordinating function within communities is essential to leveraging the range of resources, institutions and individuals necessary to build fire adapted communities.
- Investing in learning across communities and geographies is a strategy that works at multiple scales, including:
- Facilitating the adoption of best practices and innovations;
- Building a community-of-practice to fuel inspiration and innovation;
- Aggregating lessons learned to advise the design of programs and policies in support of fire adapted communities; and
- Leveraging lessons learned to inform policy and resource allocation, as appropriate.

VII. Conclusion

I want to first thank the Agriculture Committee for holding this hearing. This Committee serves as a model for how bipartisan, calm and rational discussion can lead to better legislation and results for Americans. I also want to call on this Committee to pass the Wildfire Disaster Funding Act. It is not useful to hold up passing this key budgetary solution because of the desire of some to link it to reductions in environmental review. I hope that Congress can enact the fire suppression budget fix that is widely supported (WDFA) and then figure out how to make communities more engaged and also facilitate bigger and better projects on the ground.

There has been so much good work by multiple levels of government on the National Cohesive Wildland Fire Management Strategy that it is a shame that we don't figure out how to make its implementation more balanced. We know that the preparedness actions of making landscapes more fire resilient and helping make communities more fire adapted are cost effective and cheaper than the devastation of uncharacteristic wildfires. Direct engagement of communities, with assistance, will make the greatest difference.

Our top three priorities for the Congress to reduce wildfire threats to nature and people:

1. The Wildfire Disaster Funding Act. (H.R. 167)

The current system of funding fire preparedness and suppression at the expense of hazardous fuels and other key programs threatens to undermine – and eventually overtake -- the vital management and conservation purposes for which the USDA Forest Service and Department of the Interior bureaus were established.

The current wildfire suppression funding model and cycle of transfers and repayments has negatively impacted the ability to implement forest management activities. The agencies and first responders need a predictable, stable, and efficient budget structure to deliver their congressionally directed land management missions.

The Conservancy supports the bipartisan Wildfire Disaster Funding Act (H.R. 167), which would provide the Forest Service and the Department of the Interior with a funding structure similar to that used by other agencies that respond to natural disasters, through a disaster cap adjustment. This important change would free the agencies to reinvest in core activities which have been reduced in recent years due to a continued shift of limited resources to fund wildfire suppression, including the very programs that would help to decrease wildfire costs over time. Further, this change would significantly reduce the highly disruptive process of canceling and/or significantly delaying ongoing project work, most often at the time such work is being executed on the ground.

2. Investments in forest and watershed risk reduction

It is essential that the Congress and the Administration increase federal investments to reduce fire risk in a manner that makes forests more resilient and resistant to fire and other stressors. Strategic, proactive hazardous fuels treatments have proven to be a safe and cost-effective way to reduce risks to communities and forests by removing overgrown brush and trees, leaving forests in a more natural condition resilient to wildfires. Similarly, investments in Collaborative Forest Landscape Restoration and associated proactive federal land management programs, as well as investments in science will yield faster and more effective landscape forestry treatments. Strategic mechanical fuels reduction in wildlands, combined with controlled burning to reduce fuels across large areas, can significantly reduce the chance that megafires will adversely impact the water supply, utility infrastructure, recreational areas and rural economic opportunities on which communities depend.

3. State and community assistance and incentives for shared work

All levels of government need to work together with citizens and industries to achieve the kind of forest conditions that benefit all Americans. Greater federal involvement in cost-share efforts with the States and Tribes, as well as with county and local government will yield much greater results than the sum of the parts and the shared decision making will reduce conflict and litigious delays. This Committee should work with the other Committees of jurisdiction to establish new ways of increasing community capacity to engage in this new, collaborative forestry. We would be happy to work with the Committee on formulating new, better ways of incentivizing partner investments in healthy forests and watersheds.