

**Statement of Tony Tooke, Chief of the USDA Forest Service
Before the House Committee on Appropriations,
Subcommittee on Interior, Environment, and Related Agencies
Concerning Supplemental Funding for Hurricanes Harvey, Irma, and Maria
November 29, 2017**

Mr. Chairman and members of the Subcommittee, thank you for inviting me here today to testify on the President's request for supplemental funding to assist with the Forest Service's response to the devastating 2017 hurricane season. It is an honor to be with you today as the 18th Chief of the USDA Forest Service. While the focus of today's hearing is supplemental funding for hurricane recovery, the Forest Service considers wildland fire as the primary disaster usually requiring our response. I extend my thanks to the Subcommittee for providing \$526.5 million in the last disaster supplemental to repay funds transferred from agency non-fire to fire accounts during the 2017 fire season. I look forward to continuing to work together to improve our Nation's forests and grasslands.

Storms and Initial Response

Hurricanes Harvey, Irma, and Maria were catastrophic storms resulting in loss of life, severe environmental damage, widespread power outages, and damage to public and private infrastructure throughout the Caribbean and southern United States. It is important to acknowledge that the storms had a significant impact outside of the United States and U.S. territories; however the following testimony will focus on the damage pertinent to the Forest Service. President Trump declared a Federal disaster area in all or parts of Texas, Louisiana, Mississippi, Florida, Alabama, Georgia, South Carolina, Puerto Rico, and the U.S. Virgin Islands.

The Forest Service is part of the Federal response to hurricanes under the National Response Framework, which organizes activities by Emergency Support Function (ESF) to provide the structure for coordinating interagency support for a Federal response to an incident. The Forest Service is the lead agency for ESF #4-Firefighting, and a supporting agency for ESF #13-Public Safety and Security.

Under ESF #4, the Forest Service played a significant role in hurricane response in support of the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) and affected states from August 26 through November 19, 2017. The Forest Service coordinated the ordering of 27 interagency Incident Management Teams, seven 20-person crews, 26 two-person saw modules, and additional personnel for missions such as managing Federal staging areas, performing emergency road clearing, managing logistics facilities, and supporting local emergency operations centers.

Under ESF #13, Forest Service Law Enforcement and Investigations (LEI) deployed two Quick Reaction Teams (QRT) consisting of approximately 25 personnel each. The teams completed numerous Force Protection (FP) missions on Puerto Rico and St. Thomas, U.S. Virgin Islands. The two Forest Service LEI teams combined with a Department of Interior, Bureau of Land Management QRT to support recovery operations, including the evacuation of approximately 300 patients from a hospital, searching homes for survivors, assisting with emergency pharmaceutical distribution, conducting welfare checks, performing reconnaissance for resource needs in isolated communities, creating geospatial mapping of affected areas, delivering fuel, sourcing generators and power grid supplies, and assisting with airport security.

On October 2, 2017, the Southern Region (Region 8) Forest Service LEI sent a team of four officers to directly support the heavily damaged El Yunque National Forest in Puerto Rico. The team continues to rotate in new officers every two weeks.

Employee Impact

While damage to the environment and infrastructure has been extensive, there has also been a significant impact to Forest Service employees in the affected areas. Employee safety is a top priority for the Forest Service, and I would like to share some employee stories of hardship and courage before discussing the details of the supplemental request.

It took two weeks to locate all International Institute of Tropical Forestry personnel in Puerto Rico due to damaged communications infrastructure, landslides, and blocked roads that kept a large portion of the population, including our employees, isolated. I am happy to report that all Forest Service employees are accounted for; however, many of them are faced with significant challenges as they recover from the devastating impacts of the storm.

There are Forest Service employees in Puerto Rico who have been without power for over two months, and have spent entire days waiting in line for gas. One employee had to evacuate his parents to the continental U.S. due to their medical needs. Another employee, who is a single mother to a ten year old son, moved to a new job in El Yunque less than one year ago. She has spent a significant amount of time without power and running water, and when her son returned to school it was only reopened for half days due to excessive afternoon heat in the buildings. She made the difficult decision to send her son to her parents in California so he could go back to his old school. Every day she finds a place with cell phone coverage to call and go over his homework with him.

The Forest Service has provided flexibility and support to employees impacted by the hurricanes, and has deployed counselors to provide critical support to employees coping with loss, frustrations, and uncertainty. Employees have shown tremendous perseverance throughout the recovery and our thoughts continue to be with them as they recover their lives.

Description of Request

The Administration's request includes \$96,652,000 to assist the Forest Service recovery efforts, with the majority of funding going to the El Yunque National Forest and International Institute of Tropical Forestry in Puerto Rico to address significant infrastructure damage. In addition to Puerto Rico, National Forests in Texas, Louisiana, Mississippi, Florida, Georgia, South Carolina, and North Carolina also sustained damage. In total, the requested funding will be used to repair and rehabilitate roads and bridges, administrative and recreation facilities; restore watersheds; and, support ongoing damage assessments. The following summarizes the type of damage that has been assessed, and how this damage would be addressed with the funding requested.

Cooperative Forest Health Protection/restoration of state and private forests:

- Restore state and private forests damaged by the hurricanes.
- Control invasive species on state and private lands, conduct pest and disease assessments, and remove downed trees and other vegetation. Invasive species and new pests are quick to colonize after a disturbance, so on-the-ground assessment, aerial surveys, and control of forest threats is especially critical in the three years following a hurricane.

Forest Stewardship/support damage assessments and provide technical assistance to state and private land owners:

- Support damage assessments, provide technical assistance to state and private land owners, and help private forest landowners revise or develop forest stewardship plans to assist in their recovery efforts.

Repair and rehabilitate administrative facilities, recreation facilities, roads and bridges, trails, and heritage and cultural sites:

- Facility repairs and mold remediation are needed at the following sites: the Ocala National Forest; the Sumter National Forest's Andrew Pickens District Office; the El Yunque National Forest's Catalina Service Center, El Portal Visitor's Center and water system; International Institute of Tropical Forestry's Headquarters, Rio Piedras Complex chemistry laboratory, and Sabana Research Field Station.
- There is significant damage to national forest recreation areas, facilities, and trails, and funding is requested to:
 - remove hazard trees from recreation areas,
 - replace waterlines and culverts,
 - repair trail surfaces and boardwalks
 - replace bridges and canoe launches
- Repair/rebuild forest roads that provide access through forest lands. Portions of roads are threatened by slopes that were weakened and rendered unstable by the storm.
- Assess damage and repair facilities at cultural resource sites.

Survey Forest Service landline locations:

- Survey and mark boundaries in national forests in Florida and Puerto Rico. Forest Service landline boundaries were severely impacted by the storms.

Assess value of timber damage:

- Conduct a complete assessment of the timber damage. The hurricanes blew down many trees in the Ocala National Forest in Florida, including some timber stands with over 50 percent of trees damaged to the extent that they are no longer marketable in traditional timber sales.

Restore wildlife habitat and repair structures:

- Restore critical wildlife habitat areas and assess endangered species populations. Additionally, nests and cages for the Puerto Rican parrot habitat will need to be repaired or built, and existing ones will need to be relocated, since the canopy in those areas is now too open for parrot habitat.

Conduct environmental analysis, replace seed sources, and control invasive species:

- Complete required environmental analysis for NEPA, replace/replant seeds, and continue ongoing damage assessments in affected national forest and research project areas.

Other equipment needs:

- Replace equipment damaged by the hurricanes, including radios, networks, telephones, computers, printers, plotters, and copiers.

Thank you Chairman Calvert for providing me the opportunity to appear before the Subcommittee today to discuss the funding needs for the Forest Service response to Hurricanes Harvey, Irma, and Maria, and our recovery efforts in their aftermath. I look forward to working with the Subcommittee on this supplemental funding request, and would be glad to answer any of the Subcommittee's questions.