

**Statement by
Sonny Perdue
Secretary of Agriculture
Before the Subcommittee on Interior, Environment, and Related Agencies
Committee on Appropriations, U.S. House of Representatives
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Mr. Chairman and distinguished members of this Subcommittee, I appreciate the opportunity to appear before you to discuss the Administration's priorities for the Department of Agriculture's (USDA) Forest Service, and provide an overview of the President's 2018 budget. Joining me today are Tom Tidwell, Chief of the Forest Service, and Sheri Elliott, the Forest Service's Acting Budget Director.

It is an honor to be with you today as the Nation's 31st Secretary of Agriculture. I am truly humbled by the opportunity to serve the American people, our farmers, and forest land owners, and I assure you that I will work tirelessly on their behalf. I thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today, and I look forward to working with you in the coming months and years as we continue to improve our nation's forests and grasslands; increase our focus on the active management of our lands; and work with Congress on actions or options to address longstanding wildland fire funding concerns.

A strong vision

While I am new to the Federal budget process, I know firsthand the challenges related to developing and enacting budgets at the State level. As governor, I reformed state budget priorities to transform a budget deficit into a surplus, improved program performance, and helped Georgians create more than 200,000 new jobs. Now, in my role as Secretary of Agriculture, I will be the leading advocate for rural America and responsible management of our natural resources, bringing to the Department the same energy and creativity I brought to my job as Governor. As U.S. Secretary of Agriculture, I will be guided by the following principles.

First, I will maximize the ability of the men and women of America's natural resources and recreation sectors to create jobs, to produce and sell the products that provide shelter to so many people, provide the public opportunities to get outside to enjoy the Nation's forests and grasslands, and to reap the earned reward of their labor. The FY 2018 budget proposal is projected to contribute between 340,000 and 370,000 jobs in the economy.

Along those lines, the proposed Forest Service budget for 2018 supports a program of work that is projected to contribute more than \$30 billion in Gross Domestic Product (GDP). We will work to expand our markets to sell wood and biomass and keep increasing the GDP contribution which is currently a little more than \$3 billion. The Forest Service will also maintain their focus on providing quality outdoor recreation experiences which produce more than \$10 billion toward the GDP each year.

I also place a high priority on the American taxpayers – our customers. I will prioritize customer service every day, across the USDA. Our customers expect, and have every right to demand, that we conduct the people's business efficiently, effectively, and with the utmost integrity. Arguably, no other Federal agency has more direct interface with Americans than does the Department of Agriculture. The national forests and grasslands alone have nearly 150 million people visit every year, and over half of them are repeat visitors that use the forests and grasslands up to 10 times per year. We also touch millions of Americans through a host of other

programs, as well. If we take into account our Research, State and Private Forestry, the programs of the National Forest System, and Wildland Fire Management, we touch nearly every single facet of American life.

It was with our customers in mind that I recently directed a reorganization of USDA. As part of the reorganization the Natural Resources Conservation Service was realigned from the Under Secretary for Natural Resources and Environment to a new Under Secretary for Farm Production and Conservation. This will enable the Under Secretary for Natural Resources and Environment to focus more attention on managing our national forests to ensure productive and sustained use, and managing our organization with the most employees.

We must also manage the land—and we must relentlessly pursue clean air and water. American wood products comes directly from the land. Today, those natural resources provide a wood supply with global reach, opportunities to recreate, abundant fish and wildlife, and clean and abundant water for more than 60 percent of the U.S. population. My father’s words still ring in my ears, “Son, if you take care of the land, it will take care of you. Owned or rented, we’re all stewards, and our responsibility is to leave it better than we found it.” Without proper stewardship of our resources, we will squander precious assets that are rare and time that we do not have. Science will help us find the best ways to provide sustainable wood products; restore forests and grasslands; reduce fire risk in communities; keep our air and water clean; and allow us to manage our lands in a way that leaves them a better place than we found when we started. Rather than focusing on obtaining more land, we need to better manage what we already have. If we accept these parameters, we can preserve our watersheds, our forests, our grasslands, and our delicate ecosystems for generations to come.

The President’s 2018 Budget

I am here today to present to you the Administration’s budget for the United States Department of Agriculture’s Forest Service. The 2018 President’s Budget for Forest Service is nearly \$5.2 billion, of which \$467 million is mandatory funding. The majority of these funds support Wildland Fire Management operations and the maintenance of National Forest System lands. The Administration’s commitment to rural communities, jobs creation, shared stewardship, and the production of goods and services from National Forest System lands is demonstrated by the funding level of Forest Products and the movement of Hazardous Fuels from the Wildland Fire Management to the National Forest System. Through the use of tools like the Good Neighbor and other Farm Bill authorities, utilizing funding within permanent and trust accounts, the Forest Service will sell 3.2 billion board feet of timber while improving the resilience of more than 1.7 million acres of National Forest System lands.

The Budget also fully funds suppression at the current 10-year average. The Forest Service provides the majority of aviation assets for wildland firefighting efforts on National Forest System lands, as well as other Federal, State and local jurisdictions. Serving as the contracting source for these assets provides cost effectiveness through economies of scale and other market factors and operational efficiencies in delivering critical resources for wildland firefighting efforts. The FY 2018 President’s Budget will enable the agency to continue modernizing its aviation resources, and implement the 2012 Large Airtanker Strategy.

In the 2018 Budget, 53 percent of the request is for Wildland Fire Management, up from 16 percent in 1995. The growth in fire suppression costs has steadily consumed an ever-increasing portion of the agency’s appropriated budget requiring the agency to shift funds from

other critical natural resource management programs. Increased development near wildlands is accelerating the continued growth of the Wildland Urban Interface (WUI), and more than 46 million homes, or 40 percent of the Nation's housing units, are located in these fire-prone areas. This is an issue you know well and I appreciate the support and leadership this Subcommittee has shown. I look forward to working with the Department of the Interior, Office of Management and Budget and you to develop a responsible approach that addresses risk management, performance accountability, cost containment, and the role of State and local government partners in ensuring adequate funds are available for wildfire suppression without undue disruption to land management operations.

As I recently informed the House Agriculture Committee, I am confident in the future of rural America and see opportunities for us to continue to strengthen this outlook and create opportunities for rural America. I look forward to working with this Subcommittee to fulfill the President's goals and our key responsibilities for the long term benefit of Nation's forests and grasslands and all Americans.

I will be glad to answer questions you may have at this time.