

Statement for the Record
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Recommendations to the Subcommittee on Interior, Environment, and Related Agencies
Fiscal Year 2016 Budget for the United States Forest Service
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Mr. Chairman and members of the Subcommittee, the National Association of Forest Service Retirees (NAFSR) respectfully submits the following statement for the record to the Subcommittee on Interior, Environment, and Related Agencies regarding the fiscal year (FY) 2016 budget for the United States Forest Service. I am the newly appointed Executive Director of NAFSR. I retired from the position of Regional Forester, Southwest Region, in 2013. I have also served in multiple other positions in the field including District Ranger and Forest Supervisor, as well as positions in the Washington Office, that included the Director of Forest Management, National Fire Plan Coordinator, and Budget Coordinator for the National System. We appreciate this opportunity to provide recommendations to the Subcommittee as it considers the FY 2016 Budget for the Forest Service.

NAFSR fully recognizes the budgetary challenges faced by the Subcommittee in preparing recommend appropriations for agencies included in the Interior, Environment, and Related Agencies portfolios. We are grateful for the support this Subcommittee has shown for the Forest Service. Recognizing the tight budgetary situation, my testimony will focus only on limited specific budgetary recommendations, while emphasizing recommendations regarding policies and issues the Subcommittee will likely face as it works with the Budget Committee and other Authorizing Committees, as well as the Senate during conference phases.

This testimony will address the following:

- The current forest health and natural resource management situation on our national forests and grasslands.
- The need to “fix” the currently broken wildfire suppression funding process.
- The importance of the broad array of programs included in the Forest Service mission.
- Limited specific appropriations recommendations.

CURRENT FOREST HEALTH AND MANAGEMENT SITUATION

The health of the National Forests, primarily west of the Mississippi, is generally poor and in serious need of an increased active on-the-ground management. The general recognition of the current crisis in forest condition began with the fire season of 1997. Subsequent fire seasons became increasingly severe culminating in 2000 and the resulting National Fire Plan (NFP). Enacting NFP was a bold move by Congress to address a critical national need. The NFP was insightful and identified the need to restore fire adapted ecosystems as the largest underlying factor in the increasingly catastrophic wildfire seasons. In response, Congress significantly increased the budget of the Forest Service to perform this restoration. Unfortunately over the past 15 years, these budgetary increases have been consumed by the ever increasing cost of fighting wildfires. In fact, the problem is now so severe that additional funds are routinely transferred from already stressed management programs to pay for the wildfire suppression costs now occurring. The current reality is that the need to actively restore resilience to these

ecosystems has never received the budgetary resources necessary to aggressively attack these poor forest health conditions.

There is a viewpoint that advocates doing nothing, and just letting wildfire clean out the forest. Evidence over the last fifteen years shows how foolhardy this approach is. The impacts to people and community infrastructure; and the significant damage to watersheds, water and air quality, and wildlife habitat; caused by catastrophic wildfire requires an aggressive multiple use approach. This means that active forest, woodland and grassland management is needed to replicate the ecosystem conditions that allow wildfire to burn at its more natural intensities. We must exponentially increase our on the ground management to prevent as much of this lasting damage as we can.

As Theodore Roosevelt wisely said, "The conservation of our Natural resources and their proper use constitute the fundamental problem which underlies almost every other problem of our national life." While the global interdependence of the Natural resource world is far different in today's world, NAFSR believes that the very strength and health of our country is directly related to how well we take care of our land. This Subcommittee has a unique opportunity to address the issue of our forests, woodlands and grasslands health.

Despite the current situation I just described, there are examples of exciting and progressive efforts being accomplished on the ground. Across the West and South, coalitions of people who work and live among our National Forests and Grasslands have "left their bias at the door" and come together to make a difference based on solidly focused priorities and reliable funding. Examples include:

- The Longleaf Pine Restoration in the Southern States
- The Colorado Beetle Consortium
- The Yosemite-Stanislaus Solutions in California
- The Four Forest Restoration Initiative in Arizona
- The Black Hills long term (10 year) Environmental Impact Statement

While the Forest Service should be applauded for supporting these collaborative efforts, it is clear that without increased funding for restoration, these efforts will never reach their potential; much less multiply them across all the landscapes that need treatment. The current rate of treatments is unacceptable and a primary impediment is the unreliable and reduced funding due the substantial increases in wildfire suppression costs. The bottom line is that in order to be successful, there needs to be a dependable funding process. With this assessment of the current situation, NAFSR makes the following specific recommendations.

FIX THE WILDFIRE SUPPRESSION FUNDING SITUATION

The first and most important step is to pass the Wildfire Disaster Funding Act (WDFDA – H.R. 167; S.235). While NAFSR readily appreciates that focusing on WDFDA in this testimony is essentially "preaching to the choir," we feel strongly that paying for catastrophic wildfire in a manner similar to other national disasters is a change that is long overdue. The damage these fires cause are true disasters to local communities much like tornados, most floods, small hurricanes. We hope Congress as a whole will have the same courage as this Subcommittee has shown in supporting WDFDA. It is also essential to reprioritize the funds saved by the shift

envisioned in WDFR into those very programs that support the active management of the nation's at-risk ecosystems. We additionally request that the Committee appropriate the modeled levels of suppression through the Interior bill and the wildfire budget cap adjustment to meet suppression needs in FY2016.

The Balanced Budget and Emergency Deficit Control Act of 1985 includes a process for the nation to respond to major natural disasters without impacting the programs of responsible agencies. Catastrophic wildfires are in every way the same as a hurricane or other natural disaster. While their magnitude, geographic location, and impact on people and resources cannot be definitively planned for; these events WILL happen. Yet the process of paying for wildfire suppression significantly affects the ability of the Forest Service to deliver its on-the-ground mission, and in fact directly impacts the very programs that will prevent catastrophic wildfires in the future. The only sure bet for increased federal wildfire suppression expenditures is to do nothing and continue the status quo in funding wildfire suppression.

The agencies and first responders need a predictable, stable, and efficient budget structure to deliver their congressionally directed land management missions. The WDFR would provide the Forest Service with additional flexibility to reinvest in core activities which have been reduced in recent years due to a continued shift of limited resources to fund wildfire suppression. We appreciate this Committee's attention to this increasing and unsustainable natural resource challenge.

SUPPORT FOR THE TOTAL MISSION OF THE FOREST SERVICE

Although much of this testimony focuses on the health of the national forests and grasslands, the Forest Service mission affects all areas of the country (federal, state, local, and tribal) as well as internationally. Despite the difficult funding situation, we encourage continued support and maintenance of funding for Forest and Rangeland Research, International Programs, and State and Private Forestry. The recently enacted Farm Bill contained provisions that support this mission across ownerships. Examples include permanent authority for Stewardship Contracting, permanent "Good Neighbor authority," and a process for State petitioning that resulted in 45 million acres being designated as "at risk" across multiple ownerships. The Farm Bill's action to make Stewardship Contracting Authority permanent will significantly enhance this cross-boundary performance. In support of this aspect of the agency's mission, we urge the Subcommittee to support efficiencies and streamlining, such as is represented by S.326 to amend the Healthy Forests Restoration Act of 2003 to provide a mechanism for increasing the length of such contracts by modifying cancellation ceiling procedures

SPECIFIC BUDGET LINE ITEM RECOMMENDATIONS

Land Ownership Management - In prior years, NAFSR has highlighted the essential nature of this program. This program should be funded at no less than the FY2015 level; an increase of \$6.1 above the President's Budget. As former agency employees, we appreciate that the Landownership Management program has no nationwide constituent base, yet it is a critical program that supports the agency's restoration efforts. Funding for this line item has steadily eroded over time, yet the demands for the services provided have increased. The agency's capacity to deliver such service has been seriously affected. Activities funded in this line item include identifying property boundaries, assessing powerline location and environmental impacts, processing permit applications for numerous activities including water lines and

buildings, and responding to alternative energy proposals. The Land Ownership Management budget line is also an essential part of being good neighbors to adjacent private landowners and to the many communities within and adjacent to the Forests which is essential for supporting the increasing levels of collaboration.

Forest and Rangeland Research – This program is part of the core mission of the Forest Service, yet its budget has steadily eroded over time. The capacity to perform cutting edge research is negatively affecting the ability of the United States to be a world leader in developing wood related science and technologies. We recommend funding this program at the FY 2015 level; an increase of \$4.0 million over the President’s Budget.

Facilities: Roads/Legacy Roads and Trails – We note the continued serious “under-funding” of the basic transportation infrastructure that provides access to the national forests. Combined, the Administration proposes to reduce funding from the FY 2015 level by \$53.8 million. The transportation infrastructure on our national forests continues to deteriorate, with potentially tragic and even catastrophic consequences. The downstream damage to communities from erosion and the effect on water quality is significant. The potential for legal challenges and curtailment of the agency’s forest restoration efforts could easily result from this continued neglect of the Forest Service’s transportation system.

International Programs - Although small in the overall context of the Forest Service Budget, this budget line item has furthered the standing of the United States across the world in management of natural resources. The Forest Service has successfully leveraged the small amount of appropriation at close to a 4:1 ratio in order to operate worldwide in over 90 countries. Despite this outstanding program, the Administration has continued to “low ball” its budget requests, knowing that Congress will likely continue funding. We urge the Subcommittee to consider increasing this funding to at least \$12 million in the FY2016 Budget, sending a clear signal that International Programs is a key element off the Forest Service mission. At \$12 million, this program would have to be one of the best budgetary “bargains in town.”

CONCLUSION

NAFSR is a national, nonprofit organization of former Forest Service employees and associates who advocate in support of the multiple use mission of the Forest Service. Members of the Association possess a unique body of knowledge, expertise and experience in the management of the National Forests, other public lands, forestry research, state and private forestry assistance, agency history, laws and regulations, and international forestry. Members of NAFSR are devoted to contributing to understanding and resolving natural resource issues through education, independent and cooperative analysis, and periodic review and critiques of agency policies and programs.

Mr. Chairman and members of the Subcommittee, this concludes NAFSR’s statement for the record. We close by once again expressing our sincere appreciation for your commitment to supporting the mission of the Forest Service and for your support of a program of work that supports restoring our nation’s forests and rangelands and preventing the effects of catastrophic wildfire. We are ready to assist Subcommittee at any time with further recommendations.