

**Statement of Victoria Christiansen, Chief of the USDA Forest Service
Before the House Committee on Appropriations, Subcommittee on Interior, Environment and
Related Agencies
Concerning President’s Fiscal Year 2020 Proposed Budget
For the USDA Forest Service
March 28, 2019, 10:00 a.m.**

Chairwoman McCollum, Ranking Member Joyce, and members of the Subcommittee, thank you for inviting me here today to testify on the President’s fiscal year 2020 Budget request for the Forest Service.

The fiscal year 2020 President’s Budget for the USDA Forest Service totals nearly \$5.7 billion. Of that, \$559 million is mandatory funding. It is a good investment for the American people and will enable us to make progress in addressing the critical condition of America’s forests. Up to 80 million acres of the National Forest System, about 4 in every 10 acres, are at moderate to high risk from catastrophic fire. Other threats include regional drought, invasive species, and major outbreaks of insects and disease. Stakeholders of the USDA Forest Service broadly agree on the need for active measures to address the threats across many of the landscapes we manage, and Congress has done their part to help. I appreciate the support and innovative authorities that Congress provided in the 2014 Farm Bill, the 2018 Omnibus, and the 2018 Farm Bill to help us do more to improve the conditions of our forests and grasslands and protect communities. This is an indication of Congress’ expectations and trust in us, and I look forward to continuing to work with you to meet those expectations. There is much more work to be done to improve landscape resiliency for present and future generations, but we are committed to doing the right work in the right places at the right scale.

In 2018, Secretary Perdue announced a new strategy entitled, “Toward Shared Stewardship Across Landscapes: An Outcome-Based Investment Strategy” that calls for stronger collaborative decision-making with States and partners and employs new technology that can be shared. To do this, we will continue to reform our processes to better serve those connected to the land, improve infrastructure, and collaborate with our partners to set mutual goals and priorities to get more work done across landscapes. Use of tools like the Good Neighbor Authority, with more than 200 agreements in 37 states, 20-year stewardship contracts with cancellation ceiling relief, and other internal process improvements, including environmental analysis decision-making, is reducing the time and cost needed to produce high quality and science-based decisions that are accomplished effectively and efficiently. The agency continues our work on other fiscal reforms, and identifying new reforms, to ensure accountability and credibility for every dollar we receive. In this Budget the USDA Forest Service proposes a new budget structure that will eliminate cost pools, improve transparency and accountability, and will enable efficient delivery of integrated programs at an ecosystem/landscape scale level.

Fortunately, implementation of the fiscal component of the fire funding fix begins in fiscal year 2020. The USDA Forest Service is requesting access to \$1.95 billion of the overall resources authorized in the recently enacted “wildfire cap adjustment.” This, in addition to the Suppression funding requested in the President’s budget, should dramatically reduce the need for transferring funds from our other mission programs to cover firefighting costs. Access to the wildfire cap

adjustment has stabilized our budgeting environment and the President's Budget is proposing funding increases to line items to improve the condition of our forests.

We recognize that the successful delivery of services and work starts with a highly skilled, motivated workforce. Forest Service employees remain our largest and most important investment. They are essential to confronting the arduous challenges facing America's forests and grasslands and are integral to the services and experiences we provide to citizens and local communities. We are aware that we must do more to stop harassment, bullying and retaliation. We have taken, and continue to take, significant steps to improve policies, accountability, reporting systems, and training around the workplace environment. I want to reaffirm my commitment to continue the hard work that will improve our agency's culture; to continue transparency before this Subcommittee, Congress and the public we serve; and to achieve a workplace where all employees are treated with respect and dignity, so that they do not fear for their safety—physically or emotionally.

The President's 2020 Budget

The fiscal year 2020 request focuses on three primary areas: reducing wildland fire risk, improving forest and grassland conditions through shared stewardship, and contributing to rural economic prosperity. To address these focus areas, the Budget makes significant investments in the following program areas:

- \$1.34 billion is proposed for Fire Preparedness, which enables the Forest Service to maintain its existing firefighting capability and funds all base 8 salary costs for firefighters.
- \$1.011 billion is proposed for Suppression, the 2015 10-year average, base funding set by the 2018 Omnibus which will be frozen through fiscal year 2027.
 - The Budget seeks \$1.95 billion of the authorized wildfire funding fix cap adjustment for wildfire suppression activities.
 - This, in addition to the \$1.011 billion for Suppression, would provide about \$3 billion for wildland fire suppression activities in fiscal year 2020.
- \$450 million is proposed for Hazardous Fuels, which supports the agency's emphasis on improving the condition of the Nation's forests and grasslands while enhancing their resilience to the negative effects of wildland fire.
- \$375 million is proposed for Forest Products, which will support the sale of 3.7 billion board feet of timber. The Forest Service is working to improve the speed and agility in the planning and execution of land management actions, including timber sales.
- \$77 million is proposed for the Forest Inventory and Analysis (FIA) Program, which generates data on past, current, and projected tree inventories for all 50 states. The FIA program enables the natural resource community to understand the magnitude of changes in forest conditions and trends, and to make projections of future conditions - information which is vital to the long-term health of forests and the sustained availability of multiple uses from forests.

Legislative Proposals

The fiscal year 2020 President's Budget proposes several key legislative changes to improve our effectiveness in delivering programs and services:

- *Federal Lands Recreation Enhancement Act Reauthorization (FLREA)*: The proposal is to reauthorize the Federal Lands Recreation Enhancement Act through September 30, 2022. The revenues collected from these recreation fees are an important source of funding to enhance the visitor experience through maintenance, operations, and improvements to recreation facilities on public lands. This is an interagency proposal with the Department of the Interior. The Triennial Report to Congress on Implementation of FLREA, published in May 2012, contained several “Considerations for the Future of the Program,” which set the foundation for the interagency proposal.
- *Grazing Permits*: The proposal would amend the Federal Land Policy and Management Act (FLPMA) to correct the 2015 National Defense Appropriations Act amendment to FLPMA Section 402. For this section only, all National Forest System lands would be included so that grazing permits on national forests in eastern States and National Grasslands are treated equally in National Environmental Policy Act analysis of grazing permits.
- *Wild and Scenic Rivers*: The Wild and Scenic Rivers Act requires that comprehensive river management plans be prepared within three years following a Wild and Scenic River designation. This proposal would change the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act to state that the Secretary of Agriculture shall not be in violation of Section 3(d)(1) of the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act solely because more than three years have passed since a river was designated “wild and scenic” and a comprehensive river management plan has not yet been completed. If more than three years have passed since designation without the completion of a comprehensive river management plan, the proposal would require that a plan must be completed or appropriately updated no later than during the next forest plan revision process.
- *Forest Botanical Products*: This proposal would reauthorize the Forest Botanical Products Program for charging and retaining fees for the harvest of forest botanical products. The objective of the program is to provide for the sale and harvest of forest botanical products in a sustainable manner that contributes to meeting the Nation’s demand for these goods and services. The proposal would extend the agency’s existing authority for one year, to September 30, 2020. The Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2014 extended this authority beyond a pilot program through September 30, 2019.
- *Communication Site Program -Administrative Fee Retention*: This proposal would authorize appropriation of a new programmatic administrative fee for communications use authorizations to cover the costs of administering the Forest Service’s communications site program on National Forest System (NFS) lands. This new fee, which was authorized by the Agriculture Improvement Act of 2018, subject to appropriation, would allow the agency to better manage the growing use of Forest Service lands for communications facilities to better serve its customers, emergency services, and visitors to NFS lands by providing expanded telecommunications capabilities, including cellular coverage and broadband access, to rural communities.

- *Mineral Receipts; Public Land Infrastructure Fund*: This proposal allows the Forest Service to be eligible to use up to 10 percent annually from the Administration's Public Lands Infrastructure Fund. This proposed fund was included in the Department of the Interior's FY2020 Budget request to address deferred maintenance needs. The Public Lands Infrastructure Fund would be supported by the deposit of 50 percent of all federal energy development revenue that would otherwise be credited or deposited as miscellaneous receipts to the Treasury over the 2020-2024 period, subject to an annual limit of \$1.3 billion.
- *Cost recovery Minerals*: This proposal would authorize the Forest Service to retain and spend new cost recovery fees for locatable mineral plans of operations and surface use plans of operations for oil and gas leases, and other written Forest Service authorizations relating to the disposal of locatable and leasable (but not saleable) minerals on all NFS lands. The agency currently has the authority to collect such fees but does not because we are unable to retain the fees. The provision caps the amount that may be retained at \$60 million annually. This proposal would better align the Forest Service with the Department of the Interior.
- *Cost Recovery for Land Uses/Infrastructure Special Use Processing*: This proposal would change the agency's cost recovery authority to allow the collection of funds associated with the full cost of processing a land use-related special use proposal. The amendment would authorize the agency to collect fees at the very beginning of the screening process rather than waiting until an application has been fully screened and accepted for consideration. Under the current cost recovery law, only when a proposal becomes an application is the agency able to recover costs to process the application.

Coupled with the expanded authorities Congress has provided and our internal reforms, these legislative proposals will translate to better results, and increased production and work in our nation's forests and grasslands.

In closing, the Forest Service's fiscal year 2020 Budget request prioritizes investments to reduce wildland fire risk, improve forest and grassland conditions through shared stewardship with our partners, and contribute to rural economic prosperity. It requires tough choices within our existing program of work and will compel us to make delivery of forest and rangeland products and services. We will also need to ensure better cost containment and accounting for our spending. The Forest Service will continue to meet this challenge. I look forward to working with this Subcommittee to fulfill the President's goals and our key responsibilities for the long-term benefit of the Nation's forests and grasslands and for all Americans. I will be glad to answer your questions.