

**TESTIMONY of
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UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE—FOREST SERVICE
BEFORE THE
UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
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Concerning
WILDFIRE RESILIENT COMMUNITIES**

Madam Chairman, Ranking Member and Members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today to discuss the important role prevention, active management, and community assistance play in building wildfire resilient communities. Wildfires in the recent past, including the Carr and Camp Fires in California and the 2016 Chimney Tops 2 Fire in Gatlinburg, Tennessee, are stark reminders of the urgent need to help communities prepare for wildfire, while also increasing forest treatments. As these devastating fires demonstrated, this issue knows no boundaries. When it comes to wildfire resilient communities, “we are all in this together” – from the individual homeowner, to the local community and across counties, tribes, states and federal agencies. My testimony today focuses on how the Forest Service and its many partners work together to reduce the risk of wildfire by improving forest conditions while also reducing wildfire risk and helping communities adapt to wildfire.

REDUCING FIRE RISK AND IMPROVING FOREST CONDITIONS

The Forest Service estimates a total of nearly 80 million acres are at risk from uncharacteristically severe wildfires. Many of these forests are fire dependent, requiring fire as a critical process for maintaining health and resiliency. Yet, we are experiencing larger and more intense fires along with expanding development within our nation’s forests. Across much of the United States, fire seasons have lengthened by as many as 20 days per decade over the last four decades. This scenario increases the negative impacts of wildfire including the effects of smoke on the health of the American public. Actively managing these fire-dependent landscapes and implementing fuel reduction projects can reduce the frequency and the impact of severe wildfire events.

Last August, USDA has launched the Shared Stewardship initiative to bring states and other stakeholders together to prioritize cross-boundary investments in management and monitoring to improve forest conditions. We are engaging with states, tribes, fire associations, and non-governmental organizations in landscape level work to reduce wildfire risk. States are also uniquely positioned to convene stakeholders to evaluate the wildland fire environment, agree on cross-jurisdictional planning areas, use scenario planning tools to assess fire risks and alternatives for managing the risk, and set priorities that will provide the greatest return on investment.

On December 21, 2018, President Trump issued Executive Order 13855, *Promoting Active Management of America’s Forests, Rangelands, and Other Federal Lands to Improve*

Conditions and Reduce Wildfire Risk, whereby the President has directed federal agencies, including the Forest Service, to actively manage our forests “with the same vigor and commitment that characterizes our efforts to fight wildfires.” To accomplish this, we are working to implement the following policy direction:

(a) Shared Management Priorities through agreements with Federal land managers, States, tribes, and other landowners to manage fire risk across landscapes.

(b) Coordinating the deployment of Federal, State, tribal and local assets to restore our landscapes and communities after damage caused by fires and to help reduce hazardous fuels to protect communities, critical infrastructure, and natural and cultural resources.

(c) Prioritizing treatments for fuel reduction and forest-restoration projects that protect life and property, and to benefit rural economies through encouraging utilization of the by-products of forest restoration.

We are also directed in this EO to develop performance metrics to better capture the efficacy of our fuels management efforts in reducing wildfire risk, and to collaboratively develop a wildfire strategy by December 31, 2020 to support Federal land managers in project decision-making and to inform wildfire management decisions in the protection of habitats, communities and physical infrastructure.

In recent legislation, the Forest Service has acquired additional capacity for shared stewardship across broad landscapes. We will capitalize on the authorities created by last year’s Omnibus Bill and Farm Bill. We will use all the active management tools we have, including the right kind of fire at the right time in the right places. In addition, on March 28th, the Departments of Agriculture and the Interior jointly transmitted the Administration’s Forest Management legislative reforms package, which includes various categorical exclusions from the National Environmental Policy Act for forest and rangeland management activities to help mitigate the risk of catastrophic wildfire. If enacted, this legislation will provide unprecedented capacity through expanded CEs to improve forest conditions and make communities more resilient to wildfire.

In the meantime, the Forest Service, through its Hazardous Fuels management program, continues to focus on wildfire risk through prescribed burns, timber sales and mechanical treatments with the principal aim of mitigating the spread and severity of wildfire, and promoting resilient ecosystems. Hazardous fuel treatments include any vegetation manipulation, removal, or modification of wildland fuels to reduce the likelihood of ignition, reduce potential fire intensity and rate of spread, lessen potential damage, or limit the spread of invasive species and diseases. These treatments promote the natural role of fire by reducing the likelihood of uncharacteristically intense wildland fire. These activities also reduce potential impacts to communities and increase opportunities for wildland firefighters to safely and effectively engage wildfires. Since 2006, over 4,900 fuel treatment effectiveness assessments have been completed on National Forest System lands. About 86% of the fuel treatments were effective in changing fire behavior or helping with control of the wildfire or both.

Nearly three million acres of hazardous fuel treatments are accomplished on National Forest Systems lands each year. Of these, 700,000 acres are treated mechanically, and two million acres are in the wildland-urban interface (WUI)—i.e. the areas were wildlands and communities

intersect. So far this year, we have treated more than 1.05 million acres to reduce hazardous fuels and we are on track to meet our target of 3.4 million acres. Most of these treatments are in the WUI. These accomplishments include naturally-ignited wildfire acres that were assessed and determined to meet land management goals. Managing wildfires in favorable conditions continues to be an important method to reducing risk and severity of catastrophic wildfire.

The Forest Service has more than \$5.2 billion in deferred maintenance on infrastructure that includes over 370,000 miles of roads, 13,400 bridges and trails, dams, and both administrative and wildfire facilities that impact every aspect of the Forest Service mission. Addressing this deferred maintenance is a critical issue affecting the agency's ability to achieve its mission including wildland fire suppression and actively managing the National Forests. The President's FY 2020 Budget request includes a Public Lands Infrastructure Fund that would provide an allocation of funds for deferred maintenance in the National Forest System. USDA welcomes the opportunity for further discussion with the subcommittee regarding the PLIF proposal to address the agency's deferred maintenance needs.

WILDFIRE PREVENTION

Nationally, nearly 9 out of 10 wildfires are caused by humans, including some of the costliest wildfires. If we prevent unwanted, human-caused wildfires from igniting, we can proactively use our resources to create resilient landscapes, improve our response to the other wildfires that need attention, and engage communities to be prepared for and live with wildfire. Wildfire prevention could also aid in reducing the serious smoke impacts of these unwanted wildfires that are becoming a serious threat to the health of the American public.

Wildfire prevention education activities can reduce the number of human-caused wildfires and thus fire-related costs. A 2009 study on wildfire prevention education programs in the state of Florida found that the benefit to cost ratio could be as much as 35 to 1. That is, every additional dollar spent would have reduced wildfire related losses (e.g., home and timber losses, etc.) and suppression costs by 35 dollars. The Forest Service, along with its many partners, are engaged in several activities targeted at educating the public regarding the importance of wildfire prevention.

Smokey Bear

As Smokey Bear turns 75 this year, he is at the heart of the longest-running public service campaign in American history. His signature phrase, "only you can prevent wildfires" is part of the American lexicon. Though Smokey has been essential to the reduction of unwanted, human-caused wildfires, he still needs help. Smokey's messages are particularly important as more people choose to recreate and live in areas where wildlands and communities intersect—often referred to as the WUI.

Wildfire Prevention Education Teams

Wildfire Prevention Education Teams support wildland fire prevention and educational needs prior to and during periods of high wildland fire danger. Teams are highly effective in their ability to reduce unwanted human-caused wildland ignitions and are equipped to rapidly complete on-site prevention assessments and plans, initiate implementation of such plans, and begin immediate prevention and education activities. The plans include a variety of strategies to

reduce wildfire ignitions including but not limited to engineering techniques, education, community outreach, law enforcement and administration.

The purpose of the teams is to provide unit and agency managers with a team of skilled and mobile personnel to supplement or enhance ongoing local wildfire prevention and education activities. They support units that anticipate an increase in human activity in an area; are experiencing an increase in human-caused fires; predicted increasing fire danger conditions or implementing fire restrictions. In general, they help where the workload or the local community lacks the capacity to meet fire prevention goals.

In 2018, sixteen Wildfire Prevention Education Teams supported state, local, tribal and federal agencies across the nation. The assignments included support to units in Oregon, Washington, Idaho, Montana, Florida, Georgia, Colorado, Utah, Nevada, and California.

One Less Spark, One Less Wildfire Campaign –

The Forest Service is a partner in the “One Less Spark, One Less Wildfire” campaign. This interagency campaign educates the public regarding ways they can help prevent human-caused fires. While the program focuses primarily on vehicle and homeowner equipment-caused fires, it supports the prevention of all human-caused fires. The campaign highlights lesser known but significant causes of wildfires, including sparks created by tow chains dragging along the pavement or by a metal lawnmower blade striking a rock. The campaign includes educational materials, public service announcements, graphics that are used in many states in the nation.

PROMOTING FIRE-ADAPTED COMMUNITIES

Each year, more than 69,000 wildfires burn about 6.6 million acres of federal, tribal, state and private land and destroy more than 6,300 structures. The last two years have included well-above average numbers of structures destroyed, with over 25,000 in 2018 and over 12,000 in 2017. Urban development continues to encroach into wildland areas. Wildfires also pose risk to utility infrastructure, municipal watersheds and recreation and wildlife values.

The National Association of State Foresters identified more than 70,000 communities at risk from wildfire. Approximately 11 percent of these communities have reduced their risk due to mitigation actions, fire prevention ordinances, or reduction of high priority hazardous fuels identified in a Community Wildfire Protection Plan. Nationally, more than 20 percent of communities at risk have a Community Wildfire Protection Plan, while more than 80 percent of communities at risk in the west, where wildfire risk is highest, have such a plan. The Forest Service works together with our federal, state, tribal, local and non-government organization partners to help communities be prepared for wildfire and to further the goals and implementation of the 2011 National Cohesive Wildland Fire Management Strategy.

Building Capacity for Prevention, Mitigation, Control and Suppression of Wildfires

More than 46 million homes in the United States (representing 40 percent of the Nation’s housing units) are in fire-prone wildland-urban interface (WUI) areas. The first responders on almost 75 percent of wildfires are local fire departments or state agencies. Collaboration between the Forest Service, the Department of the Interior, and non-federal government entities is important to an effective, all-lands approach to wildland fire management.

Through the National Fire Capacity program, the Forest Service supports and assists State Foresters and local communities in building capacity for the prevention, mitigation, control, and suppression of wildfires on non-federal lands. The program helps state agencies create more fire-adapted communities by implementing pre- fire prevention and mitigation programs described in State Forest Action Plans. The program emphasizes pre- fire planning in the WUI and hazardous fuels mitigation near communities at risk of catastrophic wildfire. Training funded by the program provides for effective and safer initial response to wildfire. In Fiscal Year 2018, the program assisted nearly 13,000 communities, implemented hazardous fuels treatments on nearly 50,000 acres and trained 97,210 firefighters.

Aiding Local Volunteer Fire Departments

The Forest Service, through the Rural Fire Capacity Program, is focused on providing technical and financial assistance to rural fire departments in communities of less than 10,000 people. There are more than 26,000 rural and predominantly volunteer fire departments nationwide. Through this program, the Forest Service supports local fire preparedness and suppression efforts and provides funding for equipment, training, and expansion of volunteer fire departments where little or no fire protection is available. Recipients match grants dollar-for-dollar to maximize the value of the federal investment. In Fiscal Year 2018, the Rural Fire Capacity programs assisted approximately 14,000 volunteer fire departments, trained 22,000 firefighters and assisted in acquiring or rehabilitating nearly \$11 million worth of equipment.

Without the cooperation of rural fire departments, the Forest Service and state forestry agencies would be unable to provide the level of fire response needed to contain fires near many communities. Rural fire departments also play a key role in educating constituents about fire adaptation and the need for mitigation and they help meet expanded fire protection needs within the wildland-urban interface.

Assisting Communities and Homeowners Prepare for Wildfire

The National Fire Capacity program also assists communities to become fire adapted using programs such as Firewise USA, which provides a collaborative framework for neighbors to reduce wildfire risks at the local level. The Firewise program continues to assist communities in wildfire-prone areas. National Fire Capacity supports the Firewise program at both the national level through a grant with the National Fire Protection Association and at the state level with funding for state forestry agencies to use in program administration. In 2018, 141 new communities in 23 states were recognized as Firewise communities and 1,528 communities in 42 states retained their recognition.

The *Ready, Set, Go!* (RSG) program is an important component of the fire adapted communities' element of the National Cohesive Wildfire Management Strategy and results in reduced risk, damage, and response costs in a more aware, and alert population prepared for quick and safe evacuation during a wildfire. The Forest Service partners with the International Association of Fire Chiefs (IAFC) to administer this national program. The RSG Program works directly with local fire departments to help them educate local citizens to prepare their communities for evacuation due to wildfire. The IAFC assists the Forest Service in providing a

service and engaging an audience that is difficult for a federal land management agency to reach.

Community Wildfire Mitigation

The Forest Service uses Community Mitigation Assistance Teams (CMAT) to collaborate with local communities on wildfire mitigation efforts before, during and after incidents when the awareness of the need for mitigation is the highest. CMATs work closely with incident management teams, the Forest Service or other land management agencies and community residents and leaders to identify mitigation opportunities before a fire impacts the community. Team members are highly proficient community wildfire mitigation specialists who have on-the-ground knowledge of collaboration and best practices. Team members represent interagency partners, insurance companies, non-profit partners, fire departments, and emergency management professionals.

CMATs play an important role in providing additional support for mitigation education. A CMAT can assist a community by providing home assessments, train-the-trainer courses on home assessments, community level fire adaptation assessments and providing advice on adoption of WUI codes and ordinances.

A CMAT team was deployed following the 2018 Spring Creek Fire in Colorado that burned approximately 108,000 acres and 141 structures. The team carried out workshops, one-one-one interviews and other activities to gather input from community members and provide recommendations for future mitigation. The recommendations will help promote sustainable mitigations actions, reduce negative effects from wildfire and create a better-prepared and more resilient community.

The Forest Service also partners with *The Nature Conservancy* and *The Watershed Center* to support the Fire Adapted Communities Learning Network which promotes information sharing, training, and networking among communities engaged in mitigation. The Network includes more than 120 affiliated members who are dedicated to connecting people to resources, and to practitioners, to reduce wildfire risk and increase community resilience.

Community Planning Assistance for Wildfire

The Forest Service partners with Headwaters Economics, Wildfire Planning International and private foundations to deliver Community Planning Assistance for Wildfire (CPAW) that helps communities reduce wildfire risk and costs. CPAW's long-term goal is to create fire-adapted communities through land use planning tools –where residents safely live with wildfire on the landscape. CPAW is a collaborative process that provides recommendations tailored to meet the site-specific needs and resources of communities. Communities are selected through a competitive grant process which provides services at no cost to the community.

CONCLUSION

Actions, treatments, and coordination are required to make communities more resilient to wildfire. These efforts include a spectrum of activities ranging from fire prevention programs,

through programs such as Fire adapted communities, and includes harvesting overgrown forests and treating hazardous fuels in the WUI. Private homeowners, landowners, local, state, tribal, and federal agencies are all interested in healthy forests and wildfire-resilient communities. We are all in this together and each play a role in making a difference.

I would be happy to answer any questions the Committee may have.