

**EXAMINING THE CHALLENGES FACING
FOREST MANAGEMENT, WILDFIRE
SUPPRESSION, AND WILDLAND
FIREFIGHTERS AHEAD OF THE 2023
WILDFIRE YEAR**

OVERSIGHT HEARING

BEFORE THE

SUBCOMMITTEE ON FEDERAL LANDS

OF THE

COMMITTEE ON NATURAL RESOURCES

U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

ONE HUNDRED EIGHTEENTH CONGRESS

FIRST SESSION

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**OVERSIGHT HEARING ON EXAMINING THE
CHALLENGES FACING FOREST MANAGE-
MENT, WILDFIRE SUPPRESSION, AND
WILDLAND FIREFIGHTERS AHEAD OF THE
2023 WILDFIRE YEAR**

**Tuesday, May 16, 2023
U.S. House of Representatives
Subcommittee on Federal Lands
Committee on Natural Resources
Washington, DC**

The Subcommittee met, pursuant to notice, at 2:20 p.m. in Room 1324, Longworth House Office Building, Hon. Tom Tiffany [Chairman of the Subcommittee] presiding.

Present: Representatives Tiffany, McClintock, Fulcher, Stauber, Curtis, Bentz, Westerman; Neguse, Porter, and Kamlager-Dove.

Also present: Representatives Duarte and LaMalfa.

Mr. TIFFANY. The Subcommittee on Federal Lands will come to order.

Without objection, the Chair is authorized to declare a recess of the Committee at any time.

This Committee is meeting today to hear testimony on the challenges facing forest management, wildfire suppression, and wildland firefighters ahead of the 2023 wildfire year.

I ask unanimous consent that the gentlemen from California, Mr. LaMalfa and Mr. Duarte, be allowed to participate in today's hearing from the dais.

Without objection, so ordered.

Under Committee Rule 4(f), any oral opening statements at hearings are limited to the Chairman and Ranking Minority Member. I therefore ask unanimous consent that all other Members' opening statements be made part of the hearing record if they are submitted in accordance with Committee Rule 3(o).

Without objection, so ordered.

I will now recognize myself for an opening statement.

**STATEMENT OF THE HON. TOM TIFFANY, A REPRESENTATIVE
IN CONGRESS FROM THE STATE OF WISCONSIN**

Mr. TIFFANY. The topic of today's hearing is the 2023 wildfire year. What used to be called fire seasons has now morphed into fire years, as wildfires blaze year-round. In the last 5 years alone, we have lost over 38 million acres of land to wildfire, a total area that is nearly as large as my home state of Wisconsin.

Until recently, our country had never lost more than 10 million acres in a year. But we have now hit that ominous mark three times in less than a decade. Behind these statistics are lives tragically lost, homes and entire communities destroyed, wildlife

habitat turned into moonscapes, and untold levels of air and water degradation.

It is important that we recognize the immense suffering this crisis is inflicting upon Americans year after year. The people and communities on the front lines of these fires are not just statistics. Today, we will hear a personal account of that devastation from Mayor Greg Bolin, whose town of Paradise, California endured the deadliest and most destructive fire in California history in 2018. Eighty-five lives were tragically lost during the Camp Fire, and over 18,000 structures were destroyed.

[Slide.]

Mr. TIFFANY. The posters behind me show the sobering devastation that this unprecedented crisis has caused, and will cause again unless we drastically change course.

We must also recognize the human impact this crisis is having on our nation's wildland firefighters. We must stop putting our brave wildland firefighters into unwinnable situations year after year as they are asked to fight increasingly severe fires. The mental, physical, and emotional toll these longer and hotter fire assignments are having on wildland firefighters must be addressed. Too many of our firefighters are getting severely injured or dying as a result of dangerous conditions on the ground.

We know that proper fuels treatments provide the conditions necessary to contain wildfires, and that is an important piece.

It is also paramount that we provide the best tools and strategies needed to quickly and aggressively fight wildfires.

Finally, we must ensure that the brave men and women serving in this important profession are equitably compensated and provided with resources and benefits they deserve.

Encouragingly, we are no longer debating the cause of this crisis in this Committee. There is growing consensus that active forest management must be restored to the overgrown and unhealthy forests fueling our catastrophic wildfire crisis. And I am encouraged to see that all of the witnesses before us today appear to agree with that important premise.

However, I must caution that much work needs to be done to address the systemic hurdles blocking the type of paradigm shift needed to truly confront this issue. My Democratic friends have consistently argued that increased funding for hazardous fuels treatments and wildfire suppression is all that is needed to confront the crisis. I would like to encourage my friends to recognize the reality that the influx of funds provided to our forest management agencies have thus far failed to deliver the increase in pace and scale of fuels treatment that is truly needed.

Onerous environmental regulations and frivolous litigation from extreme environmental groups remain the primary obstacles blocking the type of forest management necessary to truly turn the tide against this crisis. The fact that it takes over 3 years to begin a mechanical treatment and over 4 years to conduct a prescribed burn on Federal lands should demonstrate to all that our system is clearly broken, and funding alone will never overcome this. It is incumbent on us in Congress to provide the tools necessary to overcome the blockades that have unquestionably led us into this present predicament.

I want to thank all of the witnesses for being here today. I look forward to this important discussion as we examine where we have been, what we can expect in the present, and where we need to go to truly confront this historic wildfire crisis.

I will recognize the Ranking Member when he arrives. Now, I guess I would like to turn to the witnesses.

Let me remind the witnesses that, under Committee Rules, you must limit your oral statement to 5 minutes, but your entire statement will appear in the hearing record.

To begin your testimony, press the “on” button on the microphone.

We use timing lights. When you begin, the light will turn green. At the end of 5 minutes, the light will turn red, and I will ask you to please complete your statement.

I would now like to introduce Ms. Jaelith Hall-Rivera, who is the Deputy Chief of State and Private Forestry for the U.S. Forest Service.

Ms. Hall-Rivera, you are now recognized for 5 minutes.

STATEMENT OF JAE LITH HALL-RIVERA, DEPUTY CHIEF, STATE AND PRIVATE FORESTRY, U.S. FOREST SERVICE, U.S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE, WASHINGTON, DC

Ms. HALL-RIVERA. Thank you. Chairman Tiffany, Ranking Member Neguse, and members of the Subcommittee, thank you for this opportunity to testify on the upcoming 2023 fire year, the ongoing wildfire crisis, and how we are working to improve forest health and protect communities.

I have seen firsthand the destruction that wildfires have on our communities, infrastructure, and our natural resources. Wildfire risk has reached crisis proportions and wildfires are having more and more impacts each year.

I want to personally thank our partners who answer our call for assistance to bolster our capabilities. We are grateful for all of our partners around the country and around the world who continue to pitch in to help our nation through each difficult fire year.

As the size and severity of fires has grown, so too has our need for fire personnel. As we approach the busiest part of the 2023 fire year, the Forest Service aspires to hire 11,300 wildland firefighters nationwide. As of May 6, we have hired 9,319 firefighters, about 82 percent of our goal. While we are cautiously optimistic we will reach our hiring goals, we know that that is still not enough. That is why the President’s 2024 budget proposes to hire 970 additional firefighters in the Forest Service.

In addition, for the 2023 fire year the Forest Service will have up to 24 next-generation air tankers, more than 200 helicopters, and more than 900 engines available to manage wildfires.

Wildland firefighters are the backbone of our ability to protect communities and vital infrastructure from wildfires. The only way we are going to attract people to this challenging and hazardous work is to pay them fairly. Federal wages for firefighters have not kept pace with wages offered by state, local, and private entities. The workforce reforms proposed in the President’s 2024 budget request and supporting legislation will increase Federal and tribal firefighters’ pay, invest more in their mental and physical health

and well-being, improve their housing options, and expand the number of permanent wildland firefighters.

These reforms build on the temporary pay increase that was provided by the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act. And thanks to that legislation, more than 12,000 Forest Service firefighters received a temporary pay increase. However, the funding for that pay supplement will be spent by the end of September 2023, unless Congress intervenes to avert a pay cliff.

To ensure pay continuity in the 2024 budget, we are proposing a permanent pay increase for all firefighters. Our budget proposal includes a request for \$180 million in support of a special base rate salary table for firefighters and incident standby pay for all responders that are mobilized to a fire assignment. This new pay table was calculated to increase the total annual compensation to a level commensurate with state and private-sector wildland firefighters. For example, an entry-level Forest Service firefighter would receive approximately a 34 percent increase in pay under the new pay table.

And unlike the temporary increase in BIL, a permanent base pay increase is an investment in our firefighters' future, as an increase in basic pay leads to an increase in retirement benefits. We will need Congress to pass special legislation that authorizes the new pay table, and I look forward to working with this Subcommittee on that.

We are working hard to make a difference and improve the lives of our firefighters. Together, we can make a difference in the quality of life for our firefighters that protect our own quality of life.

In addition to paying firefighters fairly, we must support their mental and physical health. The 2024 budget proposal calls for an increase of \$10 million to enhance support for firefighters' mental and physical health and well-being.

The budget also proposes a \$50 million investment in housing. We recognize that addressing the housing crisis must happen now, as it impacts our ability to recruit and retain our workforce.

Together, these efforts would help address long-standing recruitment and retention challenges. These investments, totaling \$569 million, will ensure the Forest Service can continue meeting evolving mission demands as both the frequency and intensity of catastrophic wildfires are expected to increase.

Long term, we must address work on the ground to ultimately address the wildfire crisis. Over the last two decades, we have witnessed what has become a now familiar pattern: bigger and more destructive wildfires that are extremely costly and challenging to suppress. This growing wildfire crisis created the need for a new land management strategy. We, in the Forest Service, are in our second year of carrying out our wildfire crisis strategy, which increases science-based fuels treatments by up to four times previous treatment levels, calling for treating up to 20 million additional acres of national forest system lands and 30 million additional acres on other landownerships.

The Forest Service is very grateful to Congress for providing the resources through the BIL and Inflation Reduction Act to seed our initial work in the wildfire crisis strategy.

In closing, I want to reiterate the agency's commitment to keeping our communities and firefighters safe as fire seasons grow longer and more severe. The dedication, bravery, and professional integrity of our firefighters and support personnel is second to none. We greatly appreciate the significant resources Congress has provided to help us take initial steps to address the wildfire crisis, and we look forward to working with this Subcommittee to continue providing world-class suppression response and reducing the severity of wildfires in our country. Thank you.

[The prepared statement of Ms. Hall-Rivera follows:]

PREPARED STATEMENT OF JAELETH HALL-RIVERA, DEPUTY CHIEF, UNITED STATES
DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE—FOREST SERVICE

Chairman Tiffany, Ranking Member Neguse, and Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today to discuss wildfire management and the 2023 Fire Year. Wildfires threaten urban and rural communities, Tribal Nations and their interests, farm and ranchland, municipal water supplies, timber, recreation sites, and important wildlife habitat.

The Forest Service has a continuing need and responsibility to partner with all communities to prepare for wildfires. The Forest Service does not work alone in managing wildfires across the nation—wildfire requires an all-of-government response, including major contributions from our Federal Partners, the Departments of the Interior and Defense, and the States, Tribes, and local governments, contractors, and volunteer organizations. These partnerships have evolved over many years, creating a robust interagency capability to support wildfire suppression across the country.

Over the past 20 years, wildfires have become larger, last longer, exhibit more extreme fire behavior, and are more challenging to contain than ever before as a result of accumulating fuels, a warming climate, and expanding development in the wildland-urban interface. Wildfire risk has reached crisis proportions. This increased frequency of fire in the wildland-urban interface continues to severely impact lives, communities, infrastructure, and cultural and natural resources. Although drought conditions continue for nearly half the country, it is too early to predict with any certainty the fire activity for the 2023 fire year. Long-term relationships with our federal, state, Tribal, and local governments and our contracted partners ensure we have a strong workforce and the necessary resources to provide a safe and effective wildfire response.

I want to personally thank our partners who answer our call for assistance to bolster our capabilities. States also provide significant assistance with their National Guard units. We are grateful for all of our partners around the country and around the world who continue to pitch in to help our nation through each difficult fire year.

2023 Fire Year

There is always the potential for significant wildfire events and growth throughout the nation depending on local conditions. The National Interagency Fire Center's Predictive Services provides an updated four-month National Significant Wildland Fire Potential Outlook on the first day of each month. The current May–August 2023 outlook indicates drought will continue on much of the southern and central High Plains. However, drought improvement is likely across the rest of the Plains, in the Mid-Atlantic, and on the Florida Peninsula. Above normal fire potential is forecasted across portions of the Upper Midwest and western Great Lakes in June, with above normal potential across portions of northern Nevada, southwest Idaho, eastern Oregon, and central Washington for July and August. Below normal fire potential is forecasted along the southern California coast and much of northern New Mexico and Arizona into the southern Great Basin. In June, below normal potential is expected to expand into most mountains in California, the Wasatch Mountains of Utah, and the New Mexico central mountain chain, but a small area of east-central Nevada and west-central Utah will return to normal. For July, below normal potential will continue in the Sierra and northwest California mountains, but normal potential will return to the rest of California, Southwest, and southern Great Basin. Below normal significant fire potential will continue across the southern Sierra into August.

Taking Care of Firefighters

Wildland firefighters are the backbone of our ability to protect communities and vital infrastructure from wildfires. As the size and severity of fires has grown, so too has our need for fire personnel.

In 2022, we set a goal of hiring 11,300 firefighters and we were able to reach 97% of our target. As we approach the busiest part of the 2023 fire year, the Forest Service again aspires to hire 11,300 wildland firefighters nationwide. We do not yet have final numbers at this time, but the Agency is updating hiring numbers bi-weekly and by region on our public facing website. The Fiscal Year (FY) 2024 President's budget requested funding for an additional 970 wildland firefighters. With the President's budget proposals, we are confident in our ability to increase Wildland Fire System capacity for a total of 12,270 operational firefighters in 2024. In addition, for the 2023 fire year, the Forest Service will have up to 24 next generation airtankers, more than 200 helicopters, and more than 900 engines available to manage wildfires.

Wildland fire forecasts are consistently predicting fire seasons that start sooner, end later, and are more severe throughout the nation. With this change in condition, it is imperative to ensure a robust year-round workforce available to respond at any time and also be available to undertake preventive actions like hazardous fuels management treatments during periods of low fire activity. These men and women need to be supported and equitably compensated, equipped with the latest technologies, and have a better work-life balance. As the complexity of the firefighting environment grows exponentially, our recruitment and retention of firefighters has been further complicated by our inability to offer a competitive wage for permanent and seasonal employees. Federal wages for firefighters have not kept pace with wages offered by state, local and private entities in some areas of the United States. Firefighters must be fairly paid for the grueling work they are willing to take on.

The workforce reforms proposed in the President's FY 2024 budget request and supporting legislation will increase federal and tribal firefighters' pay, invest more in their mental and physical health and wellbeing, improve their housing options, and expand the number of permanent firefighters. These reforms build on the temporary pay increase provided by the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act, also known as the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law (BIL). Thanks to BIL, more than 12,000 firefighters received a temporary pay increase of \$20,000 or 50% of base pay (whichever is less). Notably, the funding for that pay supplement will be nearly exhausted by the end of September 2023, unless Congress intervenes to avert a pay cliff. In the FY 2024 budget, we are proposing a permanent base pay increase for all firefighters. Unlike the temporary increase in BIL a permanent base pay increase is an investment in our firefighters' future, as an increase in basic pay leads to an increase in retirement benefits. Additionally, a permanent base pay increase offers a host of benefits to the U.S. Government, such as reduced turnover and lower hiring and training costs. The proposal includes a request for \$180 million in support of a special base rate salary table and incident standby pay for all responders that are mobilized to a fire assignment. We will also need Congress to pass special legislation that authorizes the new pay table.

The FY 2024 budget proposal also increases the size of the workforce at USDA and the U.S. Department of the Interior (DOI), supports additional mental and physical health services, and increases funding to house firefighters and support personnel. We recognize that addressing the housing crisis must happen now as it impacts our ability to recruit and retain our workforce. To this end, the budget proposes a \$50 million investment in housing. The USDA has convened a national working group that has identified key recommendations and is exploring innovative solutions for providing safe, affordable and sustainable housing for employees. The proposed budget also calls for an increase of \$10 million each for USDA and DOI to establish a Joint Wildland Firefighter Behavioral Health Program.

We must take better care of the people serving on the frontlines to confront our nation's wildfire crisis. Together, these efforts would help address long-standing recruitment and retention challenges. These investments, totaling \$569 million, would build on the historic reforms in the BIL and ensure the Forest Service receives the support it needs to continue meeting evolving mission demands, as both the frequency and intensity of catastrophic wildfires are expected to continue to increase.

It is time for a significant change in our federal wildland fire system that invests in the women and men that we rely on to protect communities, critical infrastructure, and our natural resources. We look forward to working with Congress to support, retain, and modernize the federal wildland fire fighter workforce. For Congressional consideration, the USDA, DOI, and the Office of Personnel Manage-

ment developed a comprehensive legislative proposal that would provide solutions to these challenges. We remain committed to working with congressional leaders on this crucial proposal.

The Risks to Forests

Long-term, we must address work on the ground to ultimately address the wildfire crisis. Nearly a quarter of the contiguous U.S. is currently in a high to moderate wildfire condition. Over the last two decades, we have witnessed what has become a now familiar pattern: bigger and more destructive wildfires that are extremely challenging and costly to suppress. We have experienced catastrophic fire seasons devastating communities and destroying resources in their wake. They threaten human health, water quality, homes, jobs, local economies, communities, and infrastructure. They also threaten key ecological services, including carbon storage, species habitat, soil stability and watershed function: in some cases, even resulting in long-term deforestation.

Vast areas of the West and across the country are at risk from huge wildfires that can quickly spread 10 to 30 miles or more, burning through multiple landownerships, forest types, and communities. Conditions are only expected to worsen as our climate continues to change, and development in the wildland urban interface continues unabated.

This growing wildfire crisis created the need for a new land management strategy—one designed to support strategic management and restoration of millions of acres of land in high-risk areas to protect forest health, watershed function, and human infrastructure. The need for increased pace and scale of restoration necessitates a holistic response in partnership with multiple agencies, State and Tribal governments, communities, industries, organizations, and private landowners.

This collaborative response needs to be a paradigm shift from small-scale, independently managed treatments to strategic, science-based landscape scale treatments that cross boundaries and meet the scale of the problem, starting initially with those places critically at risk.

The Wildfire Crisis Strategy

The Forest Service is entering our second year of carrying out our 10-year strategy for confronting the wildfire crisis in the West. Our Wildfire Crisis Strategy aims to increase science-based fuels treatments by up to four times the previous treatment levels, especially in those areas most at risk. Fuels treatments by the Forest Service, together with partners, have made a difference over the years. However, the scale of treatments is outmatched by the rapid increase in the scale and severity of wildfires as climate change accelerates. This strategy calls for treating up to 20 million additional acres of National Forest System lands over the coming decade, and working with partners, including colleagues at Interior, to treat up to 30 million additional acres on adjoining lands of multiple ownerships, while building a long-term maintenance plan. The intent for these treatments is to reduce the wildfire risk to communities, critical infrastructure, municipal water sources, and natural resources, and to restore and maintain fire-adapted landscapes so they are more resilient.

Within BIL, Congress provided a \$1.6 billion down payment that greatly assists in putting our Wildfire Crisis Strategy into action with investments on ten landscapes in eight Western States (Arizona, California, Colorado, Idaho, Montana, New Mexico, Oregon, and Washington). Through work on these landscapes and others, we completed treatments on 3.2 million acres nationally in 2022. We also accomplished these treatments, both mechanical treatments and prescribed fire, in 118 of the 250 high-priority priority fireheds identified in the Wildfire Crisis Strategy. This work was accomplished despite numerous barriers including internal staffing capacity, lack of markets for small-diameter wood, and high post-fire workloads from previous seasons. The work on these acres directly reduced risk to communities, infrastructure, and critical watersheds.

Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) funding provides the Forest Service an additional \$1.8 billion for hazardous fuels funding in the wildland-urban interface. With IRA funding, we recently selected 11 additional landscapes for treatment in seven Western States (Arizona, California, Idaho, Nevada, Oregon, Utah, and Washington). Combined with the initial investment landscapes in Arizona, California, Colorado, Idaho, Montana, New Mexico, Oregon, and Washington, our actions will span 134 of the 250 high-risk fire sheds in the western U.S., with the investment we announced in January 2023 of \$930 million on 21 landscapes. These investments will help reduce the risk of wildfire to at-risk communities, Tribal lands, critical infrastructure, utility corridors, and public water sources. We listened to our partners, the public we serve, Tribes and many others regarding what

mattered most to them, where opportunity is, and where challenges remain. Their feedback and our experience on these landscapes helped us identify both challenges to implementation and enabling conditions for future success. This work will mitigate risks to approximately 200 communities within these landscapes.

The Wildfire Crisis Strategy builds on current work and leverages congressional authorities such as those from the 2018 Farm Bill, including the Insect and Disease Categorical Exclusion, Good Neighbor Authority, the Collaborative Forest Landscape Restoration Program, Tribal Forestry Protection Act, and Cross Boundary Hazardous Fuels; congressional authorities from BIL, including, Community Wildfire Defense Grants, the fuel break categorical exclusion and emergency actions to protect public health and safety, critical infrastructure and natural resources on National Forest System lands; along with other programs and authorities such as stewardship contracting and the Joint Chiefs Landscape Restoration Program, all which have proven invaluable in our work. The Wildfire Crisis Strategy strengthens partnerships to support our work to mitigate wildfire risk and restore forest health and resiliency over the next decade.

The Forest Service is very grateful to Congress for providing the resources through BIL and the IRA to seed our initial work and put the Wildfire Crisis Strategy in motion. It is important to note that fully executing the strategy to treat 50 million acres across jurisdictions will take continued federal investment, coupled with funding and capacity delivered from States and all of our partners in this work.

The FY 2024 President's budget provides \$323 million to complement \$1.6 billion provided in the BIL and \$1.8 billion provided in the IRA to support ongoing implementation of the 10-year Wildfire Crisis Strategy. These resources would increase the scale of hazardous fuel reduction and restoration treatments within high-risk fireheds as part of the Administration's comprehensive, nationwide response to the threat of catastrophic wildfire to natural resources, communities, and infrastructure.

Conclusion

The USDA Forest Service is committed to keeping our communities and firefighters safe as fire seasons grow longer and more severe. The dedication, bravery, and professional integrity of our firefighters and support personnel is second to none. As we work with our many partners to assist communities impacted by wildfires, we are committed, through shared stewardship, to change this trend in the coming years.

We greatly appreciate the significant resources Congress has provided through the BIL and the IRA that will allow the Forest Service, with our many partners, to take the initial steps to address the wildfire crisis. This work will result in resilient landscapes that have ecologic integrity, provide essential ecosystem services including carbon storage and habitat for wildlife, and boundless opportunities for American citizens to recreate.

The Forest Service looks forward to working with this Subcommittee to continue providing world class suppression response and reducing the severity of wildfires in our country.

QUESTIONS SUBMITTED FOR THE RECORD TO JAELETH HALL-RIVERA, DEPUTY CHIEF,
STATE AND PRIVATE FORESTRY, UNITED STATES FOREST SERVICE

Questions Submitted by Representative Westerman

Question 1. The Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act provided \$600 million to increase base firefighter pay. Those funds were supposed to last until Fiscal Year 2026, yet in your testimony you share that those funds will be nearly exhausted by the end of September. How do you explain the funds being exhausted after only 2 years?

Answer. Section 40803(d)(4)(B) of the IIJA provides a supplemental salary increase of \$20,000 per year, or 50% of base salary (whichever is less), for wildland firefighters employed by the U.S. Department of Agriculture Forest Service and the U.S. Department of the Interior (DOI). The supplemental salary increase is payable upon a determination by the Secretary of each Department, in coordination with the Office of Personnel Management (OPM), that the wildland firefighter is located in an area where it is difficult to recruit or retain wildland firefighters.

A study on the recruitment and retention of wildland firefighters was carried out jointly by the DOI and Forest Service. The study analyzed the rate of employment, promotion, and resignation of firefighting positions from the agencies. This study

demonstrated that recruitment and retention issues were universal to all geographic regions, which meant that a broad application of the pay supplement provided through IJJA should be applied. The DOI and Forest Service determined that the pay supplement should be paid to all firefighting positions covered under fire retirement in all geographic areas. For the Forest Service, more than 14,000 firefighters have or are receiving the pay supplement. The Forest Service and the DOI will exhaust Bipartisan Infrastructure Law funding for the firefighter pay supplement around the end of Fiscal Year 2023.

Question 2. Last year, the House debated a Wildfire Response package on the floor that purported to boost wildland firefighter pay to \$20 per hour but did not actually provide any funding to meet that pay standard. If we fail to properly fund any new pay tables, what would be the consequences? Would there be layoffs of wildland firefighters?

Answer. If new pay requirements were to be established without funding to support those requirements, impacts would occur to the size of our wildland firefighter workforce. Efforts would be made to ensure the permanent federal workforce receives the new pay rates to the full extent possible, while hiring of temporary seasonal employees would likely need to decrease. Annual temporary seasonal hiring is a critical pipeline to building the current and future wildland firefighting workforce.

Question 3. Can you provide the amount of standing sawtimber on unreserved National Forest System lands in the lower 48 states, as identified by the Forest Inventory and Analysis program databases?

Answer. The numbers below are an estimate of standing sawtimber volume on unreserved National Forest System lands. Reserved lands are defined as National Forest System lands that are permanently prohibited from being managed to produce wood products through statute or agency mandate, such that the prohibition cannot be changed through a decision by the land manager. However, it is important to understand that standing sawtimber on unreserved land is not an indicator of the amount available or accessible for harvest. A variety of factors influence what is available and accessible, for example:

- Land Management Plans and the Management Areas, desired conditions, goals, standards and guidelines defined within them can restrict the availability of material through, for example, designations of suitable/unsuitable areas for timber harvest.
- Market factors determine what is economically accessible.
- Areas may be unsuitable due to site-specific conditions such as steep slopes, erosive soils, being too wet, etc.
- Threatened and Endangered Species and Critical Habitat designations can restrict miles of open or closed roads, impacting accessibility of an area.

Please be aware that these and other factors affect the availability of standing sawtimber volume for utilization.

Unreserved National Forest Service land Sawtimber volume (million)	estimate
Cubic-foot	211,882
Board-foot	1,312,238

Question 4. How much standing sawtimber is located on lands designated as “insect and disease treatment areas” under the Healthy Forests Restoration Act?

Answer. Estimates of sawtimber volume within insect and disease areas designated under sections 602 and 603 of the Healthy Forests Restoration Act (HFRA) were generated using Forest Inventory and Analysis plots located within HFRA areas designated on a spatial layer from the Forest Service Enterprise Data Warehouse.

Sawtimber volume on non-reserved National Forest System lands within areas designated under sections 602 and 603 of the HFRA (million) estimate: 108,335 cubic feet (1,300,072 board feet).

Question 5. One of the things the Forest Service is required to do under the National Forest Management Act is to develop Forest Plans. Among other things, these plans must include the amount of timber that could be sustainably harvested

from each National Forest System unit over the 10-year life of the Forest Plan. Can the Forest Service accurately tally the current Allowable Sale Quantity, or Permissible Timber Sale Quantity, found in current National Forest Plans, by National Forest, and aggregated both for each Forest Service Region and Nationally? Please ensure that these ASQ's/PTSQ's factor in site specific or forest specific plan amendments, whether required by court order or created by the agency.

Answer. We do not corporately track Allowable Sale Quantity (ASQ) or Permissible Timber Sale Quantity (PTSQ). These are not considered land allocations or designations. Rather, they provide a ceiling of how much volume may be cut from a particular unit per its Land Management Plan. Plans promulgated under the old 1982 Planning Rule have an ASQ calculation and PTSQ is what is calculated under the 2012 Planning Rule. ASQ and PTSQ are located within the Land Management Plans for individual National Forests and to obtain those values for each forest is not feasible in the timeline required for this response.

Question 6. Can you provide information about the number of total permits issued by the Forest Service on an annual basis? Can you also breakdown this information to include the category/type of permit these all fall under?

Answer. The Forest Service issues and administers tens of thousands of permits every year for a wide range of uses using about 150 different types of forms. For example, the agency issues about 33,000 recreation special use permits each year. In addition, the agency issued 66,000 permits and small contracts for timber removal, and over 21,000 permits for forest products other than timber. The agency also administers about 6,000 grazing permits associated with nearly 7,200 allotments across 28 states. We would be happy to follow up with any questions you might have on permits of interest.

Questions Submitted by Representative Bentz

Question 1. What role does the Professional Private Wildland Fire industry play in helping the U.S. Forest Service address the lack of resources regarding catastrophic wildfires?

Answer. The Forest Service is just one participant in the national wildland fire system that also includes our partners in the Department of the Interior, state and local governments, Tribes, and private industry. The capability brought to bear by private industry through contractual agreements with the Forest Service is essential for successful response operations across the country. The agency contracts for most of the aviation resources, many hand crews, engines, pieces of heavy equipment, and logistical services like fire camp caterers and shower services. Without these essential services and response resources, the ability to provide for a national response effort in a safe and effective manner would be significantly impacted.

Question 2. It is my understanding that the Professional Private Wildland Fire industry provides over 25,000 pieces of equipment and potentially over 20,000 trained firefighters nationally that respond to wildfires. Is this assessment accurate?

Answer. The Forest Service contracts a significant number of resources and services with private industry and is not the only entity within the wildland fire system doing so. The Department of the Interior, state, and local governments, as well as some private utilities companies and potentially other private entities, are also contracting for wildland fire support services.

All wildland firefighters that operate within the interagency wildland fire system must be qualified for the role that they perform, and those qualifications are verified before an individual can be ordered for fire response operations. The Forest Service currently estimates approximately 11,000 private contract firefighters are active nationally and approximately 17,000 pieces of equipment are available through contracts for response operations.

Question 3. The U.S. Forest Service indicated that they utilize the "closest forces" method for responding to wildfires, however several of the contracts for private wildland fire response DO NOT utilize this method such as a Type 2 Crew Contract. Can USFS describe what process is used in dispatching private resources under contract to a fire for both initial attack and extended attack?

Answer. Type 2 contract crews are not considered initial attack resources. All Type 2 contract crews are dispatched by the National Interagency Coordination Center using an established mathematical formula that considers hourly rate, mileage, and standard assignment duration. All Type 2 contract crew orders are

filled with the lowest cost, available resource able to meet a reasonable date and time needed as determined by the National Interagency Coordination Center.

Federal, state and local government work collaboratively to establish an agreed upon pre-planned dispatch protocol for ordering resources to ensure a quick response. This information is loaded into the Computer Aided Dispatch system or identified on "run cards." During initial attack, the pre-identified agency Federal, state and local government, and Tribal resources are dispatched through the Computer Aided Dispatch system containing the "pre-planned dispatch" for a particular area. The ordering process is different for extended attack. Resource requests come into the local dispatch centers who will fill the order based on skills required and availability of resources needed. Agency resources are prioritized, but contracted resources are also considered.

Question 4. Does USFS order the closest forces to the fires?

Answer. As a rule, closest forces mobilization is the most effective and cost efficient and the Forest Service seeks to use that concept for mobilization. There are exceptions. Resource mobilization is situationally based and dependent on the type of fire such as initial attack, extended attack, large fire support, or long duration fire support. For large fire and long duration fire support, agency resources may be mobilized from geographic areas further away that have low risk of fire occurrence rather than closer geographic areas experiencing higher risk and higher resource needs. Using this method, resources are moved based on the highest need and keeps local resources available in areas with fire activity to help cover local initial and extended attack fire suppression needs.

Question 5. Does USFS prioritize Service-operated resources from a greater distance over contracted resources closer to fires? What is the formula for determining least expensive versus fastest available private wildfire response units?

Answer. As a rule, closest forces mobilization is the most effective and cost efficient and the Forest Service seeks to use that concept for mobilization. There are exceptions. Resource mobilization is situationally based and dependent on the type of fire such as initial attack, extended attack, large fire support, or long duration fire support. For large fire and long duration fire support, agency resources may be mobilized from geographic areas further away that have low risk of fire occurrence rather than closer geographic areas experiencing higher risk and higher resource needs. Using this method, resources are moved based on the highest need and keeps local resources available in areas with fire activity to help cover local initial and extended attack fire suppression needs.

During an ongoing fire, the Incident Commander is responsible for developing the overall strategy and tactics for the fire, and for ordering resources accordingly. There are many factors that are considered in this process including the type, quantity, experience, and qualifications of resources necessary to achieve the identified management objectives. Current and anticipated fire behavior and the values at risk will also influence the type of resources ordered. The capability brought to bear by private industry through contractual agreements with the Forest Service is essential for successful response operations across the country.

Mr. TIFFANY. Thank you for your testimony, Ms. Hall-Rivera.

Next, we have Mr. Jeff Rupert, the Director of the Office of Wildland Fire for the Department of the Interior.

Mr. Rupert, you have 5 minutes.

STATEMENT OF JEFFERY RUPERT, DIRECTOR, OFFICE OF WILDLAND FIRE, U.S. DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR, WASHINGTON, DC

Mr. RUPERT. Thank you. Good afternoon, Chairman Tiffany, Ranking Member Neguse, and members of the Subcommittee. Thank you for the opportunity to appear before you this afternoon to provide testimony on the challenges that the Department of the Interior faces in wildland fire management ahead of the 2023 wildfire year.

The discussion today will convey Interior's most pressing wildland fire management issues and the steps we are taking to improve compensation and support for our wildland firefighting workforce, to reduce wildfire risk, and to effectively manage wild-fire response now and into the future.

Climate change continues to play an impactful role in the extreme weather that we are experiencing across the nation. A drier and hotter climate results in low fuel moisture that frequently leads to extreme conditions that produce larger and more intense wildfires. Significant precipitation over the past several months has reduced drought conditions across much of the western United States. However, drought still remains a concern in portions of Oregon and Washington, and it has expanded in much of Texas and the southern central plains.

Again, as we have seen, drought can lead to increased and more intense wildfire activity. The areas of greatest uncertainty are in places like the northern Great Basin, where heavy rain has caused vegetation growth that could fuel intense wildfires with summer heat, lightning, and wind.

We are tackling this climate crisis and working to improve the wildland fire resiliency of our nation's lands with the help of the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law. Interior received nearly \$1.5 billion in BIL funding over 5 years. That support is being used collaboratively with our partners to increase the pace and scale of fuels management treatments, to rehabilitate lands damaged by wildfires, and to increase wildland firefighter pay, as well as fund wildland fire research-related needs.

To date, Interior has allocated more than \$450 million in BIL funding, and will allocate additional BIL funds this year. Over the 5 years of BIL, we will have \$878 million available in fuels management funding to address wildfire risk in high-priority areas across the nation. Overall, coupled with annual appropriations, Interior accomplished a total of 1.9 million acres of priority wildland fire risk reduction treatment in 2022, an increase of approximately 20 percent over the prior year.

Interior's treatment goal for this year is 2 million acres. Longer, more intense fire years and the need to actively manage and reduce fuels across vast, increasingly flammable landscapes has increased the demand and pressure on our wildland fire workforce. Recruitment and retention of wildland firefighters very much continues to be an issue, and it is widely recognized that a new model is needed to provide employees with better pay, career stability, upward mobility, and a much better work-life balance.

In Fiscal Year 2021, the Administration increased pay to ensure that no wildland firefighter makes less than \$15 per hour. With the passage of BIL in 2022, Interior and the Forest Service implemented temporary pay supplements for all Federal wildland firefighters. And to continue to advance permanent wildland firefighter pay reforms and improve recruitment and retention, the President's 2024 budget request includes an increase of \$72 million to raise the base pay of Interior and tribal wildland firefighters.

To implement this pay reform, the Administration also proposes legislation to Congress that establishes a new base rate salary

table for all Federal wildland firefighters, creates a new premium pay category, and proposes a new annual pay cap.

The budget also includes funding to hire an additional 370 Interior and 55 tribal wildland firefighting personnel.

Without the additional funding and pay reforms, we are facing a firefighter pay cliff as BIL funding runs out, currently estimated to occur at the end of this Fiscal Year. This could have a devastating effect on firefighter morale, and would certainly impact Interior's ability to recruit and retain wildland firefighters.

Interior is also working jointly with the Forest Service to provide much-needed wildland firefighter mental health support. We are following the research that is showing that firefighters are at elevated risk. This past April, both Interior and Forest Service held a behavioral health and well-being summit in Boise, Idaho. The summit's results are informing the development of a joint program to provide year-round prevention, mental health support and training, provide post-traumatic stress care, enhance capacity for acute response, and create a system of trauma support services with emphasis on early intervention.

Finally, we know that the Wildland Fire Mitigation Management Commission is working hard to complete its report to Congress later this year. We look forward to seeing the Commission's recommendations, and working with partners to make overall improvements to wildland fire management.

While we recognize no single entity can solve the nation's wildfire crisis alone, the Wildland Fire Leadership Council's recently updated National Cohesive Wildland Fire Management Strategy reinforces the need for collaboration to meet today's wildland fire management challenges. And we appreciate Congress' willingness to support these efforts and help Interior effectively address the wildfire crisis so that we can work in concert with our Federal, tribal, state, and local partners to effectively protect communities, people, and resources from increasing wildfire risks.

Thank you. I am happy to answer any questions.

[The prepared statement of Mr. Rupert follows:]

PREPARED STATEMENT OF JEFFERY RUPERT, DIRECTOR, OFFICE OF WILDLAND FIRE,
U.S. DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR

Chairman Tiffany, Ranking Member Neguse, and members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony on the challenges that the Department of the Interior (Interior) faces in wildland fire management, including wildfire suppression and the wildland firefighting workforce ahead of the 2023 wildfire year. Interior appreciates the opportunity to share with the Subcommittee its ongoing proactive steps to improve compensation and support for its wildland firefighting workforce, reduce wildfire risk, and effectively manage wildfire response. We appreciate the Subcommittee's interest in these areas, and we look forward to working with you in addressing priority wildland fire management issues.

Bipartisan Infrastructure Law

The Bipartisan Infrastructure Law (BIL) provided a once-in-a-generation investment in wildland fire management that is helping to combat the climate crisis and improve the wildfire resiliency of our nation's lands. Interior is receiving nearly \$1.5 billion in BIL funding over five years for wildland fire management programs. BIL funding supports Interior's core Wildland Fire Management program. Interior's Five-Year Monitoring, Maintenance, and Treatment Plan, required by BIL, lays out a roadmap to address wildfire risk and prepare communities and ecosystems for wildfire threats.

As you will see in our testimony, Interior bureaus—Bureau of Indian Affairs, Bureau of Land Management, National Park Service, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and the U.S. Geological Survey—are using BIL funding collaboratively with our partners to increase the pace and scale of fuels management treatments, rehabilitate lands damaged by wildfires, and fund research into priority wildland fire management issues, including the impacts of climate change on wildfire, fuels management, and firefighter mental health. Through BIL, we are also increasing workforce capacity and wildland firefighter pay and supporting wildland firefighters' mental health and wellbeing. To date, Interior has allocated more than \$450 million in BIL funding and will allocate additional funds this year. We appreciate Congress' willingness to support these efforts and help Interior effectively address the wildfire crisis so that we can work in concert with our Federal, Tribal, state, and local partners to effectively protect communities, people, and resources from the increasing risks of wildfire.

2022 Fire Year

Climate change continues to play an oversized role in the extreme fire weather that we are experiencing across the nation. Drier and hotter weather results in low fuel moisture that frequently leads to extreme conditions that produce larger and more intense wildfires. In recent years, nearly every western state has experienced prolonged periods of high to extreme fire danger over substantial areas affecting hundreds of millions of acres of land. Many of these areas are in the wildland urban interface where communities in the West are increasingly exposed to wildfire.

In 2022, 68,988 wildfires burned more than 7.5 million acres nationally. The reported number of wildfires nationwide was noticeably higher than the 10-year average of 61,285, and the number of acres burned was slightly more than the 10-year average of 7.4 million acres. A total of 2,717 structures were reported destroyed by wildfires in 2022, and sadly, 25 members of the wildland firefighting community lost their lives in wildfire incidents or wildland fire management related activities across the country.

What we observed in 2022 was a more gradual movement of wildfire that started in April in Alaska and the Southwest and progressed to the Pacific Northwest and Northern Rockies in August and September, as is the more typical pattern. Additionally, significant wildfires in California occurred in succession rather than concurrently. This allowed the National Multi-Agency Coordinating Group, tasked with national-level strategic coordination, to position and concentrate wildland firefighting resources throughout the year in those geographic areas that needed them the most.

2023 Fire Year Outlook

While drought conditions across much of the western U.S. have greatly improved since last year, drought did intensify slightly in portions of central Oregon. Drought also expanded, intensified, or continues in much of Texas, central Florida, western Oklahoma, southern and western Kansas, and in portions of Nebraska. Drought can lead to increased and more intense fire activity if weather and fuels factors align with human and natural wildfire ignitions.

Above normal wildfire potential is expected in far west Texas in May before returning to normal in June. Above normal potential is also forecast across portions of the Upper Midwest and western Great Lakes in June, with above normal potential across portions of northern Nevada, southwest Idaho, eastern Oregon, and central Washington in July and August. Normal or below normal significant fire potential is expected across the rest of the country, throughout May, June, July, and August. This does not mean that there will be no large wildfires, but rather that wildfire potential will be typical for each geographic region.

The "fire season" has become extended in many parts of the country, and what was once limited to certain months of the year now encompasses an entire "fire year." While each fire year is different due to varied weather and fuel moisture factors, currently, the outlook for 2023 points to less fire activity from April through July compared to the above normal activity encountered over the same months last year. Managing a year-long season is increasingly challenging to Interior and the entire wildland fire management community.

The NMAC establishes Preparedness Levels throughout the calendar year to ensure suppression resource availability for emerging incidents across the country. The five Preparedness Levels range from the lowest (1) to the highest (5). Currently, the nation is at Preparedness Level (PL) 2, which is characterized by large wildfires occurring in several geographic areas—Eastern, Southern, Southwest, and Northern Rockies Areas—but no shortage in the availability of resources. At this time, we are supporting our firefighting partners in Canada as that nation is at PL5 with large

wildfire activity occurring in British Columbia and Alberta. Through an existing bilateral arrangement, DOI has mobilized approximately 250 wildland fire personnel to Canada where they will support ongoing wildfire suppression efforts in the western half of the country.

Interior Wildland Firefighting Preparedness

As always, the success of our wildland fire management program is predicated on the unparalleled coordination with our interagency, Tribal, and state partners. These partnerships are vital to the Interior's success in carrying out its stewardship responsibilities, particularly fuels management work and essential restoration efforts; they are also integral to the interoperable approach that is the hallmark of the nation's response to wildfires.

Currently, Interior is in a ready-state and all preparations are in place for the fire year, though as is typical some wildland fire management hiring will continue into June, due to the seasonal nature of hiring, training, and preparedness. This year, Interior plans to have 5,800 federal and 500 Tribal wildland firefighting and support personnel available for response efforts. This includes 162 smokejumpers, 20 interagency hotshot crews, and four Tribal hotshot crews. In combination with our partners in the Department of Agriculture Forest Service (USFS), approximately 17,000 Federal and Tribal wildland fire personnel will be ready for fire suppression activities in 2023. Additionally, we have a surge capacity of up to 32,000 personnel, which includes Administratively Determined emergency hires and other non-wildland fire management DOI and USFS employees who maintain wildland fire qualifications.

Interior will have over 870 pieces of specialized equipment available for wildfire suppression, including engines, water tenders, dozers, and other equipment. Aviation assets play a critical role in efforts to manage wildfires, including single engine air tankers, water scoopers, Type 1, 2, and 3 helicopters, and other contracted aviation resources. These assets complement other Federal, Tribal, state, and local resources, as well as those specifically made available by rural fire districts. Together, these assets form the foundation of an interoperable, collaborative approach to joint wildland firefighting.

Challenges Facing Wildland Fire Management

Interior faces unique wildland fire management challenges. Most Interior-managed public lands are comprised of non-forested shrub and grass ecosystems. Over the past two decades, 54 percent of wildfire acres burned in the continental U.S. occurred on shrublands and grasslands. On Interior-managed lands, more than 70 percent of wildfire acres occurred on non-forested vegetation types. More than 7 million acres of land administered by Interior are identified as having a very high or high likelihood of exposure to wildfire, according to the USFS wildfire hazard potential data.

Nevertheless, Interior manages large tracts of forest lands, particularly in western Oregon and some other western states. Many of these lands are of cultural importance to Tribes, so it is important that we address wildfire risk in these areas to benefit and support Tribal communities. Some of these forested lands include the iconic giant sequoias—which wildfires devastated in 2020 and 2021, killing more than 10 percent of giant sequoias larger than four feet in diameter on lands managed by the National Park Service and the Tule River Tribe.

Invasive plants, which can make landscapes more flammable, are present in many of these ecosystems. Cycles of invasion are intensifying wildfire occurrence and result in increasing invasive plants that are impacting vast areas of the western U.S. Because of the fire and invasives cycle, many western ecosystems are experiencing too much wildfire compared to historical fire regimes. Suppressing wildfires in these ecosystems is costly, and these fast-moving fires put communities, people, and wildland firefighters at risk. Interior is working to conserve ecosystems that are currently not impacted by invasive plants while restoring ecological balance in ecosystems where invasive plants are changing the landscape and increasing wildfire risk.

Fuels Management & Post Wildfire Recovery

BIL funding totaling \$878 million over five years along with base Fuels Management program funding has supported Interior's efforts to address wildfire risk across the nation in high priority areas. Interior is focused on managing landscapes to reduce wildfire risk, improve wildfire resiliency, and promote fire-adapted communities. Overall, Interior achieved a total of 1.9 million acres of priority wildfire risk reduction treatments in 2022, an increase of approximately 20 percent from 2021. Our treatment goal for this year is a combined 2 million acres of treatments.

By increasing fuels treatments, Interior is working to mitigate its wildfire management challenges and advance wildfire resiliency, improve firefighter and public safety, protect communities, and boost local economies. To address these challenges, Interior conducts a wide variety of fuels management projects, including mechanical, chemical, biological, and prescribed fire treatments. Fuels treatment options can often be limited in desert and rangeland landscapes where invasive plants are contributing to an increasing threat and more frequent wildfire.

BIL funding is also supporting Interior's advancement of cross-boundary collaboration with the USFS, Tribes, states, and private landowners. Interior is funding work that reduces wildfire risk on non-Federal lands while also restoring habitats by providing \$23.7 million to support fuels treatments through the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Partners for Fish and Wildlife and Coastal programs. This funding will enable 24 fuels management projects in 13 states, including Arizona, California, Florida, Idaho, Maine, Mississippi, Nebraska, New Mexico, Oregon, Texas, Utah, Washington, and Wyoming. Additionally, Interior is expanding support for Reserved Treaty Rights Lands (RTRL) projects. By treaty, Tribes retain ancestral rights for religious and cultural hunting, fishing, and gathering activities on these lands although they are commonly managed by Federal agencies. Through the RTRL program, Interior is providing additional BIL funding to conduct fuels management on these lands in support of Tribal cultural activities.

Interior is also using BIL investments to expand post-fire restoration activities in high priority areas working with partners across boundaries. This involves investing in critical infrastructure, post-fire monitoring and evaluation, and storing plant materials essential to restore native vegetation. Interior is also increasing post-fire debris flow emergency assessments. In 2022, Interior completed more than 360,000 acres of post-fire emergency stabilization and priority burned area rehabilitation actions using BIL funding, disaster relief funding, and regular appropriations. This includes more than 75,000 acres of emergency stabilization and 285,000 acres of burned area rehabilitation, including more than 169,000 acres to control invasive species and accelerate the recovery of forests and rangelands after a wildfire.

Wildland Firefighter Workforce Reforms

Longer, more intense fire years, and the need to actively manage and reduce fuels across a vast, more flammable landscape, have increased pressure on the wildland fire workforce. In the past, Interior has relied more heavily on a temporary workforce. Currently, wildland fire suppression and fuels management work require significantly more permanent employees to address the year-round nature of wildfire and the on-going need to increase the pace and scale of fuels treatments. This increasingly complex wildland fire environment requires a professional workforce that is positioned to meet these needs year-round.

The demands on the wildland fire workforce continue to grow as the complexity and need for more active management increases. Many wildland firefighters are currently challenged to take time off for family events and other life occurrences because the current workforce lacks enough qualified individuals to fill behind them. Concurrently, federal and Tribal wildland fire wages have not kept pace with some industry competitors, such as California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection or CAL FIRE. In many communities, entry to mid-level fire position wages at the federal, Tribal, and state levels are not competitive with private-sector opportunities. Housing costs have also risen rapidly across the West; in certain geographic areas many wildland fire personnel may find it difficult to afford rent or home purchases on their current wages. These issues are compounding wildland fire workforce challenges, including the ability to recruit new employees and retain qualified wildland fire personnel.

It is widely recognized in the wildland fire community and elsewhere that a new model is needed to provide employees with career stability and upward mobility, support a better work-life balance, and promote long-term wildland fire or resource management careers.

In FY 2021, the Administration implemented temporary pay supplements to ensure that no wildland firefighter makes less than \$15 per hour. With the passage of BIL in 2022, Interior and the USFS implemented temporary special pay supplements for federal wildland firefighters. These payments have had a significant positive impact on firefighters' morale and their abilities to achieve a reasonable wage for the arduous work that they perform. To continue to advance wildland firefighter pay reforms, and improve recruitment and retention rates, the President's FY 2024 Budget request includes an increase of \$72 million to raise the base pay of DOI and Tribal wildland firefighters. To implement the pay reform, the Administration transmitted legislation to Congress that:

- Establishes a special base rate salary table for all Federal wildland firefighters that will permanently increase their pay.
- Creates a new premium pay category that provides all incident responders with additional compensation for all hours they are mobilized on an incident.
- Proposes a new annual pay cap with additional authority for a Secretarial waiver if specific criteria are met in any given year.
- Allows periods of paid rest and recuperation leave following the completion of service during certain wildland fire activities.

The budget also includes funding to hire an additional 370 federal and 55 Tribal wildland firefighting personnel, which builds on a \$29 million increase that Interior received in FY 2021 to support Interior's Workforce Transformation Initiative. Since then, Interior has added more than 250 permanent wildland fire positions and continues to increase its firefighting workforce. Without the additional funding for firefighter pay that is requested in FY 2024 and the accompanying legislative proposals, we are facing a firefighter pay cliff as the BIL supplemental pay funding is estimated to run out at the end of this FY. We look forward to working with Congress on these proposals.

Additionally, the President's FY 2024 Budget requests an increase of \$22 million in the Facilities program to provide housing for wildland fire personnel. This increase will go to repair, renovate, and construct new housing for wildland fire personnel as they continue to encounter limited or unaffordable housing options in certain geographic locations.

Wildland Firefighter Mental Health and Wellbeing

Research indicates that firefighters are at an elevated risk for negative mental health impacts due to their work environment and the increased, year-round wild-fire management and risk-reduction needs. Interior is committed to supporting our wildland firefighters, who work in arduous, stressful environments.

Using BIL funding, Interior and the USFS have initiated work to establish a program to address mental health needs, including post-traumatic stress disorder care, for permanent, temporary, seasonal, and year-round wildland firefighters. By streamlining and expanding existing mental health programs, Interior is working to better support firefighter resilience, improve mental preparedness, and address the effects from cumulative stress. This initiative will create a bridge between existing programs, consider additional prevention and training program needs, enhance Critical Incident Stress Management capacity, and further develop early intervention trauma support services.

In April, Interior and the USFS held a wildland firefighter mental health and wellbeing summit in Boise, Idaho. Currently, both agencies are assessing the needs and recommendations that were discussed at the summit to develop a mental health and wellbeing program framework. Work will continue with stakeholders, mental health professionals, and a variety of partners to further expand our mental health program and build an environment that focuses on wildland fire professionals' wellbeing.

The President's FY 2024 Budget request also includes an increase of \$10 million each for Interior and the USFS to establish a Joint Wildland Firefighter Behavioral Health Program. The program will further support firefighters by establishing year-round prevention and mental health support training, providing post-traumatic stress care, enhancing capacity for acute response, and creating a system of trauma support services with an emphasis on early intervention.

Conclusion

Thank you for this opportunity to share Interior's latest wildland fire management efforts with the Subcommittee. Wildland fire management is changing rapidly as a result of climate change, increased fire activity, and vast landscape transformations. Interior continues to adapt to this changing environment. We appreciate the Congress' continued support and look forward to working with you as we address these critical program and workforce issues.

This concludes my statement. I welcome any questions you may have.

QUESTIONS SUBMITTED FOR THE RECORD TO JEFF RUPERT, DIRECTOR, OFFICE OF
WILDLAND FIRE, DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR

Mr. Rupert did not submit responses to the Committee by the appropriate deadline for inclusion in the printed record.

Questions Submitted by Representative Westerman

Question 1. Director Rupert, I think that one of the biggest components of addressing this wildfire crisis is transparency in the amount of fuels reduction treatments actually being accomplished. Despite the fact that DOI is statutorily obligated to report its annual hazardous fuels reduction treatments to Congress annually, your agency has failed to do so and has not publicly posted this information anywhere. Attempts to get this information have gone unanswered for months.

1a) Why is DOI failing to properly report its hazardous fuels reduction treatments to Congress despite being statutorily obligated to do so?

1b) When does the agency plan to come into compliance with the law?

1c) How many acres of land did DOI treat last year to reduce hazardous fuels?

Question 2. Does the Bureau of Land Management's "Conservation and Landscape Health" rule recognize that active forest management is conservation?

Question 3. In briefings between Committee staff and BLM staff, it has been made clear that there is a difference in the way BLM is defining conservation broadly versus how it is defining conservation for the purposes of conservation leases. Can you please explain the discrepancy between these definitions?

Question 4. The Committee has heard concerns that Tribal firefighters operating under "638" contracts have not been considered federal firefighters and have not received the same pay raises federal firefighters received under the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law. What is the Department of the Interior doing to address this pay parity issue?

Question 5. Can you provide information about the number of total permits issued by DOI on an annual basis? Can you also breakdown this information to include the category/type of permit these all fall under?

Question 6. What effects do prior fuels reduction treatments have on wildland firefighting strategy?

Question 7. Are areas that received prior fuels reduction treatments considered more safe or less safe compared to untreated areas when evaluating where to send wildland firefighters battling a wildfire?

Question 8. DOI's testimony states that the agency plans to employ 5,800 federal and 500 Tribal wildland firefighting personnel this year.

8a) Of this total, how many federal and Tribal firefighting personnel has the agency hired as of May 16, 2023?

8b) What hiring events does the agency plan to conduct for the remainder of the year to hire additional firefighting personnel?

8c) What effect, if any, is DOI seeing on the expiration of bonuses provided under the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law on firefighter retention and recruitment?

Question 9. What role does the use of aerial fire retardant play in DOI's fire suppression operations?

Question 10. What would be the agency's projections on the upcoming fire year if the agency could no longer use aerial fire retardant?

Question 11. In light of the new inventory of mature and old-growth forests, can you please provide information about how many acres of BLM land that meet your new mature and old-growth definition framework have burned in wildfires in the last 10 years?

Question 12. Why was the inventory of mature and old-growth forests limited to Bureau of Land Management and Forest Service forests, and not to the other federal agencies that manage forests like the National Park Service and the Fish and Wildlife Service?

Question 13. How much BLM and DOI staff time was used to develop the mature and old-growth inventory?

Question 14. Why is it important to manage forests to have a diversity of age classes?

Question 15. Can you please explain the importance of early successional forests?

Question 16. Is the term "mature forest" a recognized term in the scientific practice of forestry?

Question 17. In the BLM and Forest Service's report on old growth, the report states that "narrative frameworks" are going to inform the "policy and practice of forest management" for old growth. The report also includes the following quote: "The role of place attachment or identity, meaning "the symbolic importance of a place as a repository for emotions and relationships that give meaning and purpose to life" may also be particularly relevant in our understanding of how people relate to and value old-growth forests."

Is the BLM planning to manage old growth forests based on vague concepts like "place identity" instead of scientific forest management practices?

Question 18. How much of the direct work at the BLM unit level is planning and assessment to include the preparation of environmental review documents under NEPA?

Question 19. How much did DOI spend last year on planning or environmental review costs for meeting the requirements of applicable laws generally?

Question 20. How many staff hours did DOI spend last year on planning or environmental review costs for meeting the requirements of applicable laws?

Question 21. The Forest Service has provided regular, public updates regarding the implementation of its 10-year strategy and the investments made under such strategy. DOI has not made similar information available. When does DOI plan to publish a status update regarding its 5-year strategy?

Question 22. How many communities are adjacent to DOI lands that are at risk of experiencing a wildfire that would destroy structures were it to spread from DOI lands to the nearby community?

Question 23. How has DOI utilized direct hire authority for wildland firefighters? Has this been a helpful tool for the agency?

Question 24. What is the average amount of time it takes DOI to hire a wildland firefighter without direct hire authority?

Question 25. What is the average amount of time it takes DOI to hire a wildland firefighter with direct hire authority?

Question 26. What is the process for federal wildland firefighters who wish to switch their employment from DOI to the Forest Service, or vice versa?

Question 27. Has DOI conducted an inventory on any underutilized buildings on DOI lands that could be converted into housing for wildland firefighters if the necessary deferred maintenance is addressed?

Question 28. Are there any restrictions on using Great American Outdoors Act funding to address deferred maintenance on underutilized buildings on DOI lands that could be converted into housing for wildland firefighters?

Mr. TIFFANY. Thank you, Mr. Rupert.

I will now recognize the Ranking Minority Member, Mr. Neguse. Mr. Neguse, you have 5 minutes.

**STATEMENT OF THE HON. JOE NEGUSE, A REPRESENTATIVE
IN CONGRESS FROM THE STATE OF COLORADO**

Mr. NEGUSE. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I very much appreciate the courtesy, my apologies for the delay.

I am glad to be here today to discuss an issue that is critically important to my district and to my state, the state of Colorado, and certainly to many of my colleagues' districts here on this

Committee, and I appreciate the testimony from both of our witnesses.

As many of you know, I represent the 2nd District in Colorado, and I am honored to represent a beautiful congressional district filled with public lands such as Rocky Mountain National Park, Arapaho and Roosevelt National Forests, and the Routt National Forest. My district also, unfortunately, has suffered three of the largest and most destructive wildfires in the history of Colorado just in the span of 2 years.

We know firsthand in Colorado the impacts of these devastating disasters on our communities, many that are still working to recover. Just by way of example, the Marshall Fire, which took place in Boulder County, was the most destructive fire in the history of Colorado. It happened in December 2021, New Year's Day, or New Year's Eve, I should say. Over 1,000 structures burned, and we tragically lost the lives of two members of our communities.

I know that we also have the Mayor of Paradise, California here with us today, who will be testifying on the second panel, I believe, and I want to thank the Mayor for joining us to share their experience and that of their community during and after the Camp Fire.

Wildfire has become a major focus for many of us here in Congress, myself included, and certainly has been the focus of this Subcommittee in the prior Congress. I was proud to start and co-found the bipartisan Wildfire Caucus with my good colleague, Representative Curtis from Utah. I didn't recognize him today with his new goatee there, but nonetheless, I am grateful to co-chair the effort with him. I see he has left, but you will see him when he gets back.

We made great strides in the 117th Congress in that caucus, as well as working with the U.S. Forest Service and the Department of the Interior with the funding and resources that they need to address the wildfire crisis. We held several Subcommittee hearings on wildfire suppression and mitigation, workforce capacity, and promoting community resilience. And I am grateful to the Chairman for hosting a hearing in that vein today.

It is important for us to contextually remember some of the investments that were made. And, of course, both of our witnesses testified to some of these. For example, we provided \$28 billion to the Department of the Interior and \$5.5 billion to the Forest Service in the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law to address drought, wildland fire management, and preparing for extreme weather events. This included authorizing the Joint Chiefs Landscape Restoration Partnership Program, which I was proud to champion, a program that reduces wildfire risk and supports communities.

As was mentioned, we also secured a pay raise, a long-awaited and long-overdue pay raise for Federal wildland firefighters as part of the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law. We built on these investments through the Inflation Reduction Act, which provided funding for wildfire management and workforce needs, ecosystem restoration, and invested in our nation's Conservation Corps workforce. These investments made by House Democrats in the 117th Congress are key to supporting the important work of Federal agencies and local communities to reduce wildfire risk and address

the critical workforce and staff capacity that USFS and DOI have frequently identified as major barriers.

Finally, on the legislative front, it bears mentioning that just last week, I introduced my bicameral bill, Tim's Act, which builds on the investments we secured in the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law. It would increase firefighter pay benefits to provide these public servants with the benefits they work so hard to earn on behalf of the American people, the many sacrifices they make, and address the firefighter pay cliff, that was referenced earlier during your testimony. That bill was bipartisan, I should say, in the last Congress. Liz Cheney, a Congresswoman and my neighbor to the north from the state of Wyoming, was our co-lead. I hope that I can convince one of my Republican colleagues here on the other side of the aisle to support us on this legislation again, which is common sense and would honor wildland firefighters across the country, and I look forward to talking more about that this afternoon.

Finally, in closing, let me just say that wildfires continue to increase in severity and intensity throughout the United States. As has been repeated often in this Committee, we no longer have fire seasons, we have fire years in the Rocky Mountain West. The scale of the challenge of the crisis that faces the Rocky Mountain West and, more broadly, the western United States necessitates a whole-of-government approach, which is why I am looking forward to the conversation today to improve our wildfire preparedness and support the firefighting workforce.

And with that, Mr. Chairman, I yield back.

Mr. TIFFANY. Thank you to the Ranking Member.

I will now recognize the Full Committee Chairman, Mr. Westerman, for his opening statement.

STATEMENT OF THE HON. BRUCE WESTERMAN, A REPRESENTATIVE IN CONGRESS FROM THE STATE OF ARKANSAS

Mr. WESTERMAN. Thank you, Chairman Tiffany, and thank you to the witnesses for being here today.

This hearing covers a very important topic, and I hope everybody in the House and the Senate on both sides of the aisle can come together this Congress so we can enact real change, so that we can do something different than what we have done in the past.

I think one of the biggest misconceptions about forestry, when we talk about management, is that there is not any management. And I have always said we have always been managing. Because when you are talking about a dynamic, living organism like a forest, no management is management. We can't run from it. The decisions we make affect the forest, whether we say it is going to be hands off or whether we say we are going to follow the science and do something proactive.

And we also, I think, in Congress look at problems backwards sometimes. We should be looking at what is causing these fires, not just how do we spend more money to pay firefighters, to buy more equipment, to increase budgets. Why don't we look at what causes the fires on the front end, and maybe we will have more money to pay the firefighters that we need and spend our money wisely in prevention, instead of having to spend so much money putting fires

out, saving lives, things that are very worthwhile and needed, but if we would do better planning on the front end, I think we could save a lot more money, and a lot more lives, and a lot more assets on the back end. So, that is why hearings like this are important.

The Forest Service has identified thousands of communities across the West at being of risk of experiencing fires at the same level as the Camp Fire, which we all know leveled the town of Paradise. How many more of these Paradise, California-style fires must occur before we actually do the right thing and start taking preventative measures?

I have a friend, Joe Fox, he is a state forester back in Arkansas, and he has this saying that trees are the answer; now, what is your question? And I really like the way Joe puts that, because this shouldn't be a partisan issue. If you care about clean air and clean water, you should care about forest management. If you care about the climate and carbon, you should support forest management. If you care about wildlife habitat or protecting endangered species, then you should care about forest management. If you care about affordable and environmentally-friendly housing and commercial construction, you should support forest management. If you support new technologies for carbon sink positive energy and innovative products that can greatly benefit everything from food production to advanced manufacturing, then you should care about forest management.

In short, trees are the answer to many of the questions that we are asking ourselves today. And the reality is, if we just followed the science, our forests would be in much better condition than they are now. We have over-regulated our public forests so much to the point where Federal land managers can't follow the science anymore.

There is a huge disconnect between what people on the ground tell us when we go out into the field and the conversations that we have back here in DC. Where land managers in the field tell us they need streamlined and simple authorities, folks who haven't spent much time in the forest say it is unnecessary.

That is part of the reason why I am leading a bipartisan trip this week to the Yale Forest. This forest, which is probably the oldest managed forest in the country, the same forest where Gifford Pinchot started the forestry school there, it has been managed for over 120 years, and it has never had a NEPA analysis on it. But I hope we all get to go there and look at it, and people can look at the results on the ground and tell me why that can't work on our Federal lands.

I am hoping that this hearing today, the trip to Yale, and other field trips and conversations can help us talk about the interconnected issues between forest management, wildland fire suppression, and ultimately, wildland firefighter well-being. We owe it to our forests, we owe it to our communities like Paradise, and the brave men and women serving as wildland firefighters to try to find solutions that will rise to the occasion of truly confronting our wildfire crisis.

I believe this is a man-made crisis. You can talk about warming temperatures and a drier environment, but we still can manage for that.

It is also important to carefully examine potential solutions through the regular order process, which is why I am grateful that we are having this hearing today. We can see the effects of not having bipartisan hearings, which has already been mentioned. We are facing the pay cliff that was set up by Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act funding that was supposed to pay for firefighters is set to expire after only 2 years.

That was the largest infrastructure bill in the history of the world, \$1.2 trillion of infrastructure spending. It never went through a single Committee hearing in the House, not one. I am on the Transportation and Infrastructure Committee. We never had a hearing on that bill. That is why it is important to go through regular order to have true bipartisan conversations and to address these challenges.

And with the testimony that we have to hear today and, hopefully, the work that we do going forward, we will make meaningful progress in these areas. Again, thank you, and I yield back.

Mr. TIFFANY. Yes, thank you, Chairman Westerman. And I suspect there is still space for the Yale trip at the end of the week, if anyone wants to join you. Is that accurate?

Mr. WESTERMAN. More than welcome.

Mr. TIFFANY. Next, we are going to turn to Members' questions, and we will start with the gentleman from California, Mr. McClintock.

Mr. MCCLINTOCK. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Ms. Hall-Rivera, a few years ago I toured the footprint of the King Fire. You could literally tell the boundaries between the private and public lands just by looking at the condition of the forests on each side of the boundary line. The private lands had been completely salvaged 5 years later, completely replanted, and a young, green, growing young forest was thriving. Right next to it, on the public lands, there had been no salvage. The landscape was littered with fire-killed timber, much of it falling on 8 feet of brush that had grown up, making a perfect fire stack for a second-generation fire. And, in fact, when the Caldor Fire hit a portion of the public footprint last year, it completely exploded out of control, according to the firefighters that were battling it. Why is that?

Ms. HALL-RIVERA. Thank you, Congressman, for that question, and you are absolutely right that in many areas we haven't been able to get to that post-fire work or get to the fuels treatments that we need to be doing.

Mr. MCCLINTOCK. You haven't been able to, but SPI, the private landowner, did. Why is that?

Ms. HALL-RIVERA. Well, sir, I would say that in the past it was primarily a result of capacity challenges that we have and funding challenges.

Mr. MCCLINTOCK. SPI is one of the biggest land, in fact, it is the biggest landholder in the United States next to the Federal Government. So, why is it they can do simple tasks of replanting and restoring a forest that seems to be beyond the capacity of the Federal Government?

Ms. HALL-RIVERA. Well, we are certainly looking to scale up those kinds of fuel treatments and post-fire work with the investments that we are making.

Mr. MCCLINTOCK. But why is it? Why the difference? We used to be able to, we used to salvage the lands and replant them after a fire. We used to do exactly what the private landowners do. Why aren't we doing that anymore?

Ms. HALL-RIVERA. Well, sir, we do salvage sales in some places, but we do have different challenges than private landowners.

Mr. MCCLINTOCK. Only on hazard trees. And you know perfectly well it now takes 2 years under NEPA and the other environmental laws on a fast track to approve timber salvage. And by then, the fire-killed trees have lost all their commercial value. That is why you can't auction them. And it is not because of some act of God, it is because of acts of government. It is specifically because of these laws that we passed and refuse to modify.

So, tell me, why is it, again, that these forest owners can maintain their tracks in a healthy condition and they make money, a lot of money, doing that, and yet the Federal Government loses money managing the very same lands.

Ms. HALL-RIVERA. Yes, that is accurate, sir. Many times that is the case. And like I said, that is why we are making the investments in fuels treatments in our wildfire crisis strategy, using all the funding and all the tools that we have received from Congress. And we are happy to work with you on any more of those tools.

Mr. MCCLINTOCK. Yes, I know you are putting a lot more money into fighting fires, because you have allowed the Federal forests to become morbidly, catastrophically overgrown, and now they are doing what a forest does when it chokes itself to death. They are succumbing to disease, pestilence, drought, and ultimately to catastrophic wildfire. Am I missing anything?

Ms. HALL-RIVERA. Well, like I said, sir, we are focused on taking the funding that we do have and the tools that we do have, and using that to focus and accelerate fuels treatments wherever we can and cooperate with our partners in doing that.

Mr. MCCLINTOCK. But you are missing the point, I think. I am trying to drive this home to you. Private landowners not only manage their lands properly, salvage their lands after a fire, and make a great deal of money doing it, while the Federal Government abandons its lands after a fire and loses money on any timber-thinning project that it undertakes today. We used to make money doing that, didn't we?

Ms. HALL-RIVERA. Yes, we did.

Mr. MCCLINTOCK. Didn't we used to send foresters out into the forest, mark off excess timber, then auction it to logging companies that would remove that excess timber and pay us for it?

Ms. HALL-RIVERA. Yes. We still do that, sir.

Mr. MCCLINTOCK. But it now costs us money.

Ms. HALL-RIVERA. In some places, yes.

Mr. MCCLINTOCK. That is the difference. It now costs us money because the cost of these studies exceeds the value of the timber. And in those days, when we were efficiently managing the forests, before we put these idiotic laws in place, a quarter of the revenues from the timber auctions went to the communities that were directly impacted, and the other 75 percent went back to the Forest Service to reinvest in our lands.

Wouldn't it be a good idea to go back to the policies that worked, instead of continuing to defend the policies that don't?

Ms. HALL-RIVERA. Yes, we absolutely agree with you that active management is a critical part of our work to do to reduce the wildfire crisis strategy.

Mr. MCCLINTOCK. Well, my suggestion is maybe you ought to start doing it.

I will yield back.

Mr. TIFFANY. The gentleman yields. I recognize the gentlewoman from California, Ms. Porter.

Ms. PORTER. Thank you very much.

In recent years, California has seen some of the biggest wildfires in state history. Fortunately, we have some of the best wildland firefighters in the world at CAL FIRE, the U.S. Forest Service, and the Department of the Interior. We owe our wildland firefighters a debt of gratitude. They put their lives on the line to keep our communities safe. But the lack of support that they are given has left agencies scrambling to find and retain workers, all without the benefits and financial support that they need.

I have continuously sounded this alarm in hearings, in interviews, in press conferences, through the support of legislation including my co-leadership of Tim's Act, that Congress needs to do its part to give our firefighters what they need.

Ms. Hall-Rivera, can you name a few barriers to the recruitment and retention of wildland firefighters?

Ms. HALL-RIVERA. Yes. Thank you for that, Congresswoman, and thank you for your work on behalf of our wildland firefighters.

I would say our biggest barriers to recruiting and retaining firefighters has been a lack of pay parity or, essentially, the low pay that they receive for doing this grueling and hazardous work. The BIL supplement has been helpful. It is a bridge. But what we need is to permanently enact a pay increase so that we can give certainty not only to our current wildland firefighters, but those that we are trying to attract into this profession, that they can make a living wage and support their families doing this work.

Ms. PORTER. I really appreciate that strong answer. You would agree that the pay bump that you mentioned under the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law has been helpful in retaining our firefighters?

Ms. HALL-RIVERA. Yes, Congresswoman, I would agree, and I have heard that directly from firefighters, that it has been helpful. But once again, we need a permanent solution.

Ms. PORTER. When is that funding expected to expire?

Ms. HALL-RIVERA. For the Forest Service, we are expected to spend all of that money by the end of this Fiscal Year, September 2023.

Ms. PORTER. So, September 2023. And, of course, we don't have a wildfire season, we have year-round wildfires. We heard about firefighters and fires, terrible fires, Marshal Fire and others that are in the fall and into the winter. We are inching closer to a pay cliff, so we need to permanently raise wildland firefighter base pay if we are going to maintain this consistent workforce.

You mentioned in your testimony, Ms. Hall-Rivera, that Congress will need to pass special legislation that supports a special base rate salary table and incident standby pay for all

responders. If Congress fails to do that and address this inadequate pay situation, what is going to happen at the end of Fiscal Year 2023 in September?

Ms. HALL-RIVERA. Well, Congresswoman, what I am very concerned about is that we will lose our firefighters. They will leave for other higher-paying jobs. We are hearing from our union even now that 30 to 50 percent of our firefighters in the Forest Service could leave if we go over that pay cliff, and that would certainly be of great concern to all of us and all of you, I know, who depend on these firefighters to help protect communities in your state and do the critical forest management work that we need, as well.

Ms. PORTER. And as we have seen in the last several budget years, if we have a continuing resolution, Federal employees cannot receive a raise in base pay across the board during a continuing resolution. So, it is urgent that we address this.

As you know, we are about to default if we don't pass legislation to address our current debt limit. And we are only now beginning to mark up appropriations packages that Republicans have said will cut domestic funding. Can you please tell this Committee why Congress should not let politics get in the way of stabilizing the wildland firefighter workforce?

Ms. HALL-RIVERA. Well, Congresswoman, I think we can all agree that it is critical that we continue to pay our firefighters and pay them what they are worth, and that is not a partisan issue.

Ms. PORTER. And how many Forest Service firefighters are currently hired for this year?

Ms. HALL-RIVERA. We have a little over 9,000 firefighters on board right now.

Ms. PORTER. And how many do you need?

Ms. HALL-RIVERA. We aspire to have 11,300 firefighters. That is not what we need. We need more than that, and that is why the 2024 budget requests funding for an additional 970 firefighters.

Ms. PORTER. How long is it going to take you to get from the 9,000 you have as of today to the 11,300 which is the maximum that you can support under the funding that you have?

Ms. HALL-RIVERA. If we meet that goal, which we are, I would say, cautiously optimistic we will get to, that time of year is usually late June or early July when we have all of our firefighters on board.

Ms. PORTER. Can we count on there not being a fire until late June or early July?

Ms. HALL-RIVERA. Absolutely not, Congresswoman. That is why we have the 9,000 that we have on board now. We also depend on other employees in the Forest Service who are red-carded, or who have fire qualifications.

Ms. PORTER. Thank you. The last thing I want to flag in my remaining time is you mentioned these numbers are available on your website.

Ms. HALL-RIVERA. Yes.

Ms. PORTER. And I was able to eventually find them. But the link, www.fs.fed.us/wildlandfire, doesn't work.

Ms. HALL-RIVERA. OK, we will get that fixed, Congresswoman.

Ms. PORTER. Thank you. I yield back.

Mr. TIFFANY. The gentlewoman yields. I now recognize the gentleman from Minnesota, Mr. Stauber, for 5 minutes.

Mr. STAUBER. Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Ms. Hall-Rivera, thank you for joining us today. Tomorrow, on this Committee we are going to mark up my good friend Mr. Rosendale's Forest Information Reform Act, which fixes the *Cottonwood* decision. When Deputy Director French was before this Subcommittee not too long ago, he discussed how the expiration of the temporary fix to the misguided *Cottonwood* decision could lead to lengthy ESA reconsultation on numerous forest plans. As you know, Mr. Rosendale's H.R. 200 would fix this issue.

But before the President signs that bill into law, as we enter this horrible wildfire season, can you discuss how this onerous process could impact needed forestry projects that mitigate fuel on our forest floors?

Ms. HALL-RIVERA. Yes, thank you for that question, Congressman. And we want to work with you on the solution to *Cottonwood*. I know our Chief and Deputy Chiefs have testified on that many times. As I understand it, we have 87 land management plans that could be impacted if the fix is not enacted.

Mr. STAUBER. And then can we expect any other further delays?

Ms. HALL-RIVERA. I am sorry, sir. Delays in what?

Mr. STAUBER. In the forest plans being implemented.

Ms. HALL-RIVERA. This is not my area of expertise in the agency, but I would expect that if we had to re-consult on plans, there would be a delay. Yes, sir.

Mr. STAUBER. Yes. Can you give us an idea of how long of a delay?

Ms. HALL-RIVERA. Well, I believe I have heard our Deputy Chief for the National Forest System say 1 to 2 years, in some cases, could be the delay.

Mr. STAUBER. OK, 1 to 2 years, thank you. And I have asked similar questions to Chief Moore, as well. But we need to update the Good Neighbor Authority so counties can retain receipts for completing contracts on Federal lands, whether it be in the farm bill or a stand-alone. I think the Good Neighbor Authority is important, and I think the counties need to be reimbursed for their efforts.

Ms. Hall-Rivera, I appreciate your reference to Good Neighbor Authority briefly in your written testimony. Can you share how allowing counties to retain revenues would benefit forest health and help to mitigate wildfires?

Ms. HALL-RIVERA. Yes, sir. Allowing counties and tribes to share their revenues, we believe, would increase their participation and make this a tool that has been very successful even more effective.

Mr. STAUBER. Thank you very much. And with my remaining time, I will yield to the gentleman from Wisconsin for the last 2 minutes and 30 seconds.

Mr. TIFFANY. The gentleman yields. Next, I will recognize the gentlewoman from California, Ms. Kamlager-Dove.

Ms. KAMLAGER-DOVE. Thank you, Mr. Chair, and thank you both for attending this hearing today.

Director Rupert, the most recent national climate assessment predicts increased incidences of wildfires in the West as tempera-

tures soar and droughts lengthen. You mentioned the oversized role that climate change continues to play in the extreme weather we have been experiencing across the country, including my state of California. As the fire season continues to extend year round, how is the Office of Wildland Fire accounting for climate change and ensuring the utilization of science when developing fire prevention policies?

Mr. RUPERT. Thank you for the question. As you stated, the impact and the role of climate in the occurrence and increasing intensity frequently of wildfire is pretty well established in science at this point. How that interacts with land use and land management and prior fire management, as well as an expanding interface, people living in that wildland urban interface, really is, foundationally, the really unacceptable impact that we are seeing nationally to people and resources.

So, in Interior, with additional support through the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law, as well as we have also been on a trajectory of receiving fuels management and risk reduction support through the annual appropriation, we have been steadily increasing our accomplishment of fuels reduction on the ground. Increasingly, we, along with our partners like Forest Service, states, tribes, many, many local communities across the West, although we really need to be able to say all communities across the West, increasingly are developing multi-jurisdictional, cross-programmatic, at-scale, so think watershed scale, landscape-scale risk reduction strategies so that the fuels management work that we do on Interior-administered land aligns and is coordinated with the fuels management work that our partners on adjacent jurisdictions are implementing with again, that shared vision of at scale, and the scale piece is really important here, that at scale we have these shared risk reduction strategies that will make a difference in future years for those communities' infrastructure, resource values, the complete sort of resiliency and sustainability of landscapes and watersheds.

Ms. KAMLAGER-DOVE. Thank you.

Deputy Chief Hall-Rivera, you mentioned that over the past 20 years wildfires have become larger, lasted longer, and proved more challenging to contain. We know that healthy forests help regulate the climate by absorbing greenhouse gases, facilitating water flows, and supporting diverse ecosystems. Is it your opinion that older and larger trees are more resistant to wildfire and the effects of climate change than smaller, younger ones?

Ms. HALL-RIVERA. Yes. Thank you for that question, Congresswoman. I would say it depends on the species, of course. But many trees that are older and larger are more resistant to fire, especially low severity fire, if that is what they are naturally adapted to, yes.

Ms. KAMLAGER-DOVE. And how is your office prioritizing protecting either those kinds of trees or those species?

Ms. HALL-RIVERA. I would say we have lots of different ways that we are doing that, one of the most important being working with local communities, working with tribes, and working with others who really have that on-the-ground knowledge, as well as our own Forest Service personnel, to identify those places on the forest where those trees or those groves of trees may be, and designing

management strategies around them, again, in collaboration, in partnership with those folks who know the area best.

Ms. KAMLAGER-DOVE. Thank you for that. I did a couple of forest tours in Northern California looking at private lands and also Federal lands, and there is a difference in how they are managed. I think part of it is because private companies only have to answer to their shareholders and not to the public. They are not using taxpayer dollars.

I will also say, and I know this might sound strange, that in my discussions with tribal leaders, the importance of doing exactly what you said, in making sure that there is a healthy co-existence of the trees and how we are actually communicating to them, because they certainly are communicating with one another about which ones are going to stay and which ones might succumb if not to human touch or mismanagement, but to fires. I know that went a little spiritual.

So, with that, I will yield back my time.

Mr. TIFFANY. The gentlelady yields. I recognize the gentleman from Idaho, Mr. Fulcher.

Mr. FULCHER. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Ms. Hall-Rivera, my home state of Idaho, about two-thirds of our land mass, really close to that, is federally controlled, some 33 million acres. Most of that is Forest Service. But between Forest Service and BLM, quite frankly, overwhelmed, don't have the resources to manage.

There has been a lot of mismanagement. And, frankly, when they do, they get sued into oblivion for every step of the way by some somebody who calls themselves an environmentalist. And as a result of that, somewhere between half a million and a million acres a year gets burned up. And that is just because of bad management, lack of ability to manage.

In our state, it is the state and the private land that is our life-line, because we have some degree of control. We have some degree of ability to manage that ground.

And I have to admit until today I didn't even know we had a Federal Deputy Chief for State and Private Forestry. And please don't mistake my comments to be disparaging to you, but I simply don't know. What is the purpose of your role? What do you do over state and private?

Ms. HALL-RIVERA. Well, thank you for that question, Congressman. I am happy to talk about our programs that serve state, private, and tribal landowners.

In addition to the National Forest System, which, obviously, you are well familiar with, we have a suite of programs where we work really closely with state foresters in every state and territory to help deliver technical assistance and financial assistance to private landowners through our forest stewardship program. We help private landowners combat diseases and insects through our forest health program. And then we also provide training and the ability to do hazardous fuels treatments on state, private, and other county lands through our state and volunteer fire assistance programs.

So, we have a really long-standing relationship with our state forestry agencies, and we work in very close partnership with them

to manage our nation's forests, we have 193 million acres of national forests, and we have almost 500 million acres of state, private, tribal, and urban forests.

Mr. FULCHER. Well, if I could just encourage you, that is not where we need the help. It is the Federal lands where we need the help. And, again, this is nothing against you personally, but we are doing OK with the state and the private. And speaking for the majority of the people in my state, that is not where we want the help.

But I will segue, because I don't want to make this all negative about that. What criteria do you use when you are prioritizing fires, one fire versus another? How do you prioritize where to put your assets and how to attack?

Ms. HALL-RIVERA. Yes, that is a great question, and there is a lot of complexity there depending on what is going on in the fire season.

But for what we call initial attack, that is really done locally with our personnel, but usually also with state, maybe local, county dispatchers, personnel. And essentially, when a fire starts, it is usually closest forces. If we are closest, we go. If Interior is closest, they go. If states or counties are closest, they go.

As we get more fire activity and there is more complexity, we do have to do more prioritizing, and that is primarily done at the National Interagency Fire Center in Boise. And what we are going to look at, first and foremost, is protecting communities, life, and property that is at risk. That is where we are going to prioritize all of the assets that we have any sort of control or influence over.

Mr. FULCHER. OK. Thank you, Ms. Hall-Rivera, and Mr. Rupert, as well.

I yield back.

Mr. TIFFANY. The gentleman yields. I would like to recognize the Ranking Member for his questions, Mr. Neguse.

Mr. NEGUSE. I thank the Chairman. And I see Mr. Curtis is back, so hopefully he can defend the propriety of that goatee I was challenging earlier.

It is good to see you.

Sorry, so much discussion about Mr. Curtis. I wanted to raise a couple of different issues.

First, to the Deputy Chief, I am certainly familiar with your work, and with your role, and grateful for the work that you do in partnering with a variety of private forest owners in my district, as well as, of course, with the state of Colorado and the State Forestry Department.

We had an opportunity to question Chief Moore a few weeks ago in this Committee, an extended colloquy around some of the prioritization decisions with respect to the tranches of funding that have been allocated and announced by the Forest Service. I couldn't be more, again, grateful that we were able to get these investments enacted into law, and that the Forest Service is now well on its way to working on implementing those funds in a variety of different national forests across the country, including in my community, the Arapaho and Roosevelt National Forests, as I am sure you are familiar with, or rather, USDA and your department, the Forest Service, recently announced a tranche of funding

going to the Routt National Forest up in northwestern Colorado up to the Wyoming border. So, I am grateful that we are able to make those investments. It is going to make a real difference in terms of the hazardous fuels reduction that will happen in those parts of my district, and I suspect many of my colleagues that have projects in their states, as well.

I wonder if you might talk a bit about how you see subsequent tranches of funding being allocated. There are many forests that, of course, were not included, and one in particular in my state, the White River National Forest, which happens to be the most highly-visited national forest in the entire system managed by the USFS, and part of this goes to the different criteria that are being used to determine which landscapes merit the investment. So, I just wonder if you might opine a bit on that.

Obviously, I have my interest in particular on behalf of Coloradans in making sure that the White River National Forest is reflected in the next tranche.

Ms. HALL-RIVERA. Yes, absolutely. Thank you for that question. Again, we are extremely grateful for all of the resources that have been invested in this work through BIL and IRA.

There is a lot of work to do out there, I think, Congressman, and you all know that. It can be a challenging task to prioritize, right? What we have learned, and Mr. Rupert spoke to this earlier, is you need to invest at a landscape-scale to make a difference. You have to do work at the scale of the problem. We have lots of great work going on all over the country, but a lot of it is not large enough. The treatments are not large enough to make a difference when a fire impacts them.

So, what we look at is fire potential, communities. We look at some aspects around things like wildlife corridors, infrastructure, tribal lands, tribal interests, and socially disadvantaged communities. So, it is a complex network of different factors that we look at.

We will continue to use, I believe, that same type of prioritization for additional funding that we are going to be putting out, as well as continuing to invest in those landscapes that we are currently investing in.

Mr. NEGUSE. I appreciate that answer and I would encourage the agency, I think, to be nimble and explore alternative criterion that can be applied as you determine the best way to allocate these resources.

In the case of the White River National Forest, a good example, you mentioned populations. Obviously, most of the landscapes identified in that first tranche of funding, including the Arapaho and Roosevelt, happened to be adjacent to large population centers—a very direct threat, of course, to citizens and to our communities.

But the White River National Forest, as we know, has been the site of multiple fires that have created disastrous economic impacts: the closure of I-70 in the Glenwood Canyon, just by way of example, 2 years ago that had ramifications across the country, just because it is such a central artery, as my colleagues in Utah, Nevada, and other states well understand in terms of that highway.

Anyway, I would just encourage you to take that approach, and as you get to this, I believe it is the third tranche of funding, or perhaps spending or allocating the remaining funding that isn't spent from the first two tranches, that you explore some different criteria.

With that, again, I thank you for the work that you are doing, both of you, and you will certainly have a partner in our office, in my office, and I suspect many of us in the work that you are doing.

I yield back, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. TIFFANY. The gentleman yields. I recognize the gentleman from Utah, the Vice Chairman, Mr. Curtis.

Mr. CURTIS. Thank you. Let me just start by saying what a delight it is to work with Congressman Neguse as Co-Chair of the Wildfire Caucus, and I appreciate your support and leadership.

I have listened with interest as he has described his district and my colleague from Idaho has described his district. It sounds a little bit like one-upmanship about who has the most trees. I am pretty sure I do.

[Laughter.]

Mr. CURTIS. And since I am speaking last, I will take that.

But Congressman Neguse, my last comment would be just to invite you to join the goatee caucus with me. We could perhaps Co-Chair that with a little work on your side.

Mr. NEGUSE. I will rise to that challenge.

Mr. CURTIS. Good. Listen, I really am grateful for the Wildfire Caucus. It does give us an opportunity and a platform to talk about some of these issues on a really bipartisan level. It is no secret how much the two of us share in our districts in importance of forest fires.

Let me talk a little bit about—you talked about prioritization. Let me talk about just the prioritization of preventative work over firefighting and treatment. It seems obvious, but could both of you just address quickly the cost difference of preventing a fire versus putting one out and treating a fire?

Ms. HALL-RIVERA. Yes, I will start, Congressman. That old adage, an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure, is very true. We find that the investments that we make in fuels treatments, even though some of them can be quite costly, they don't compare to what we spend in suppression, and certainly don't compare to what communities and people suffer in terms of financial and other hardships as a result of fires.

Mr. CURTIS. Yes.

Mr. Rupert?

Mr. RUPERT. Yes, I would just real briefly add to that. The work that I have seen done on that, treating, preventing, a fraction of the cost of suppression. Part of the challenge of really nailing that number down is the true cost of wildfire. And there are reports, and reports, and reports written about the true cost, and there is still uncertainty that we have not accurately been able to determine the true cost of wildfire.

So, that efficiency, as we understand and develop that science, is just going to continue to—

Mr. CURTIS. Yes, and add onto that the environmental impact, the carbon release, the damage to the environmental ecosystem.

The next obvious question to both of you then is, why aren't we spending more time on prevention, and how can we make that a bigger focus?

Mr. RUPERT. Well, I am pleased with the trajectory that we have been on the front side of fire. There has been a dramatic increase in focus on that. I agree that there is a long way to go.

For me, I think about that fire response framework, very robust, very mature framework. We talk about Boise, we talk about the National Interagency Fire Center, and that partnership and that community. It is all coordinated, standard-driven. We don't yet have that in the pre-fire space. And it is not a cut-and-paste sort of need that we have for a pre-fire framework, because there are some different interested parties, more of a land management engagement, for sure.

But to have a coordinated framework that is standard-driven, science-driven, data-driven, I think, is what we continue to need to expand and build.

Mr. CURTIS. Is it possible that it is a little political, some of these treatments? And how do we address that? How do we hit that head on?

Ms. Hall-Rivera, go ahead.

Ms. HALL-RIVERA. Sure. I will take that one, sir.

Yes, certainly we see disagreements about treatments and what the American public wants from their forest lands. But I am really heartened to see in the past few years the strength of the collaborations that we see, just the awareness of fire, and the need to do treatments in the forest to help prevent that, I think, has gone up significantly as a result of this crisis that we are suffering.

So, we have a lot more partners at the table that are helping us come together and do these treatments and get the prescribed fire on the landscape, too, which is a significant need that we have in the West, and we need partners and traditional ecological knowledge from tribes to help us do that well.

Mr. CURTIS. I can tell you in my district, we are often criticized after a fire of not having prepared or done enough to prevent it, and I would love to join my colleague, Mr. Neguse, in a bipartisan manner to deal with these preventative issues, and would love any ideas that you could bring forward that we could work on in the caucus to see if we could advance some bipartisan solutions.

Mr. Chairman, I am out of time. I yield back.

Mr. TIFFANY. The gentleman yields. I would like to recognize the gentleman from Oregon, Mr. Bentz, for 5 minutes.

Mr. BENTZ. Thank you, Mr. Chair, and thanks for this hearing.

I am, obviously, from Oregon, and I will challenge the tree numbers that were mentioned by Utah. But the issue of wildfire is hugely challenging in Oregon and, of course, northern California. And one of the obvious ways of taking care of this is treating land. That is why I was so happy to see your 10-year plan and 20 million acres, and then perhaps 30 million on top of that or in addition to that from adjacent landowners.

It seemed to me, in the work I have been doing with various large timber landowners, that there is a concern when it comes to fighting these fires that private land is not respected, private land rights are not respected. And we even saw an example of this in

a small, little prescribed burn adjacent to, actually, one of the grazing permits that my family has in the Malheur National Forest, and what happened was reflective of the folks working for the Forest Service not really caring about private property. And what that does is it makes the private property owners mad, and angry, and upset, and nothing good comes from it.

The question I have for both of you, really, is how do we address this issue of arrogance that we see when backfires are started? How do we address this issue of we don't care about fences, we don't care about cattle, we don't care about neighboring property burning up. How do we address this? Because we have to work together on this. And that 10-year plan really does reflect the fact that you are looking at private landowners for that 30 million acres.

So, can both of you take a shot at explaining how we might move away from the obvious "We are the Federal Government, we can burn anything down we want, we have absolute immunity," and all kinds of justifications to more of a "How can we work together with you, and the last thing we want to do is burn you up while we are trying to save our national forests"?

So, take it away.

Ms. HALL-RIVERA. Sure, thank you for that question, Congressman. Yes, we need to be in partnership, no doubt about it. Fire is an all-hands issue, and wildland fires don't respect boundaries, right?

I think it is absolutely our Chief's expectation that our leaders out in the field are working together with their partners, their communities, private property owners. We are doing that work before the fire comes. That is really, really critical, sitting down together when smoke is not in the air, having those discussions about where do we engage a fire, what is the right ridge, learning from our folks like ranchers and producers that have been out there on the land and know those features, and can help our folks learn that—

Mr. BENTZ. If I may interrupt, what is the accountability method so that, when someone working for the Forest Service does make a mistake, and burns way more than should have been burned? There are all kinds of excuses, but what is the accountability methodology in place so that, when something does go wrong and there is no doubt about someone overstepping their bounds as an employee of the U.S. Forest Service, how do you address this? Because that is not what happened in this little prescribed burn. Can you share with us what we look toward to make sure accountability occurs?

Ms. HALL-RIVERA. Sure. Yes, we are always going to be accountable for our actions. I know that myself and the Chief definitely will be accountable.

We are asking our employees to do challenging things. We are asking our employees to take risks when we put fire on the ground, and we are going to support them, as well. And we do try to make right with the private landowners wherever we can.

Mr. BENTZ. Here is what I need. I need the rules that reflect the procedure for imposing accountability. I just don't want a statement that, yes, we will be—no, that is not good enough. In the situation that occurred back in the Malheur National Forest, there

were people who did things that were incorrect, burned up private property, reflected zero care for that purpose, cut fences, destroyed I don't know how many board feet of private timber for no good reason, and contrary to the measurement of the amount of humidity in the air. In fact, it was phoned up.

Where is the written procedure for holding those people and the Forest Service accountable? I need a copy of it, if such a thing exists.

Ms. HALL-RIVERA. We can get that to you, Congressman.

Mr. BENTZ. Thank you so much. I yield back.

Ms. HALL-RIVERA. The gentleman yields. I would like to recognize the gentleman from California, Mr. Duarte, next.

Mr. DUARTE. Hello, thank you. Thank you for being here. I have been through a lot of forestry discussions, several today even, one over in Doug LaMalfa's Subcommittee on Agriculture with the Chief, and here with you. And they all start off with a lot of discussion of climate change. And, yes, the climate is changing. It has been changing for a while. We don't need to go into that.

What is really different though, and I hope we can dialogue honestly about it, is our forest management strategies changed 30 to 40 years ago. They didn't change for the better. In retrospect, for whatever the motivations or intents were then, they didn't change for the better. Whether they were old growth forests or new forests, we quit thinning them, we drove the loggers out of them in Oregon, in California, in many areas. Logging communities are on their heels, economically. It is tough to find a logger in California these days.

And really, it is going to take, I mean, there are 48 million acres of forest land in California alone, Federal forest land in California alone. So, \$1,000 an acre would be \$48 billion. It is not going to happen, right? It is not going to happen. So, we need those loggers back. We need the sawmills back. We need the wood products companies researching new products and finding economic use of our forest products.

We are not going to do this if we leave it to government to get through the 100 million acres, or 193 million acres of forest land, it is going to burn. It is going to burn hot, it is going to burn catastrophically, and it is going to burn and then regenerate into something that is very different than a sustainable conifer forest that we hope to get to.

So, please, be honest with us, because right now what is happening is when one party gets control of the administration power, we get some forest laws we can live with. When another party gets in there, we talk climate change and the loggers are on their heels again, and we don't get the investment and the long-term business strategies that allow for the rural communities to actually develop the economy that sustains the forests.

So, please, if you guys can be honest with us, we can at least begin the dialogue and the assurance that we are heading toward a commercially viable—for a sustainability program that allows logging, grazing, wood products, industries to re-establish and convince the bank that it is a worthwhile investment.

So, please, talk about a vision for sustainable forestry going forward that removes it from the political football it has been,

admits to mistakes which were admitted to when we went to some more of what we thought were sustainable methods. Please give us something to hold on to here, because we keep hearing the same stuff.

Ms. HALL-RIVERA. Yes, Congressman, I would say our 10-year wildfire crisis strategy lays out that blueprint and that plan. We absolutely need to do active forest management on millions of acres in this country, and we need an industry, a healthy industry, to help us be partners in that, not only our traditional sawmill industry, but, as you pointed out, new forest products as well, new markets, especially for the smaller diameter trees that put many of our forests most at risk.

Mr. RUPERT. I might just add, from an Interior perspective, I thank you. I very much appreciate your comments and feedback.

I think, particularly with a bureau like the Bureau of Land Management, a bureau like the Bureau of Indian Affairs, and really, across the entire Department, there is a recognition that for some of the lands that we manage, and again, Interior, we don't want to just talk about forest management, because actually in Interior we don't manage all that much forest. We do manage forests, especially in Oregon, but we manage hundreds of millions of non-forested land, as well. And they are dealing with fire risk in those areas.

Grazing is a very important tool. The BIA, in particular, working with tribes with forest programs and active forage management, there is a very sort of proud, proud legacy and history there. So, I think much of, at least from my perspective, in addition to recognizing the impact of climate and then all of these activities in terms of, OK, so how are we going to adapt to that for future years that we do need to have, if we want to use those tools, that we have to have sort of the foundation. And for many of these uses, that includes the economic foundation for them to exist.

Mr. DUARTE. Thank you.

Mr. RUPERT. I appreciate your comments.

Mr. DUARTE. You mentioned grazing, so let's talk about southwestern deserts and grazing. Salt cedar removals are very necessary. BLM land leases are very, very much a part of, families' grazing rights are a big deal.

Just recently, the Department of the Interior challenged grazing rights, and basically offered grazing rights that families have held adjacent to their deeded acreage for generations up for public auction to conservation groups, or whoever will pay the highest price.

These families that need to develop water, they need to manage habitat, they need to control game on their property, they need to do salt cedar removal to protect groundwater resources and habitat value, the same issue, we just inserted a whole ton of uncertainty into the business model of these ranching families with a policy that came out of the Bureau of Land Management, Department of the Interior that hadn't even been through public comment, hadn't even worked constructively with the ranchers to talk about what would happen if we put your grazing rights adjacent to your deeded acreage up for auction.

So, that is another one of the economically destabilizing—how does a bank loan against those ranches when public policy is making ominous, large moves against the most economic interests?

Thank you, Chairman. I will yield back.

Mr. TIFFANY. Thank you. The gentleman yields, and I would like to recognize Mr. Westerman.

Mr. WESTERMAN. Thank you, Chairman Tiffany. And again, thank you to the witnesses for being here.

Ms. Hall-Rivera, do you get out much and see the Forest Service lands across the country?

Ms. HALL-RIVERA. Well, Congressman, I don't get to go out as much as I would like. But yes, I try to get out and see our forest lands as much as possible.

Mr. WESTERMAN. How does it make you feel when you see these devastated landscapes? I call them moonscapes.

Ms. HALL-RIVERA. Yes, it is heart wrenching.

Mr. WESTERMAN. I can just think of a few of them off the cuff here.

I was out in New Mexico, the Lincoln National Forest, a fire burned many years ago, and it is still just a moonscape out there. But you go down the road to the Mescalero Apache tribal land, it is a beautiful Ponderosa pine forest, lots of wildlife there. And it is the same climate, same elevation, same environment, same tree species. It is just different management tactics.

And the really sad thing is these forests aren't coming back. So, it seems like, if Forest Service employees went out and saw that, you would be just like hammering the table saying, "We have to do something different. We can't have more Lincoln National Forest storage of these thousands and thousands of acres of land that has been decimated."

Out in California, Mr. McClintock has done some work where you go look at the restoration out around South Lake Tahoe, where fires have come through and you still have a vibrant, healthy forest there, yet you go down the road, and I can't remember the name of this particular fire, but the Forest Service said they had tried to replant it, like, 6 times in 12 years, and the trees just wouldn't grow because the organic matter burned out of the ground.

Should we be more adamant about doing management preventing these moonscapes, doing things like Mr. McClintock has proposed that show it works on the ground? What is keeping us from making these forests healthy like we would all like them to be?

You are representing the U.S. Forest Service. What does the Forest Service need to make that happen?

If you had an unlimited firefighter budget, that tells me all we are doing is paying more people to put out the fires we should be preventing.

Ms. HALL-RIVERA. Yes, well, it is a multi-faceted challenge, for sure. And I know our employees want to get out on the ground and do that work together with our partners.

We need additional capacity. We are building that capacity through many of the investments that you all have made in the Forest Service in the last couple of years. We are also working with partners to build their capacity.

We need industry. We just were talking about that earlier. We need a healthy forest products industry, and we need new markets, again, especially for those trees that right now don't have all that much value. And we are doing that work in our research and wood innovations programs, and we are partnering.

We need to learn from our partners. We need to learn from our tribal partners who have been managing these forests for millennia.

Mr. WESTERMAN. Yes, I think learning from state and tribal partners could be a tremendous help. But when I look at it from an industry perspective, they were basically run out of the areas because of the lack of management. And it is kind of like Charlie Brown and Lucy with the football. Why would they ever want to go invest a lot of money trusting that there is going to be long-term management down the road?

And we tried to give the Forest Service tools like that. We gave you a 20-year stewardship contract provision. How many 20-year stewardship contracts has the Forest Service signed since we gave you that provision in 2018?

Ms. HALL-RIVERA. I don't have that number, sir, but it is small.

Mr. WESTERMAN. I have the number, it is zero. And if we are not doing the management, if you are not showing industry that there is reason to come back to a place, there is no incentive for them to go spend hundreds of millions of dollars to build infrastructure that simply can't exist without the management.

We have the Save our Sequoias Act, and we have large white fir and pine trees that need to be taken out of the sequoia groves, and there is absolutely no market anywhere close for that material. So, it is kind of the chicken and the egg scenario.

I think the Forest Service has to create some credibility, and it has to be long-term commitments like the 20-year stewardship contract if you ever want to get that industry back.

And we are facing housing shortages, high construction prices. And instead of burning all this timber and sending carbon up in the atmosphere, we could be building houses, we could be building businesses. But it is really hard to come in here and talk about increased money for firefighting, when that is just putting a Band-Aid on the wound instead of going to the symptom of what is causing the problem.

I yield back.

Mr. TIFFANY. The gentleman yields. I recognize another gentleman from California, Mr. LaMalfa.

Mr. LAMALFA. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Thanks for letting me be in today with your Subcommittee.

Ms. Hall-Rivera, we have noted your goal of working 20 million acres of public land over a 10-year period, as well as doing things to partner on the state, tribal, and private lands for another 30 million. My question is, we have seen a history with Forest Service of over-reporting or even misrepresenting actual treated acreage, such as counting the same piece of land maybe up to four times if it has had different treatments in a short period of time, or maybe it is fire, and then they come back with thinning, or salvage, et cetera, things like that.

Would you agree that that is an issue with how land is reported, and for us to make decisions on? What does that look like to you?

Ms. HALL-RIVERA. Yes. Well, thank you for that question, Congressman.

We do count every treatment that we do. Many acres need multiple treatments to get them back to a healthy state. They need to be mechanically thinned, they might need to have a timber sale, and they probably need prescribed fire. That is going to occur over, likely, multiple seasons and multiple years. So, we account for each one of those entries, because we need our folks out there doing that work, we need to be paying them a salary to do that, or we need to be contracting with folks. So, yes, we account for each one of those.

But to your point, I think the point maybe that you are making is are we also accounting for the outcomes that we are having, and I would acknowledge that we can always do a better job talking about outcomes, in particular when it comes to how we articulate whether we are reducing risk, risk to communities, and whether or not those landscapes are healthier and in a more resilient state when we complete all of those treatments. So, we need to do that, as well.

Mr. LAMALFA. Yes, I guess at the same time we need to be reporting, if it is multi-treatments on the same land, how much untreated land do we still have.

Let me ask more specifically on what you consider treated. If a forest has been burned via wildfire, not prescribed, is that considered treated land?

Ms. HALL-RIVERA. In some instances, we do count those acres as a fuels treatment if they meet a number of criteria, and if it is an area that, in the forest plan, is designated for that. It is, I would tell you, a pretty small number of acres each year.

Mr. LAMALFA. So, you would have an area where an accidental wildfire caused by nature or what have you, that those lands could be counted not as being harvested or prescribed, or thinned, or whatever, you would count them as treated. Like, I had a million-acre fire in my district 2 years ago. How much would that be considered treatment by Forest Service when it was not intended?

Ms. HALL-RIVERA. Let me characterize that, the numbers there. We normally treat, overall, around 3 to 3.5 million acres a year. Acres that are treated by a wildfire that we count toward that might be 300,000 acres, total. It is a relatively small number.

Mr. LAMALFA. Because the big problem on the back end of that is that, and you can fly right over it and look at the comparison, when you see private land post-fire versus Federal land post-fire, private land is going right back to work removing that material and planting trees back. You fly over, say, 7 years later, you can see green there, and you can see the land that was that was Federal. It is a checkerboard pattern, you can tell that it has largely been left the same. You have snags out there, you have brush growing, all that. So, we have the same tinderbox situation.

How is the Forest Service doing, since I think it is about a 2-year-old plan now, on the 20 million acres that it set out to do? How much progress has been made on that 10-year goal so far?

Ms. HALL-RIVERA. I don't have the figures right at my fingertips, but I believe we have treated a couple hundred thousand acres total in our 21 landscapes. Obviously, we have more to go. A lot of our first year we were getting activated, getting those projects that were already kind of on the shelf out in place. And now we have this significant investment here in the second year, and I expect us to continue to ramp up our activity in our priority landscapes.

Mr. LAMALFA. Well, it is going to be very difficult to meet a 10-year mark of 20 million at that rate, and that is the thing I always am concerned about, is pace and scale of getting this work done, especially since Forest Service oversees 193 million acres. Twenty million is right at 10 percent of that, so 2 million per year is 1 percent of the year of its holdings. That will take forever.

And I understand not all 193 million is such that they would be treating, but still, we have a significant—and Chief Moore in a previous hearing says the wood outstrips the work every year by a lot.

I yield back. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. TIFFANY. The gentleman yields from California. I will take 5 minutes for questioning at this point.

The Chairman of the Full Committee asked a question in regards to the 20-year stewardship contract. He said there are none out there. Are there any being considered?

Ms. HALL-RIVERA. Yes, I do believe we have one 20-year stewardship contract under development now. And what I can say writ large is that we do use stewardship contracting.

The other authority that we have quite frequently, as well as all of the other tools that we have available to us—Good Neighbor Authority, Wyden Authority, joint chiefs, many of the things that we have talked about today.

So, we do use stewardship contracting a lot, just the 20-year authority we have not used as much.

Mr. TIFFANY. Do you not want to use the 20-year stewardship contract? As the Chairman said, it gives people certainty then, especially for private industry, which has been run out of the West. Wouldn't it encourage some of them to come back?

Ms. HALL-RIVERA. Yes, we do want to use that, Congressman. This is not my area of expertise, so we can get you some more details on ones that are being developed, or even some of the challenges that we have experienced.

Mr. TIFFANY. You commented about being accountable under the questioning of Mr. Bentz from Oregon. How were you accountable? How was the agency accountable with the Hermits Peak Fire?

Ms. HALL-RIVERA. Yes, thank you for that question, Congressman. And I just want to acknowledge and say again that we are very sorry for what happened with Hermits Peak. We know that it had tragic impacts on that community, and the people's lives and livelihoods there, as well as some of our employees who live there.

We had to put a lot of funding, post-fire and disaster funding, into that area. We are working together with the community and landowners to help them get access to other USDA programs as well.

Mr. TIFFANY. Are state and local entities or private landowners allowed to sue the Federal Government in a situation like that?

Ms. HALL-RIVERA. Sir, I am not an attorney. I don't know all the details around that. But, yes, I believe there is a lot of active litigation going on right now.

Mr. TIFFANY. Who manages our forests better, local, state, or Federal?

Ms. HALL-RIVERA. Well, I would say that working in partnership is really critical. We all have our own authorities and our own missions that we work in. And for us, bringing those partners to the table, learning from them, being collaborative, and trying to get to a point where we have a lot of social license to do the work that we need to do is critically important for us.

Mr. TIFFANY. You used the term, the phrase "social license." What role do lawsuits play in stymieing the Federal landowners from getting projects done?

Ms. HALL-RIVERA. We do have litigation challenges, sir, in particular in specific regions of the Forest Service. We have that. It can delay projects, and it can delay us from getting work done on the ground.

Mr. TIFFANY. Would it help to have a loser pays system here in the United States?

Ms. HALL-RIVERA. I am sorry, a what, sir?

Mr. TIFFANY. Would it help to have a loser pays system, where those that are filing the lawsuits, which you oftentimes win, but then there are no repercussions for those that file those lawsuits that are oftentimes frivolous?

Ms. HALL-RIVERA. Yes, I couldn't say one way or the other. I haven't really looked into that. That is part of our democracy. People are going to litigate the decisions that we make, and what we do is try to build deeper partnerships and more collaborations so we can help build trust and social license to do our work.

Mr. TIFFANY. Mr. Rupert, you mentioned about climate change causing this. What has had a greater impact, climate change or improper management?

I always use the watershed year of 1988, where forest management became much less active on our Federal lands, and you see the decline in forest production, and you see the incline of fires over the last, what would that be, 40 years. Which one has had a greater impact?

Mr. RUPERT. I don't know that I have seen definitive sort of reporting comparing the two and assigning weight. The most comprehensive study that I have seen, and analysis really hits on all three that have been talked about today: (1) climate, (2) past fire management practices, in particular with very aggressive suppression over the last century-and-a-half, and then (3) changes in population, so people moving into that wildland-urban interface, those three issues combined.

Mr. TIFFANY. Do you believe global warming is man-caused?

Mr. RUPERT. I am not a global warming expert in terms of climate change. Everything that I have read and all the reference to climate and the atmosphere and a variety of complex factors, including wildfire smoke that interact in it, and the impact that it has, and I think that clearly sort of creates that foundation for why

we spend so much time talking about how are we going to adapt to this.

Mr. TIFFANY. You may be correct that these wildfires, with all the smoke that is coming up as a result of improper management, that may be befouling the environment and helping cause it.

I am going to ask one real quick final question. We saw the impact of illegal aliens causing fire on Federal lands down in southern Arizona. Are you concerned at all with the incredible crush of people coming across our border as a result of the actions of the Biden administration, that we may see wildfires as a result of illegal aliens going through our Federal forest lands, as has happened previously?

Mr. RUPERT. Maybe, I will respond to fire along, in this case, the southern border.

Certainly, Interior, we administer hundreds of thousands of acres along the southern border: refuges, parks, BLM land, tribal trust lands. We have a real focus on risk reduction fuels management along the southern border, and that has been the case for many years. And then we also have a real focus on our sort of preparedness and response resources along the southern border, as well.

And regardless of how wildfires ignite, I mean, we are doing everything we can to be prepared to interact with that and reduce risk from those fires.

Mr. TIFFANY. I thank the witnesses for their testimony today and the Members for their questions. The witnesses on the first panel are dismissed.

Thank you for your testimony. We will now move on to our second panel.

While the Clerk resets our witness table, I will remind the witnesses that, under Committee Rules, they must limit their oral statements to 5 minutes, but their entire statement will appear in the hearing record.

I would also like to remind our witnesses of the timing lights, which will turn red at the end of your 5-minute statement, and to please remember to turn on your microphone.

As with the first panel, I will allow all witnesses to testify before Member questioning.

[Pause.]

Mr. TIFFANY. I want to thank the witnesses so much for their patience, what is nearly 2 hours and a little bit of a delay because of votes that happened at the start of this Committee hearing. But we greatly appreciate you being here.

First, I am going to recognize Matt Dias.

Am I saying your name correctly?

Mr. DIAS. That is correct.

Mr. TIFFANY. He is the President of the California Forestry Association.

I recognize you for your testimony for 5 minutes.

**STATEMENT OF MATT DIAS, PRESIDENT, CALIFORNIA
FORESTRY ASSOCIATION, SACRAMENTO, CALIFORNIA**

Mr. DIAS. Thank you very much. Thank you, Chairman Tiffany, Ranking Member Neguse, and members of the Subcommittee for the opportunity to testify today regarding the challenges we are facing as we approach the 2023 wildfire season. As said, I am the President and CEO of the California Forestry Association, otherwise known as Calforests.

Calforests membership includes private industrial forest owners and managers. Our members are committed to the sustainable management of our private forest resources, and cumulatively represent about 3.5 million acres in California.

In addition, I think it is important to note that our members also share about 6,000 miles of property line with federally managed lands throughout California.

Despite record precipitation and the largest snowpack in recent history, forest conditions that have led to severe wildfire seasons, particularly in our national forests, still largely exist. The question is how long will it take for overstock fuel condition and brush-laden fire scars to dry out and become susceptible to large fires once again?

Certainly, the fine fuels and shrubs in the lower elevations to mid-elevations of the Sierra Nevada are curing, essentially drying out, and will likely be the forefront of the 2023 wildfire season.

As temperatures rise and snow melts, it will likely reveal issues of blocked roads due to fallen trees, poorly maintained road surfaces, and watercourse crossings that need significant maintenance to re-establish access. And this issue of access is so imperative as we wade deeper into the 2023 wildfire season, because without access, suppression activities are just simply ineffective.

As such, it is really important that the Forest Service retain all tools necessary for suppression, including the ability to deploy fire retardant, fight fires aggressively on a 24/7 schedule, tailor the use of backfires, and work closely with state firefighting agency partners. In our instance, that would be CAL FIRE.

In 2020, the United States, the U.S. Forest Service, entered into an agreement with the state of California noted as the Agreement for Shared Stewardship of California Forest and Range Lands. This agreement commits to restoring healthy forests and rangelands in California through vegetation treatments, and has a shared responsibility with state and private partners and Federal partners of commitments of treating 500,000 acres each annually.

It was reported by the California Wildfire and Forest Resilient Task Force about a month ago that, over the course of the last 2 years, on average, in California, the Forest Service has treated 137,000 acres. And that is a far cry from the committed 500,000 acres that we are seeking. And I would suggest that that indicates that pace and scale has to increase dramatically.

In addition, we have 1.5 million acres that are identified at high risk of conversion from forest to non-forest vegetation types as a result from wildfires in 2019 through 2021. During that same period of time, we have about 8,000 acres that are being planted annually. There is a very short window of opportunity after high-severity fire to re-establish forests when costs are lowest and prob-

ability of success is highest, and we just aren't meeting that mark right now, and this delay is also setting aside the benefits of carbon sequestration that healthy and young forests provide.

I want to provide three thoughts as it relates to issues that we could embrace to deal with this situation at hand.

Maintain and build upon aggressive initial attack. We have heard a lot of testimony today about the overstocked conditions of the forested resources in the National Forest System as a whole. And I would suggest that we need to take a very strong stance on initial attack because the tried-and-true test of ameliorating wildfire impacts is putting them out early.

No. 2, reliance upon existing tools and authorities. We have this Congress, or last Congress, through the Infrastructure Act, allowed for emergency action and new categorical exemptions supporting fuel breaks. In addition, we have alternative opportunities for the Forest Service. And in California, those have been narrowly relied upon. In fact, I can only identify 11 projects that have been relied upon for these efficiency in permitting and process.

The last point I want to make is develop cooperative partnerships with private entities, and this falls in the space of not only suppression, but prevention and post-fire recovery, as well. The private sector in California holds the expertise, the networks, and the capacity to assist the Forest Service, and that is what we really want to do, assist the Forest Service to get to the goals that we all jointly want to see achieved in the short term here, as it relates to forest health and resilience.

And lastly, I want to talk about supply agreements. And we have heard some questions today as it relates to infrastructure, and the building out of infrastructure for forest products industries. That would be commercial, that would be standard sawmills, if you will, innovative wood products, or low-value wood waste. And to date, that is just not happening. And I honestly believe that the 20-year stewardship agreement could be helpful. But obligatory supply agreements are what is going to unlock the investment to make that happen.

I appreciate the time, and I am ready for questions being offered.

[The prepared statement of Mr. Dias follows:]

PREPARED STATEMENT OF MR. MATT DIAS, PRESIDENT/CEO, CALIFORNIA FORESTRY ASSOCIATION (CALFORESTS), SACRAMENTO, CALIFORNIA

Introduction

Thank you, Chairman Tiffany and Ranking Member Neguse and members of the Subcommittee, for the opportunity to testify regarding challenges facing forest management, wildfire suppression, and wildland firefighters ahead of the 2023 wildfire season.

I serve as President/CEO for the California Forestry Association (Calforests).

Calforests Background

Calforests membership includes private industrial forest owners and managers, and forest products companies ranging from sawmills, veneer mills, and several biomass powerplants. Our members are committed to the sustainable management of our private forest resources and supporting active forest management of National Forests within California. Cumulatively our members own and manage more than 3.5 million acres of timberland in California and share thousands of miles of ownership boundaries with United States Forest Service (USFS) and other federal lands.

California Winter and the coming 2023 Fire Season

Just like the many recent wildfire seasons, the winter of 2022–2023 in California has also made national headlines. Despite record precipitation and the largest snowpack in recent memory, the forest conditions that have led to severe wildfire seasons, particularly on our National Forests, still exist. The question, as we look to the looming fire season for 2023, is how long it will take for overstocked fuel conditions and brush laden fire scars to dry out and become susceptible to large fires once again. Certainly, the fine fuels at low to mid elevation of the Sierra are beginning to cure, and these fuels will likely become the forefront of the 2023 fire season.

Additionally, with such extraordinary snow loads, there is significant concern over issues of access. As temperatures rise the snow melt will likely reveal issue of blocked roads due to fallen trees and roads surfaces that need significant maintenance to reestablish access that is critical to engaging in rapid and effective fire-fighting when ignitions occur. It is unlikely that the USFS will have the manpower or contracting efficiency necessary to reestablish the necessary access prior to the peak of fire season.

This issue of access for firefighting, along with unknowns as it relates to extended periods of extreme heat or lightening, make it important that fire protection forces be fully staffed as soon as possible and that all suppression tools, including the use of aerial deployed fire retardant, be made available throughout the 2023 fire season. It is critically important for US Forest Service to fight fires aggressively during wildfire season—immediate response to suppress, fighting fire 24-7, tailor the use of backfires, and work closely with their state firefighting agency partners like CAL FIRE.

In spite of the heavy snow and rain this winter, wildfire will continue to impact water resources, air quality, recreation, forest carbon and—for Calforests' members—the timberlands they own and manage to generate renewable forests products that society depends on.

Wildfire Prevention Activities

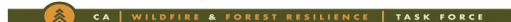
On August 12, 2020, the USFS, Pacific Southwest Region, and the State of California entered into an “Agreement for Shared Stewardship of California’s Forest and Rangelands.”¹

The agreement commits to restoring healthy forests and rangelands in California through actions including vegetation treatments on one million acres per year by 2025 (500,000 acres USFS and 500,000 acres state and private lands). Calforests strongly supports this cooperative effort. The joint targets for treatments are likely the minimum necessary to meaningfully reduce the devastating impacts from wildfires across California.

In March of this year, the first reports of tracking were provided, with the following metric provided:

DRAFT Activity Acres	FY21	FY22
Grand Total	700,000	700,000
Reporting Entity		
CAL FIRE	140,000	150,000
Other State	120,000*	175,000
US Forest Service	145,000	130,000
Other Federal	95,000	40,000
Private Timber	200,000*	200,000

*Assumes FY21 activity data is similar to FY22 for Caltrans (other state) and Private Timber



¹ <https://www.gov.ca.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/8.12.20-CA-Shared-Stewardship-MOU.pdf> (Accessed October 15, 2021).

As you can see, USFS Region 5, which is responsible for management of the greatest proportion of forestlands in California (15.3 million acres), successfully treated an average of just over 137,000 acres in the last two fiscal years. While this is a laudable effort, it appears unlikely that the goals of the “Million Acre Strategy” will be met by the established timelines. Meeting this goal of prevention is a key metric in addressing the wildfire crisis that we face in California.

The pace and scale of the treatments accomplished must increase dramatically to not only meet desired targets, but also actively protect critical habitat, water resources, timber resources, adjacent communities, and private timberlands.

In contrast to the slow pace of fuels treatment, the acres impacted by wildfire in California continue to climb drastically, setting new records for burned acres on an annual basis. Over 10 million acres (Refer to Appendix 1) of the USFS Region 5 National Forests have experienced wildfire over the past 20 years.

Post Fire Recovery and Reforestation

From 2019–2021, more than 4.9 million acres of forested land burned in wildfires across the state. While the greatest proportion of those acres will likely require some level of recovery-based management, at least 1.5 million acres are identified as at risk of conversion from forest to non-forest vegetation types. This forest loss results from extraordinarily high intensity wildfire over large footprints and the reburning of previously burned areas that were not subsequently restored or reforested.

During the same three-year period, a conservative estimate of 50,000 acres were reforested each year in California by Calforests members, whereas USFS Region 5 reforested approximately 8,000 acres annually, which represents less than 1% of the public lands that require post fire recovery and reforestation. There is a short window of opportunity (about 1–3 years) after high-severity fire to reestablish forests when costs are lowest and probability of success is highest. Delays in taking timely action will result in higher costs for reforestation with a lower probability of success, and will result in a significant reduction in carbon sequestration, at least in the near term.

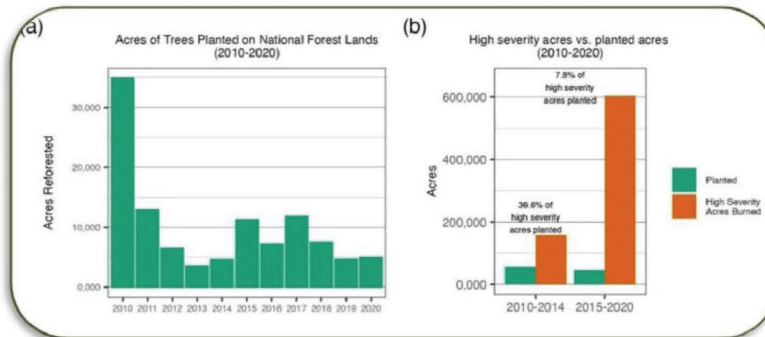


Figure 1: (a) Number of acres planted during the period 2010–2020 on National Forest System lands. Source: USDA Forest Service FACTS database. (b) Acres reforested and replanted compared to acres burned at high severity across two five-year periods on USFS Region 5

Things must change and I am prepared to discuss some of the necessary steps that must be taken.

Focus Points for this Testimony

1. Maintain and build upon aggressive initial attack to keep fires small; and
2. Support increased USFS use of the tools and authorities provided by the Congress;
3. Develop a Cooperative Partnerships with Private Entities to Drive Suppression, Prevention, and Recovery Efforts.

Maintain and Build Upon Aggressive Initial Attack

Conditions across the forested landscape of California are simply dangerous during wildfire season. In recent research published by the USFS, Dr. Malcolm

North, indicates that tree density on our Federal Forests is 6 to 7 times greater than they were a century ago. Dr. North also indicates that tree size has diminished, and these forested conditions are not as resilient to the wildfires we are consistently experiencing today.

There is also a large population of people which have moved into the Wildland Urban Interface over the last many decades, along with other resources at risk across all forested lands in California and beyond. The only tried and true way to manage fires burning in these conditions during the peak fire season is to extinguish them immediately. Allowing fires to burn “for resource benefit” is a luxury that California (and much of the rest of the West) cannot currently afford. With fuel loads this high and the potential to return to drought always present, any fire can go from “beneficial” to dangerous in a matter of hours—or even minutes.

During peak wildfire season, burning for resource benefit takes resources that just simply cannot be spared in time of need. Rapidly changing weather patterns, unpredictability of human caused ignitions, outrageous fuel loads, and firefighter and civilian safety simply introduce too many variables into the equation to allow fire to burn during the height of fire season as a means of vegetation management.

To be clear, Calforests supports all tools in the wildfire prevention toolbox, including prescribed fire at the right times and places. We simply are no longer in a situation where we can allow uncontrolled burns as a substitute for active fire management.

Reliance upon Existing Tools and Authorities

The wildfire crisis in an emergency in California, and across much of the west. As such, Calforests respectfully urges all forest management actions, including fire prevention, be treated as an emergency. The Infrastructure Act created a new Emergency Action authority for the USFS. To date, the USFS has approved the use of this Emergency Action authority for one project in California. In times of crisis, this authorization should be relied upon much more heavily.

The USFS has the authority to execute projects under Alternative Arrangements (36 CFR 220.4), which the agency has used twice in California—one for road clearance following the Caldor Fire and one for protection of sequoia groves in the central Sierra Nevada. This authority does not bypass the need to conduct environmental review, but rather allows for simultaneous NEPA analysis while the project is being executed to achieve resilient forest conditions in times of emergency. The dire need for increased treatments necessitates greater reliance upon all these emergency authorities.

Additionally, the Infrastructure Act created a new Categorical Exclusion for fuel break construction on USFS lands. Again, the option is narrowly relied upon in California, and the USFS has only approved 9 fuel breaks in California using the Categorical Exclusion provided in the Infrastructure Act. With an elevated use of the Categorical Exclusion and Emergency Authority, projects on federal land could be better coordinated private lands as well to design a system of treated landscapes that would maximize the benefits of these management actions.

While the USFS Region 5 has more aggressively used emergency authorities and Categorical Exclusions than some other regions, we certainly believe there are far more opportunities to rely upon these expedited environmental reviews. With a truncated field season due to winter conditions, it's imperative that the agency use every tool to expedite required analysis wherever possible.

It is critical to remember that none of these authorities open new lands to forest management activities. All projects conducted using Alternative Arrangements, Emergency Actions, or any Categorical Exclusion must confirm to existing forest plan standards and guides, and the agency takes steps to ensure that these authorities are not used where they could potentially impact sensitive resources. None of them can be used in designated Wilderness areas and their use in inventoried roadless areas is extremely limited.

With wider use of CE and Emergency Actions Authority, projects on federal land could be better coordinated with private lands as well to design a system of treated landscapes that would maximize the benefits of these management actions.

Develop a Cooperative Partnerships with Private Entities to Drive Suppression, Prevention and Recovery Efforts

In California, private landowners and forest management timber operators provide forest management capacity to achieve the forest health, community protection, and forest management goals discussed here today. In the case of fire suppression, it is not uncommon to have fire suppression assets and personnel overwhelmed. As an example, in 2020, a weather pattern resulted in over 11,000 lightning strikes across California in a single day, setting the stage for a disastrous summer of well

over 1 million acres burned, thousands of structures lost, and multiple civilian and firefighter deaths and injuries. Conditions were ripe for wildfire, weather conditions were extreme, but resource drawdown was also rampant. The ability for the fire protection system to respond to multiple fires burning simultaneously was overwhelmed. In trying times like this, private resources could be expeditiously deployed to assist in meeting suppression shortfalls.

The same holds true in both fire prevention and post fire recovery. The private sector maintains the technical expertise and networks to engage in management activities focused on both prevention and post fire recovery and is eager to assist federal partners in achieving goals of prevention and post fire recovery and reforestation.

This is of particular concern given that the USFS shares thousands of miles of property lines with other landowners, and in excess of 6,000 miles of shared ownership boundaries with Calforests members. In addition, many communities are adjacent to federally managed lands. This issue of adjacency is critical in our era of wildfire crisis, and expansion, connection, completion and maintenance of fuel breaks and post fire recovery efforts conducted on private lands near communities, utilities and water infrastructure and roads onto federally managed land represents the steps necessary to achieve established fire protection goals and expectations. The federal partners cannot do this alone, and it is clear that assistance is required. Again, the private sector is available to partner, but better pathways to allow these partnerships to be developed and drive meaningful outcomes must be developed.

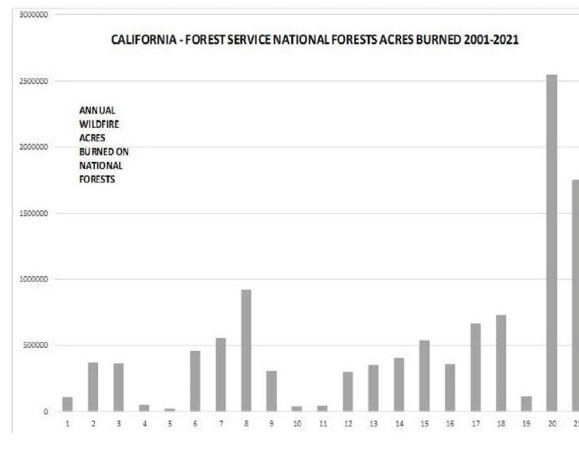
Lastly, the forest products sector is a recognized partner in the wildfire crisis. While expertise in forest management within the sector is critical, facility infrastructure is as important. Without market driven support, the work that desperately needs to be conducted on all lands will suffer. The required level of public investment will continue to be extraordinary without outlets that utilize the material being generated from forest health and postfire recovery projects.

Infrastructure retention and development, in terms of traditional sawmills, cogeneration facilities, low value wood fiber utilization are all goals in California, but the challenges are real and present. Of these challenges, one of the prevalent mitigating circumstances is supply agreements. Federal partners, who again managed the greatest proportion of all forestlands in California, are able to engage in the development of obligatory supply agreements for green material. This would incentivize investment in costly facilities that would provide additional and meaningful capacity to assist all partners—federal, state, private, non-industrial, tribal and NGO partners—in meeting our shared goals.

Thank you for this opportunity to provide testimony on this critical issue.

Appendix 1

Acres Burned on USFS Region 5 lands within California



Mr. TIFFANY. Thank you, Mr. Dias.

I will now recognize Ms. Ranotta McNair, who is a Board Member for the National Association of Forest Service Retirees.

You have 5 minutes, ma'am.

**STATEMENT OF RANOTTA MCNAIR, BOARD MEMBER,
NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF FOREST SERVICE RETIREES,
BEND, OREGON**

Ms. MCNAIR. Thank you, Chairman Tiffany, Ranking Member Neguse, and the other members of the Committee also. I am happy to be here today.

My name is Ranotta McNair, and I am a 33-year retiree with the Forest Service. I spent much of my working career in our local field offices. I retired as the Supervisor of the Idaho Panhandle National Forest. I managed and was responsible for managing 2.5 million acres of public lands. My forest also managed and had oversight on an air tanker base and a hotshot crew.

The South Canyon Fire in 1994, we saw 14 firefighters perish. That fire continues to haunt me today. As a young acting deputy forest supervisor, I stood on the tarmac that day and greeted our firefighters home, and returned them to their families. Since that time, I have often asked myself, and continue to ask, why are the firefighters where they are? What difference will their efforts really make? Could it be worth their lives? These are a critical set of questions that I think we all need to be asking ourselves today.

What we are facing is really unprecedented. We are seeing year-round fire behaviors and a workforce that is struggling to keep up with the pace. Our forests are just too dense to handle these wildfires. It is putting people, it is putting communities, it is putting critical infrastructure, and it is putting resources at risk.

We are living with fire. We will continue to live with fire. But there are things we can do. I want to talk to you today specifically about four areas where I think you can help.

The first, we need to pass H.R. 1585 to allow the fire retardant, aerial retardant, to continue to be used to protect infrastructure. We need to protect our water systems, our roads, our power lines in our homes. But most of all, we need to protect our firefighters.

Second, we need a permanent fire suppression and prescribed fire workforce. This requires supporting the current 2024 Administration's budget workforce reforms—it addresses pay, it addresses housing, and it addresses their care. We need this to have trained, skilled professionals year-round if we are going to meet the needs today. This will require legislation.

Third, we do need to sustain funding to treat larger-scale, larger, more effective fuel treatments across the landscape. This includes thinning large-scale areas so that we can reduce stand density, and we can follow it with prescribed fire. We know that scientists and experts are saying that these are working, they are helping reduce devastating fire effects on our landscapes. We also know that we will have to go back and retreat them because there is long-term maintenance that we have to do with the fuel treatments today. And we also know that it will allow us to begin to play a natural fire role back in our forests.

Fuel treatments are not a one-and-done kind of thing. We need to move on and think about them time and time again. So, we will need sustained funding. We will need also a prescribed fire exemption for EPA's new proposed PM2.5 air quality rule. The fire standard, as it is written, will negatively affect our ability to do prescribed fire. It needs a legislative solution. We need to sustain funding for our agencies, tribes, and states who are responsible for actions against the wildfire crisis. And this is not a Federal lands problem only.

And fourth, we need to look at sustaining and building an infrastructure for our industry. It will require us to look at the Federal renewable fuel standards to allow fuels that are coming off of Federal lands to be included in the industry supply chain as biofuels. We need transportation subsidies. We need more wood innovation grants from the Forest Service.

And I just want to close by saying that I have a grandson. I want my grandson to be able to play in the forest that I am in today. I want him to be able to hike, ski, and mountain bike with me, and long after I am gone in the forests that I love so dearly. We need to take actions today, not tomorrow, to make sure that we can address the wildfire crisis. Thank you.

[The prepared statement of Ms. McNair follows:]

PREPARED STATEMENT OF RANOTTA MCNAIR, BOARD MEMBER, NATIONAL
ASSOCIATION OF FOREST SERVICE RETIREES

Chairman Tiffany, Ranking Member Neguse, and Members of the Committee, I appreciate the chance to testify today on the challenges facing us around forest management and our wildfire crisis. I'm Ranotta McNair, retired after 33 years of federal service working for the Forest Service. Much of my career was spent in leadership working on National Forests in the Pacific Northwest, Northern Rockies and Southern regions. During my 12-year tenure as Forest Supervisor on the Idaho Panhandle National Forest (IPNF), I was fortunate to have had a talented and experienced fire organization and a solid bench of district rangers who had experience in dealing with prescribed and wildland fire. The IPNF hosted and was responsible for the supervision and operations of the regional air tanker base and a type 1 Hot Shot Crew. On the personal side, I also understand after being married for over 40 years to someone working on the front lines of fire the personal sacrifices that are made to do that job. I am on the Board of Directors for the National Association of Forest Service Retirees (NAFSR). We are an organization dedicated to sustaining the Forest Service mission and adapting to today's and tomorrow's challenges. Our principal beliefs and values include protecting and managing diverse lands and valued resources while providing a wide array of uses and services to the public. This includes providing for clean water and quality aquatic and terrestrial habitat. Our values also include responding professionally and responsibly in support of the Agency's efforts to protect public interest and ensure public safety.

The challenges we face today have not arisen overnight, and solving them will require time and bold action. The current situation is a result of the overall loss of workforce capacity, particularly the skilled workforce within the Agency, compounded by a century of fire exclusion, expanding development in the wildland-urban interface, a changing climate, and accumulating fuels across our landscapes.

Year-round wildfires have become more severe and frequent, posing grave risks to homes, communities, infrastructure, and natural resources, particularly in dry-site forests and Western communities. The level of death and destruction on these landscapes is difficult to comprehend, with irreplaceable natural resources lost, vital soil washed away, and untold floods causing further damage to communities and their water systems. The emotional and psychological trauma to citizens and firefighters from the loss of loved ones, homes, and communities is unimaginable.

To address the growing threat to the nation's natural resources and communities posed by extreme wildfires, we need to take bold and transformative action to change the trajectory of how we manage, staff and prepare for wildfire impacts. We

must prioritize a paradigm shift in land management approaches across jurisdictional boundaries to reduce risk and restore fire-adapted landscapes.

The scale of fuel treatments needs to match the scale of the problem; for example, an area prone to high-risk large-scale fire demands large-scale strategically placed fuel treatments. What are these known effective treatments?—thinning of dense stands followed by prescribed burning, both on regular repeated treatment intervals. Past treatments on National Forests rarely matched the scale needed today to reduce our wildland fire risks. In part this was due to litigation, uncertain funding, and workforce capacity. Today's wildfire crisis requires National Forests to increase both the pace and size of its landscape treatments. With the support of the passage of the Infrastructure Bill and the Inflation Reduction Act, funding and resources have been committed to a 10-year wildfire crisis strategy. These historic bills are essentially a down payment on the resources needed to do fuels work, forest restoration, community preparedness, and post-fire recovery and reforestation. It mandates that 50 million acres of at-risk forests be treated over the next 10 years, including 20 million acres of additional fuel treatment on Federal lands and 30 million acres of fuel treatment on state, private, and tribal lands.

Landscape scale treatment of fuels is not solely a federal lands issue. States, counties, communities, tribes and federal governments share both the responsibilities and risk for accomplishing this work. Treating priority landscapes at the necessary scale and pace requires building a multi-jurisdictional coalition to work across land management jurisdictions and build broad public and community support for the work.

The catastrophic wildfire events of 2020 and 2021 exhausted resources at the height of wildfire season, while climate change exacerbated their behavior. Unfortunately, this was not an anomaly, but rather a far more troubling and long-standing trend. Wildfires have become larger, longer-lasting, more frequent, and more destructive in terms of lives lost and economic costs over the past two decades. A 2017 report by the National Institute of Standards and Technology (NIST) found that the annual economic burden of wildfires was between \$71 and \$348 billion, including local, state, and federal suppression costs, and that the prevalence of wildfire smoke has increased substantially since the mid-2000s, accounting for approximately 25 percent of Americans' total exposure to harmful fine particulate matter.

The science and on-the-ground experience indicate that we need to increase the pace and strategically pivot to larger scale fuel treatments. Random placement of fuel treatments along the wildland-urban interface boundary simply isn't enough. We know that when a fire moves into a treated area it alters fire behavior and reduces the risks to firefighters. A recent scientific study by Dr. Jain, Research Forester at Rocky Mountain Research Station, in collaboration with other scientists synthesized over 127 existing studies on landscape-scale fuel treatment effectiveness. The key findings were that landscape-scale fuel treatments reduce negative outcomes of wildfires and, in some cases, promote beneficial wildfire outcomes. Treating multiple fuel layers (canopy, ladder, and surface) reduces fire spread and severity, and the degree of effectiveness is influenced by the extent, size, placement, timing, and prescription of fuel treatments. The case study indicates that the length of time needed before retreatment depends on site productivity, plant species traits, and initial fuel removal, which contribute to how a site might reburn in subsequent wildfires after treatment. Several case studies showed that as fire moved into treated areas, even if they were burning at high intensity, fire intensity lowered enough that spot fires were not common or far reaching from the main fire.

Fire researchers and experienced professionals agree that treating fuels is highly effective in mitigating the dangers of wildfires. In fact, scientific evidence shows that treating surface, ladder, and crown fuels can improve protection capabilities, reduce potential fire behavior, and increase the likelihood of successful fire suppression efforts. In a Sacramento Bee interview, fire researcher Scott Stephens confirmed that at least 99% of fire scientists believe that treated areas do moderate fire behavior. Furthermore, a 2018 USDA Forest Service Pacific Northwest Report found that of the 253 treatments sampled in which a wildfire met a fuel treatment, 153 altered fire behavior, and 127 assisted with fire control operations.

In his field observations, Joe Stutler, Area Commander of the Area Command Team—with over 1000 fire assignments—stated that it is urgent to increase the number and size of forest thinning, mechanical treatments, and prescribed burning across all landscapes, and in a geographically explicit and systematic way. He noted that modified fuel treatments simply work, especially when combined with prescribed fire. Stutler went on to say “Of course, there are exceptions that lead to the myth that fuels treatments don't make any difference, like wind/wildfire events in Oregon in 2020 is an example that's being used currently, and the numbers are

staggering. Of the 1.2 million acres burned, 455,000 occurred on some of the most intensively managed forests in the Northwest. I would offer this personal observation: when we experience 80 mph winds for 72 hours, the Walmart parking lot may not be a safe place.” There is a growing recognition that the impacts of wildfires on communities have far outpaced the scale at which fuels have been treated.

To support this effort, it is important to rebuild the infrastructure necessary to process wood products coming from fuel reduction projects. The recent administration investment of \$34 million from the Bipartisan Infrastructure bill is a step in the right direction, but more is needed. The federal government and Congress can begin by incentivizing use of woody biomass from federal lands in new markets, as well as removing regulatory barriers, and encouraging market innovation. In doing so we can support a healthy forest products industry, create local jobs, reduce cost of treatments, along with restoring high-risk landscapes in the long run.

All of this is dependent on having skilled, trained wildland firefighters. The demands and expectations on our fire professionals and first responders are rapidly increasing while firefighter risks and suppression costs are reaching unprecedented levels. Many firefighters are struggling with pay, housing, work/life balance, and mental health issues. In 2020, for example, some Hot Shot Crews in CA were working over 1000 hours of overtime just to make a living wage. Other firefighters could be found living out of their vehicles because they could not find affordable housing. Others are struggling with mental health such as PTSD due to prolonged fire assignments and critical incidents that occurred on fire assignments. To take better care of these firefighters, we need to provide them with better pay and benefits, housing, mental and physical health resources, and work-life balance. Two years ago, legislation was enacted that temporarily raised firefighter pay for 2 years and added support for mental and psychological health. That legislation is set to expire; a permanent solution needs to be enacted.

The fire season, which was once thought to be 4 to 6 months, has now become year-round. A temporary, seasonal workforce is no longer sufficient, and we are seeing a shift toward a more permanent workforce that can increase workforce capacities to conduct year-round wildland fire management. We need to train this permanent collective workforce in suppression and prescribed fire management and move from a “firefighter” to a fire manager mindset.

The Forest Service once had the ability to stop gap shortages in fire personnel by using personnel working outside of fire to perform fire duties. Starting in 2000, after an intense and costly fire season, that reliance and support from non-fire personnel began to change. By 2019, the number of fire personnel had risen 132 percent since 1992, while specialists who supported restoring landscape resiliency and fuel reduction projects decreased by 54 percent. The most dramatic reductions in personnel occurred in the disciplines of forestry and engineering. NAFSR in a July 2019 conducted its own workforce study titled “Sustaining the Forest Service—Increasing Workforce Capacity to increase the pace and scale of restoration on national forest system lands.” We reached similar findings. This shift in the composition of a skilled labor force has affected the agency’s capacity to fully support wildland fire and restore landscapes to be more fire resilient.

While the present surge in funding for hazardous fuels treatments through the IJA and IRA has been supportive of additional staffing and progress is being made collectively on increasing workforce capacities, recruitment and retention of a skilled workforce continues to be an issue.

But there is some good news:

- A comprehensive National Cohesive Wildland Fire Management Strategy is in place that all firefighting agencies have agreed to.
- Keystone agreements with major partners are in place.
- 21 High-risk Firesheds have been identified to prioritize landscape treatments
- The Collaborative Forest Landscape Restoration Program (CFLRP), the Joint Chiefs Landscape Restoration Partnership (Joint Chiefs), the Good Neighbor Authority (GNA) and initiatives like Shared Stewardship are in place.

And there are problems you can help solve:

- Support the proposed workforce reforms in the FY 2024 budget request. These reforms include a permanent pay increase for federal and tribal firefighters, investment in their mental and physical health and well-being, improving their housing options, and expanding the number of permanent firefighters.

- Support the proposed budget increases funding for wildfire preparedness, hiring additional personnel, and hazardous fuels reduction treatments.
- Authorize legislation to establish a special base rate salary table for all federal wildland firefighters, create a new premium pay category, and establish a pay cap with secretarial waiver authority.

Additional Support:

- Support passage of H.R. 1586, Forest Protection and Wildland Firefighter Safety Act of 2023—allowing for the continued use of aerial retardant drops in support of wildland fire suppression efforts.
- Future legislation that would create an exception to U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) requirements—should the proposed rule be finalized for national ambient air quality standards (NAAQS) for fine particle pollution, also known as fine particulate matter, or PM_{2.5}. This proposal as written will reduce the Nation's ability to implement strategies intended to reduce unwanted wildfire effects on communities and wildlands, including barriers to increasing the pace and scale of prescribed burning. Preliminary research suggests that some areas could see a reduction in available burn days of 70–80 percent.
- Encourage changes to the federal renewable fuel standard RFS that would allow fuel removals from federal lands to be considered renewable by wood innovation businesses in their supply chains.
- Recommend that Congress request the Forest Service to provide technical drafting assistance to amend problematic provisions within the Infrastructure Bill and the Inflation Reduction Act. These provisions currently contain language that significantly hinder the Forest Service's ability to successfully implement these programs, resulting in inadequate conservation outcomes as Congress intended.

In summary, the challenges posed by wildland fires are extensive and complex, but we have the knowledge and experience to address them. We have already taken meaningful steps toward building fire-resilient landscapes, but it will require a sustained effort across jurisdictions and a long-term commitment to see these changes through. Congress has a critical role to play in providing the necessary resources, funding, and policy to mitigate the severity of wildfires, enhance community resilience, and protect our natural resources. We must work together to address this crisis and ensure a safer and more resilient future for our communities, firefighters, and forests & grasslands. Let us rise to this challenge and commit to a future where our landscapes are better equipped to withstand the threat of wildfire.

Thank you for the opportunity to be part of this hearing today. I welcome any questions that subcommittee members might have.

Mr. TIFFANY. Thank you, Ms. McNair.

I would now like to recognize Ranking Member Neguse for 30 seconds to introduce our next witness.

Mr. NEGUSE. I thank the Chairman for his courtesy. I wanted to introduce Dr. Courtney Schultz, Associate Professor of Forest and Natural Resource Policy at Colorado State University in Fort Collins.

We are glad to welcome Dr. Schultz to this Committee. She is a distinguished Professor of Forest and Natural Resource Policy at CSU, specializing in forest and fire policy, and directs the university's Public Lands Policy Group, which is focused on natural resource management and informing policy decision-making. Dr. Schultz, along with many of her colleagues at CSU, have produced invaluable research in the wake of a number of wildfires that we have experienced in Colorado.

We thank you for joining this important hearing, and certainly look forward to hearing your testimony.

And with that, I yield back, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. TIFFANY. The gentlelady is recognized for 5 minutes.

**STATEMENT OF COURTNEY SCHULTZ, ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR
OF FOREST AND NATURAL RESOURCE POLICY, COLORADO
STATE UNIVERSITY, FORT COLLINS, COLORADO**

Dr. SCHULTZ. Thank you, good afternoon, Chairman Tiffany, Ranking Member Neguse, and members of the Subcommittee. Thank you for the opportunity to speak to you today.

I am a professor at Colorado State University, and for almost 20 years, I have led research on NEPA, the National Forest Management Act, and major forest restoration and fire policies in partnership with the U.S. Forest Service across administrations and with funding from the Joint Fire Science Program and the USDA. Prior to coming to CSU, I worked for the U.S. Forest Service. My research involves surveying and interviewing people about how policy is working for them on the ground.

The most significant finding I can share from my research is that there are no silver bullets, no simple policy solutions that define whether we can overcome the tremendous challenges ahead. Instead, collaboration, leadership, and sufficient capacity, both internal and external to the agencies, are necessary preconditions for successful forest management.

If we want to get to the scale needed to make a difference in fire behavior and forest conditions, we must work across jurisdictional boundaries, build partnerships to do the work and communicate with the public, and engage industry at scale to remove and process the primarily low-to-no-value wood products that result from restoration and fuel removal.

Today, about 85 percent of projects are done through categorical exclusions, and this is good for smaller projects and jump-starting larger efforts. But to really work at the landscape scale, we need collaboration through the NEPA process to do the hard work of building partnerships and developing effective cross-boundary management plans.

Almost everyone agrees we need active management of our forests, including thinning and using beneficial fire to reduce future fire risk. A helpful resource to me is the Wildland Fire Cohesive Strategy, written by a group of leading Federal, tribal, state, and NGO land managers, and its first tenet is that we must manage for resilient forests by reducing unnaturally high fuel loads that have resulted from past management and now lead to severe fires, particularly with climate change.

Its second tenet is to promote fire-adapted communities, where human populations and infrastructure are prepared to receive, respond to, and recover from wildland fire. Importantly, the cohesive strategy focuses not on community protection, but on community resilience through home hardening and fuel reduction in the home ignition zone.

The final tenant of the cohesive strategy is to promote safe and effective fire response. Major challenges include recruiting and retaining the fire response workforce, using principles of risk management and defining and measuring effectiveness, given the vast amount of public dollars spent and the people who risk their lives responding to wildfire. It is untenable to continue suppressing almost all fires when conditions are favorable. Fire must be allowed to play its natural role to reduce future fire risk.

I would like to share a bit more about my research, which has found that collaborative approaches support larger scale planning and implementation, innovation, leveraging of non-Federal capacity, and reduced conflict. According to the Forest Service, collaborative approaches like the Collaborative Forest Landscape Restoration Program, commonly known as CFLRP, have economic benefits keeping mills open, supporting jobs and local labor income, and contributing to a relatively greater proportion of accomplishments in timber volume sold and acres treated.

My work has found that the biggest barriers to success are inadequate agency capacity for planning, contracting, and implementation, insufficient industry capacity, and limited markets for wood products.

In addition, my work has found that we need to do more to support beneficial fire. We need a year-round, dedicated, prescribed fire workforce, and it cannot all be Federal. This will require addressing the liability issues that limit building this workforce.

To conclude, these are my primary recommendations.

First, work to facilitate community protection on Federal lands must occur in places where communities are also working on their resilience to fire.

We must continue to address workforce limitations, and we need to do more to build external industry capacity and markets.

Now, especially, we also need effective measurement and transparency. A recent report by Taxpayers for Common Sense noted that it is difficult to know what is being planned and prioritized under the 10-year crisis strategy, how much money is going to specific programs, or what is being accomplished. The same is true for wildfire suppression expenditures.

Finally, we need to have honest and transparent conversations about the future of fire, which is predicted to only get more frequent and intense. Work on Federal lands can make a difference for forest conditions, but work within communities on and around homes is the most important factor for community resilience. Now that major Federal investments are in place, we collectively need strategies to create the enabling conditions, oversight, and transparency to facilitate effective partnerships and work on the ground.

I look forward to continued work with the Forest Service, its many partners, and the dedicated members of this Committee and the Congress to addressing these challenges. Thank you.

[The prepared statement of Dr. Schultz follows:]

PREPARED STATEMENT OF DR. COURTNEY SCHULTZ, ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR,
COLORADO STATE UNIVERSITY

Thank you for the opportunity to speak to you today about the current challenges facing forest management, wildfire suppression, and firefighters as we move into the most active period of the fire year. I am a professor in the Department of Forest and Rangeland Stewardship at Colorado State University, specializing in forest and fire policy. I direct the Public Lands Policy Group, which researches the policy impacts, challenges, and opportunities on federal public lands.

Over the last 18 years, I have led national policy analyses of many of the primary forest restoration policies, including the Collaborative Forest Landscape Restoration Program, the Joint Chiefs Landscape Restoration Partnership, Implementation of the Shared Stewardship Strategy, and now post-fire policies, in partnership with the US Forest Service across administrations and with funding from the Joint Fire Science Program, National Science Foundation, and USDA. I have also led research on barriers to prescribed fire, land management planning, National Environmental

Policy Act processes, climate change vulnerability assessment, and risk-management approaches for improving fire response. Prior to coming to Colorado State University, I worked for the U.S. Forest Service on the Four Forests Restoration Initiative in Arizona. I work closely with the Colorado Forest Restoration Institute, networks of scientists, and thought leaders working on forest management issues from rural and community-based forestry organizations. My research involves listening to people from around the country about how policies are working for them on the ground. I have surveyed and interviewed thousands of federal and state agency staff members, partners, NGO and industry representatives, and individuals working for Native American Tribes.

The most significant finding I can share with you from my research is that there are no silver bullets—no simple policy solutions that will define whether we can overcome the tremendous challenges we face ahead. Instead, collaboration, leadership, and sufficient capacity, both internal and external to the agency, are what undergird successful national forest management. Policies that facilitate communication among stakeholders and collaboration across jurisdictions, and strategies that increase capacity to do the necessary work, lead to success.¹ If we want to get to the scale needed to make a difference in fire behavior and forest conditions, we have to work across jurisdictional boundaries, engage in partnerships to do the work and communicate its value with the public, and engage industry to remove and process the low-to-no-value wood products that often result today from restoration and fuel removal. Today, about 85% of projects are done through categorical exclusions, and this is good for smaller projects and jumpstarting larger efforts. But to really work at the landscape level, we need collaboration, and that means we must do the hard work of strategizing, planning, and building partnerships, and do this through the NEPA process and through collaboration.

The challenges we face are complex, centuries in the making, and involve major biophysical processes and natural hazards. Scientists predict longer and more intense fire seasons because of the warming and drought associated with climate change.² The wildland-urban interface is the fastest growing land-use type in the nation and across the West.³ Forest management can both reduce and exacerbate fire hazard, depending on how, where, and when it is done.^{4,5} Lands managed for timber production, including industrially managed lands, can often be subject to and propagate higher-severity fire than other lands, requiring cross-boundary cooperation and science-based assessment of fire hazard and management options.⁶

In our frequent-fire forests, past forest management, including both fire suppression and past approaches to timber harvest, has led to an accumulation of small trees and fine fuels that contribute to increased fire hazard. Almost everyone in the scientific and management community agrees we need active management of our national forests, including fuel removal through thinning and the increased use of beneficial fire as a strategy to reduce future fire risk.^{7,8} Restoring fire to our fire-prone ecosystems through controlled burning, cultural burning by tribes based on their traditional ecological knowledge, and during wildfire ignitions when conditions are favorable for good fire all can reduce the risk of more extreme fire in the future. Timber harvest and tree thinning can be part of the solution. In some areas, merchantable timber can offset some of the cost of this work, but in many areas, especially those with high fire hazard, the small-diameter wood on our forests is of low-to-no value. We will have to pay to get it out of the woods and create new markets, for example for biomass, to derive some value from restoration by-products.

Considering the recent updates made by the Wildland Fire Leadership Council, comprised of leading state, federal, tribal, and NGO forest and land managers, I

¹Schultz CA, Moseley C. 2019. Collaborations and capacities to transform fire management. *Science*, USA 366(6461):38–40.

²Abatzoglou JT, Williams AP. 2016. Impact of anthropogenic climate change on wildfire across western US forests. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, USA 113:11770–11775.

³Radeloff VC, et al. 2018. Rapid growth of the US wildland-urban interface raises wildfire risk. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, USA 114:2946–2951.

⁴Zald HSJ, Dunn CJ. 2018. Severe fire weather and intensive forest management increase fire severity in a multi-ownership landscape. *Ecological Applications* 28: 1068–80.

⁵Kalies EL, Kent LL. 2016. Tamm Review: Are fuel treatments effective at achieving ecological and social objectives? A systematic review. *Forest Ecology and Management* 375:84–95.

⁶Levine JI, et al. 2022. Higher incidence of high-severity fire in and near industrially managed forests. *Frontiers in Ecology and the Environment*. Doi:10.1002/fee.2499

⁷Stephens S, et al. 2020. Fire and climate change: Conserving seasonally dry forests is still possible. *Frontiers in Ecology and the Environment* 18(6), 354–360.

⁸Prichard, SJ, et al. 2021. Adapting western North American forests to climate change and wildfires: 10 common questions. *Ecological Applications* 31(8), e02433.

want to reference back today to the Wildland Fire Cohesive Strategy and its primary tenets. First, the Cohesive Strategy says we must manage for resilient forests by reducing unnaturally high fuel loads that have resulted from past management and now lead to uncharacteristically severe fires, particularly under conditions driven by climate change. Work in our national forests is primarily about restoring ecological integrity so that forests are resilient in the face of climate change and climate-driven disturbances. We must reduce fuels especially in our low-to-mid-elevation forests and restore fire as a critical ecological process in all fire-prone forests. Doing this can improve forest ecosystem conditions by reducing extreme fire behavior and can create conditions that support safe and effective fire response. This work requires mechanical thinning and the use of beneficial fire. Desired conditions, achieved through hard work or wildfire events, must be maintained with maintenance burning.

We now have the benefit of unprecedented federal investment in our forests, with billions of dollars allocated to fuel reduction near and in the wildland-urban interface and in high-priority municipal watersheds under the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act and Inflation Reduction Act. Now we must put in place the capacity throughout the system to make the best use of these funds. In my research, the primary barriers to accomplishing work in the woods are lack of both internal agency capacity to plan and administer projects and contracts, and lack of external capacity, including industry partners who can cut, remove, and process wood products, and access to viable markets for those products. Other research has found, like mine, that the primary barriers are not due to litigation and NEPA.⁹ The problems are more nuanced, related to hiring, recruitment, and retention of a workforce to do this work, both inside and outside of the federal agencies, expediting hiring and grants and agreements capacity to facilitate that work, engagement of state, tribal, industry and NGO partners who can add capacity, and undertaking fire management planning. I have seen numerous creative approaches to large-scale planning, NEPA analysis, and monitoring the implementation and effects of treatments under programs like the Collaborative Forest Landscape Restoration Program, and to working with private landowners through the Joint Chiefs Landscape Restoration Partnership. I have seen forests use their NEPA processes as key opportunities to build partnerships with other fire agencies, homeowners, and air quality regulators to implement fuel reduction and prescribed fire projects at a meaningful scale. Many projects have benefited from improved partnerships with states to accomplish work, sometimes through the Good Neighbor Authority and Shared Stewardship, and an increased recognition of the need for tribal co-stewardship and integration of traditional ecological knowledge into land management. These factors create the potential for promoting the first Cohesive Strategy tenet of managing for resilience forests.

Another tenet of the Cohesive Strategy is to promote fire-adapted communities, where “human populations and infrastructure are as prepared as possible to receive, respond to, and recover from wildland fire.” I want to emphasize that the Cohesive Strategy focuses on community resilience to fire, not community protection. What we do on public lands will not stop fires, nor will it be the primary factor in protecting communities. The most destructive fire for homeowners in my home state was an urban fire where grasses, shrubs, and homes propagated the flames of the Marshall Fire in December 2021, leading to the loss of over a thousand homes. Home loss is most related to the presence of fuels within 150 feet of the home, and other factors that make home more or less likely to ignite. Most fire starts are not on public lands and are human-caused.¹⁰ Under extreme weather conditions, fires can burn through treated, industrial, and even clear-cut stands. Communities around the West must take on fuel reduction in the home ignition zone, communication and evacuation planning, community-based fire response, and equitably including all community members in fire-adapted communities. Home hardening and fuel reduction in the home ignition and community protection zones are imperative.¹¹ Work on national forests therefore must be coupled with community-based fuel reduction and preparedness if the goal is to contribute to community resilience. Because most land in the wildland-urban interface is not federal land,

⁹ Ruple JC, Pleune J, Heiny E. 2022. Evidence-based recommendations for improving National Environmental Policy Act implementation. *Columbia Journal of Environmental Law* 46: 273–350.

¹⁰ Balch JK, et al. 2017. Human-started wildfires expand the fire niche across the United States. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, USA* 114:2946–2951.

¹¹ Schoennagel T, et al. 2017. Implementation of National Fire Plan treatments near the wildland-urban interface in the western United States. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, USA* 106:1076–10711.

this will mean more work on private, municipal, and state lands to reduce fire hazard. This means getting federal funding to state and local resources to do this work and making sure that where the federal government is investing in work to reduce fire hazard near communities, the nearby communities are doing their part to promote resilience for the fires that will inevitably come.

The final tenant of the Cohesive Strategy is to promote safe and effective fire response grounded in risk management principles. The Wildland Fire Leadership Council recognizes that it is untenable to continue suppressing almost all fires. When conditions are favorable fire should be allowed to play its key role as the primary ecological process that shapes healthy forests in the West and reduces future fire risk. And in some cases, indirect attack of fires, where firefighters utilize natural features and fire breaks to stop fires, is the best and safest strategy for incident response. Here too there is a major challenge of recruiting and retaining the workforce for safe and effective response.¹² And, defining and measuring effectiveness is a challenge that is as-of-yet unmet and deserves greater attention given the vast amount of public dollars spent, and the people who risk their lives, responding to wildfire. I also want to draw attention to the growing use of PODs, or potential operational delineations, which are a pre-fire season strategy to promote coordinated action and planning for wildfires in order to delineate response strategies and priorities and potential locations for holding fire, and by extension for fuels treatment to support safe and effective fire response.¹³ Shaded fuel breaks at key boundaries, for instance, have value for reducing and managing extreme fires.¹⁴ Many BLM and national forest units will be implementing PODs in the next few years. In our research, people said these activities hold promise for getting more “good” fire on the ground but also to build agreement about fire management approaches in partnership with state and local fire responders outside of the emergency management context.¹⁵ Here, again, collaboration has great value, this time in the context of planning for fire response.

The recent update to the Cohesive Strategy identifies four factors that need increased attention: climate change; workforce capacity, health, and well-being; community resilience; and diversity, equity, inclusion, and environmental justice (DEISJ). Related to climate change, scientific research and innovative, forward-thinking planning grounded in science and traditional ecological knowledge will be needed to respond effectively in the face of climate change. More work will be needed to prepare for the cascading effects of multiple disturbance events, like reburns or post-fire floods, and improving policy to attend to the multi-jurisdictional effects of fire. For the fire workforce, more attention is needed to the mental and physical health of firefighters, interagency and multi-partner training opportunities to augment the fire workforce, and making sure the pay and benefits of firefighters are adequate. We also need innovative strategies to recruit and train a next-generation forest and fire workforce. Sharing equipment and resources among agencies and partners, and moving money through agreements needs to be easier. For community resilience, community readiness can be improved and requires changing building codes, reducing human-caused ignitions, creating incentives and support for removing fuels in the home ignition zone, inclusive planning for during- and post-fire response, and smoke readiness, done in partnership with public health agencies. Finally, DEISJ can be promoted through inclusive planning, budgeting, contracting, and training, with intentional engagement of local communities and incorporating equity considerations into fuels reduction strategies. These are all new emphasis areas within the Cohesive Strategy where state and federal fire managers say we need to pay increased attention.

Before I close, I want to elaborate on some of my key research findings—primarily the important role of partnerships in fire management and evidence-based assessment of the barriers to improving forest and fire management. I have researched the Collaborative Forest Landscape Restoration Program (CFLRP) and the Joint Chiefs Landscape Restoration Partnership, interviewing and surveying hundreds of partners and agency staff members across all CFLRP projects and most Joint Chiefs

¹² U.S. Government Accountability Office. *Wildland Fire: Barrier to Recruitment and Retention of Federal Wildland Firefighters*. GAO-23-105517, Nov. 17, 2022.

¹³ Thompson MP, et al. 2018. Rethinking the wildland fire management system. *Journal of Forestry* 116:382–390.

¹⁴ Low KE, et al. 2023. Shaded fuel breaks create wildfire-resilient forest stands: lessons from a long-term study in the Sierra Nevada. *Fire Ecology* 19: 29.

¹⁵ Greiner SM, et al. 2021. Pre-season fire management planning: the use of Potential Operational Delineations to prepare for wildland fire events. *International Journal of Wildland Fire* 30:170–178.

projects.¹⁶ These approaches support: larger-scale planning and implementation; monitoring and planning innovations; leveraging of non-federal capacity; and agreement-building. According to Forest Service reporting, the CFLRP had economic benefits that included keeping mills open, supporting jobs, local labor income, and a greater proportion of accomplishments in timber volume sold and acres treated compared to the proportion of agency spending.¹⁷ The biggest barrier to success inside the agencies were inadequate agency capacity for planning and implementation. The biggest challenge external to the agencies for the CFLRP was insufficient forest products industry capacity and limited markets for wood products that could offset high treatment costs. These factors persist and need to be addressed to promote success.

With colleagues, I also conducted a multi-year study across the West, interviewing federal and state land managers and air quality regulators to understand barriers to and facilitators of prescribed fire.¹⁸ Aside from weather conditions constraining burn windows, we found that the biggest barriers to progress are lack of funding and capacity, particularly because qualified fire personnel are increasingly pulled onto wildfires, but also due to seasonal employment and a general decrease in staff capacity. We need a year-round dedicated prescribed fire workforce. It cannot all be federal, and it will require addressing the liability issues that are attendant to building this workforce. Resource sharing to leverage capacity across agencies and partners is essential for success. People also said incentives to plan and implement prescribed fire are weak. Where prescribed fire occurs, it is because individual leaders are committed to making it happen and find creative strategies to overcome these hurdles. Congress can play an essential role in promoting the value of beneficial fire and overseeing how prescribed fire is being utilized with plans and incentives to increase the application of good fire on priority landscapes.

On this last note, I want to emphasize that the current EPA proposals to tighten regulatory standards for PM 2.5 would impede efforts to reintroduce beneficial fire, which is our most powerful tool for mitigating against the intense particulate matter exposure that occurs during wildfires. While efforts to protect human health and air quality are critical, the EPA must do this in a way that allows the continued use of beneficial fire. Comment letters on this topic offer potential paths forward, like easing exceptional events requirements and considering smoke from beneficial fire as part of background conditions. I also suggest greater attention to the needs for access to insurance and indemnification for burners, large-scale fire management planning to support the effective application of good fire on our forests, building a workforce with access to training and qualifications for a variety of partners, and supporting cultural burning by tribes.

Effective use of IIJA and IRA funds will require addressing these challenges, and working in places where communities are also working on their own resilience to fire if community protection is a goal. The last time I testified before this committee was before the historic investments of 2022. I noted that augmenting investments could be beneficial but would require a transparent and science-based process for identifying priority work at the national level. Investments would need to be targeted toward places with effective partnerships and social agreement and attention should be paid to the effects of budget structures and performance measures to incentivize and account for priority work. For instance, timber targets drive work to places where there is valuable product and existing processing infrastructure, which often do not overlap with fire hazard reduction priorities, and acreage targets can incentivize staff to pursue so-called “cheap acres” and fail to convey whether fire hazard has been reduced or whether treatments yield positive benefits when fires burn. I also noted that leveraging external capacity would require more efficient resource sharing and a strong external workforce to support restoration and fuels reduction work. Regarding the forest products industry, the lack of businesses able to work on restoration projects and with low-value products, limited markets, and problems with workforce availability all are barriers to progress. More work is needed to investigate specific challenges and policy options that would support forest products industry and other restoration businesses so that the creation of

¹⁶Schultz, CA, et al.. 2018. Policy design to support forest restoration: the value of focused investment and collaboration. *Forests* 9(9):512. All reports and publications for this project are available at: <https://sites.warnercnr.colostate.edu/courtneyschultz/forest-restoration-governance/>

¹⁷U.S. Forest Service. 2020. Collaborative Forest Landscape Restoration Program: 10-year report to Congress. Available at: https://www.fs.fed.us/restoration/documents/cflrp/REF_Report-CollaborativeForestLandscapeRestoration-508.pdf

¹⁸Schultz CA, et al. 2018. Prescribed fire policy barriers and opportunities: A diversity of challenges and strategies across the west. Public Lands Policy Group Practitioner Paper #2/ Ecosystem Workforce Program Working Paper #86; Schultz CA, et al. 2019. Available at: <https://sites.warnercnr.colostate.edu/courtneyschultz/prescribed-fire/>

forest restoration by-products can continue to be a co-benefit of restoration work where possible. To develop the science on the changing nature of fire management, I also suggested supporting full funding for the Joint Fire Science Program.

At this important time, I reiterate these recommendations. Addressing workforce limitations and supporting increased capacity both internal to the agencies and through partnerships will be critical to success. And, now especially, we need effective measurement and transparency. A recent report by Taxpayer's for Common Sense noted that it is difficult to know what is being planned and prioritized under the 10-Year Wildfire Crisis Strategy, how much money is going to specific programs, or what is being accomplished. The same is true for wildfire expenditures. I would recommend the development of a robust system for tracking investments, which are supposed to be going to work in the WUI, priority watersheds, and in part specifically to prescribed fire. A plan for increasing the use of beneficial fire is needed, along with new metrics to track acres where fire hazard is mitigated and forest conditions are restored. The current metrics of acres treated will not effectively convey the amount or efficacy of work done on the ground with these funds. I would recommend a transparent process involving partners in tracking investments over time, with details on spending, accomplishments, and prioritization and implementation strategies. Improving measurement of safe and effective fire response is also needed. Finally, we need to have honest and transparent conversations about the future of fire, which will only become more intense. Work on national forests can make a difference for forest conditions, and likely provide some benefits for communities. However, for community resilience in the face of the fires that are certainly coming, work within communities on and around homes is the most important factor. Now that major federal investments are in place, we collectively need to put into place strategies to create the enabling conditions, oversight, and transparency to facilitate effective partnerships and work on the ground.

Mr. TIFFANY. Thank you, Dr. Schultz.

I will now recognize Mr. LaMalfa to introduce our next witness.

Mr. LAMALFA. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, I appreciate that.

We are honored to have from Paradise, California, my district, I can see the ridge from my front door at home there, Mr. Greg Bolin, our Mayor.

Thank you for joining us. Thank you for providing these handouts here, showing the reality of the Camp Fire that need not be forgotten from November 2018 by any of us as we deal with these serious issues and overcome the impediments to doing better forest management.

So, Mr. Bolin, a pleasure to have you here today. Thank you.

Mr. TIFFANY. Sir. You are recognized for 5 minutes.

STATEMENT OF THE HON. GREG BOLIN, MAYOR, PARADISE, CALIFORNIA

Mr. BOLIN. Thank you, Congressman LaMalfa, Chair Tiffany, Ranking Member Neguse, and members of the Subcommittee. Thank you for the opportunity to share the Town of Paradise's experience during, before, and after the Camp Fire of 2018.

The Town of Paradise is located in northern California, approximately 90 miles north of Sacramento. Prior to the Camp Fire, our population was 26,500, making Paradise the second-largest community in Butte County, behind the City of Chico, our neighbor to the southwest. Considered a bedroom community, most Paradise residents worked in neighboring cities, and chose to live in Paradise for its forested beauty, cooler temperatures, as well as affordable housing.

Paradise is seated in the foothills on the ridge between two canyons, Butte Creek Canyon to the west and Feather River

Canyon to the east. Paradise's location, along with the dense national forest that surrounds Paradise, and prior to the Camp Fire dense vegetation that existed within the town limits made Paradise vulnerable to wildfires.

I moved to Paradise in 1967 at the age of 9 from Los Angeles. My dad built houses, so we moved frequently. He built, sold, built again, and so on. I was able to graduate from Paradise High School, and did the same and followed my father's footsteps. Out of 24 homes I lived in over that period of time, only 2 survived the Camp Fire.

In 2012, I was elected to the town council with a goal of making Paradise more business and builder-friendly. I served as the mayor three times, and most recently this last December was elected as mayor. In more than 50 years in Paradise, I have seen and experienced fires of all types, severity, and duration.

Fire is nothing new to Paradise, or the hundreds of foothill communities just like it. There are a number of factors that have changed to make wildfires more intense and damaging, which include environmental, situational, policy-driven factors. In our case, a combination of a historically long dry period, drought conditions, high wind, overgrown properties with too little defensible space, dense neighboring forests, and electrical equipment failure came together on that fateful day in November 2018 to cause the Camp Fire.

The 2018 Camp Fire ignited on November 8, and became the most deadly and devastating fire in California history, burning for 17 days, destroying 154,000 acres of public and private property, over 14,000 homes, 5,000 businesses, and other structures. The fire forced evacuations of more than 52,000 residents, injured 17 people including 5 firefighters, and claimed the lives of 85 people.

November 8, 2018 started like a normal fall day, except the wind was blowing strong. I loaded up my pup in the back of my truck, and as I was getting ready to leave, my wife walked out and said she just heard on the radio there was a fire on Highway 70 in a place called Pulga. I looked up in the sky in that direction and saw a plume of smoke. I told her I would get back to her if I heard anything, and give her the updates.

My typical morning included running my dog in a grass field behind our church, which is right next to a middle school, and then visiting my job sites before I went to the office. I am a general contractor who builds custom homes. I was on the grassy field about 15 minutes when I saw the plume from a distance become a dark cloud over our town. I noticed that parents were lined up to drop off their kids at the charter school, and not aware of the events that were developing. It was about 7:30 a.m.

I started listening to the scanner on my phone, and then noticed large ash floating down from the sky. I walked over to Chris, the principal of the school, and asked if he thought the kids should be dropped off. Chris was on the phone with the district office and said there were no plans of canceling school. About then I heard on the scanner that the fire was in Concow, one ridge over from Paradise. I communicated this to Chris and was off to my job sites.

My task was to tell everyone to grab their equipment and go home if they lived in town, or get out of town if they didn't. After

communicating with my subs, I heard on the scanner that we had a house on fire in the upper part of Paradise on the east side. I called my wife to tell her to pack the car, which she had already started. I called my mom, and it was about 8:30 a.m. I got home without much trouble and started packing the vehicles.

I walked around the exterior of my house, removing flammable items and debris. In the fall season, when the wind is blowing, leaves go everywhere. I went up to my mom's, loaded her and her belongings in my truck. She lived only a few houses up from me. I brought her back to my house, and finalized loading and leave. It was about 9:30 a.m. Both my wife and my mom asked, "Why are you leaving? You never leave." I had experienced fires and evacuations over the years. My answer to them was, "Something is different. Something tells me we cannot stay here for this one."

We drove through the neighborhood and hit various points of traffic as others were leaving. We saw ash and debris falling. We heard explosions in the background that turned out to be propane tanks. About 2 miles into our 13-mile journey to Chico, we finally arrived on Skyway. Skyway is a main road on the west side of town, and all north and southbound lanes were heading south. It was about noon.

By that time, the sunlight was completely gone. The sky was dark. This was a darkness I had never experienced in my life, along with the heat. I felt the heat of the flames on my truck as we drove by them. I had the AC on recirculating, just so I could keep the smoke out and cool the truck down. As we made our way south, we saw houses on fire, apartments on fire, standing power poles in flames. One power pole fell across Skyway, forcing all traffic to merge south on the northbound lane.

We saw our son's neighborhood in flames, and the fire dancing on the road ahead of us. We made it to Chico around 1:30 p.m., and had arranged in advance to meet up with our son. At this point, we had no plans for housing, except our son did have a friend he was staying with. We called a friend from our church and asked if myself, my wife, and my mom could stay there. They said, "Absolutely." We didn't know at the time they had already accepted three other couples.

My story is a story of tens of thousands of people who evacuated that day. In all, over 50,000 people were displaced, 26,500 from Paradise and the rest from areas surrounding Paradise. Our residents watched their community burn as they drove through the flames, believing they might perish that way.

Some of our residents did die in the car trying to escape. There were mothers with newborn babies evacuating the hospital, forced to escape burning ambulances and walk on foot, still in their hospital gowns. The events of that day will never leave the memories of our residents, and it is incumbent upon me as their mayor to tell their story and help prevent this disaster like ours from happening again.

Leading up to the Camp Fire, Northern California had experienced very long periods without rainfall. More than 200 days had elapsed without significant rainfall by November 2018. This led to extreme, dry, brittle, fuel conditions throughout the region. The national forest lands that surrounded Paradise, the Plumas, and

Lassen National Forest were extremely dry as well, and were overgrown.

Inside Paradise limits, private properties contained dense brush. As a small town with one code enforcement officer, defensible space was encouraged but difficult to enforce.

Mr. TIFFANY. Sir, I have to ask you to wrap up your testimony.

Mr. BOLIN. OK. I will just leave with it was 17 days that fire-fighters worked hard and finally got the fire out. And a lot of it was because of the rain that came and helped them out.

So, I will leave it with that.

[The prepared statement of Mr. Bolin follows:]

PREPARED STATEMENT OF GREG BOLIN, MAYOR, TOWN OF PARADISE, CALIFORNIA

Thank you for the opportunity to share the Town of Paradise's experiences before during and after the 2018 Camp Fire. The Town of Paradise is located in northern California approximately 90 miles north of Sacramento. Prior to the Camp Fire, our population was 26,500, making Paradise the second largest community in Butte County, behind the City of Chico our neighbor to the southwest. Considered a bedroom community, most Paradise residents worked in neighboring cities, and chose to live in Paradise for its forested beauty and cooler temperatures, as well as more affordable housing. Paradise is situated in the foothills on a ridge between two canyons, Butte Creek Canyon to the West and Feather River Canyon to the East. Paradise's location, along with the dense national forests that surround Paradise, and prior to the Camp Fire, dense vegetation that existed within Town limits, made Paradise vulnerable to wildfire.

I moved to Paradise in 1967 at the age of 9 from Los Angeles. My dad built houses, so we moved frequently as he built, sold, built again and so on. I graduated from Paradise High School and did the same as I followed in his footsteps. Out of 24 homes I've lived in, only 2 survived the Camp Fire. In 2012 I was elected to Town Council with the goal of making Paradise more business and builder friendly. I have served as Mayor 3 times, the most recent term as Mayor beginning in December 2022. In more than 50 years in the Town of Paradise, I have seen and experienced fires of all types, severity, and duration. Fire is nothing new to Paradise, or the hundreds of foothill communities just like it. There are a number of factors that have changed to make wildfires more intense and damaging, which include environmental, situational, and policy-driven factors. In our case, a combination of a historically long dry period, drought conditions, high winds, overgrown properties with too little defensible space, dense neighboring forests, and electrical equipment failure came together on one fateful day in November 2018 to cause the Camp Fire.

The 2018 Camp Fire ignited on November 8, 2018, and became the most deadly and devastating fire in California history, burning for 17 days, destroying 154,000 acres of public and private property, over 14,000 homes, and 5,000 businesses and other structures. The fire forced the evacuation of more than 52,000 residents, injured 17 people including 5 firefighters, and claimed 85 lives.

November 8th 2018 started like a normal Fall day, except the wind was blowing stronger. I was loading up and putting my pup in his kennel in the back of my truck when Kathleen, my wife came outside and said that she had just heard on the radio there was fire on Hwy 70 in Pulga. I looked in the sky in that direction and could see a plume of smoke. I told her I would let her know if I received any updates and was off to start my day.

My typical morning includes running my dog at a grass field behind our church which is next to a middle school charter and then visiting my jobsites before heading into the office. I am a general contractor who builds custom homes. I was on the grass field for about 15 minutes when I could see that plume off in the distance was now a dark cloud falling over half our town. I noticed that parents were lined up to drop their kids off at the charter school and not aware of the events that were developing. It was about 7:30 am. I started listening to the scanner on my phone and then noticed large ash was floating down from the sky. I walked over to Chris, the principal at the school and asked if he thought the kids should be dropped off? Chris was on the phone with the district office and being told they had no plans to cancel school. About then, I heard on the scanner that the fire is in Concow, one ridge over from Paradise. I communicated that to Chris, and I was off

to my jobsites. My task was to tell everyone to grab their equipment and go home if they live in town or get out of town if they didn't.

After communicating with my subcontractors, I heard on the scanner that we had a house on fire in the upper part of Paradise on the east side of town. I called my wife to tell her to pack the car, which she had already started. I called my mom. It was now about 8:30 am. I got home without too much trouble and started packing the vehicles. I walked around the exterior of my home removing flammable items and debris. It was the Fall season and leaves drop quick in high winds. I went up to help my mom load her and her belongings in my truck. She lived a few houses from ours. I brought her back to my house to finalize loading and leave. It was about 9:30 am. Both my wife and mom asked me "Why are we leaving, you never want to leave". I have experienced other fires and evacuations over the years. My answer to them both was that "this is different. Something is telling me that we can't stay here this time."

We drove through our neighborhood and hit various points of traffic as others were leaving. We saw ash and debris falling. We heard explosions in the background which turned out to be propane tanks. About 2 miles into our 13-mile journey to Chico we finally arrived on Skyway. Skyway is the main road on the west side of town and all north and southbound lanes were heading south. It was about noon. By that time the sunlight was completely gone, the sky was dark. A darkness that I had never experienced before along with heat. I felt the heat of the flames through the truck we drove. I had the AC on recirculating since the smoke was thick and it was warm in the truck.

As we made our way south, we saw houses on fire, apartments on fire and standing power poles in flames. One power pole fell across Skyway forcing all traffic to merge and go south on a north bound lane. We saw our youngest son's neighborhood in flames and the fire dancing on the road ahead of us.

We made it to Chico around 1:30 pm and had arranged in advance to meet up with our son. At this point we had no plan for housing except my son had friends to stay with. We called a friend from church and asked if he had room for myself, my wife and my mother. They said "absolutely"! We didn't know that they already had taken in three other couples.

My story is the story of tens of thousands of people who evacuated that day, in all over 50,000 people were displaced—26,500 from Paradise, and the rest from the areas surrounding Paradise. Our residents watched their community burn as they drove through flames believing they might perish that way. Some of our residents did die in cars trying to escape. There were mothers with newborn babies evacuated from the hospital, forced to escape burning ambulances, and walk on foot, still in hospital gowns. The events of that day will never leave the memories of our residents, and it is incumbent upon me as their Mayor to tell their story and help prevent a disaster like ours from happening again.

Leading up to the Camp Fire, northern California had experienced a very long period without rainfall—more than 200 days had elapsed without significant rainfall by November 2018. This led to extremely dry, and brittle fuel conditions throughout the region. The national forest lands that surround Paradise, the Plumas and Lassen National forests were extremely dry as well and were overgrown. Inside Paradise Town limits, private property contained dense brush, and as a small Town with a single Code Enforcement Officer, defensible space was encouraged but difficult to enforce. November typically sees high winds in our region, however the winds on November 8th were particularly strong. With these conditions in place, the slightest spark could prove catastrophic, which is exactly what happened when a poorly maintained and faulty Pacific Gas & Electric transmission line 8 miles away from Paradise in a community called Pulga failed. This failure caused enough of a spark to ignite the dry fuel nearby, which was carried at stunning speed across the 8 miles of dry, dense forest and small mountain communities to the Town of Paradise within an hour and a half.

The fire burned for 17 days before it was finally put out by our hard-working firefighters, with help from rains that finally arrived in the region. While fire retardant was not used in Paradise, winds and smoke were too much for aircraft to fly safely, it was utilized in the subsequent weeks once the fire had burned through Paradise. This action kept the fire from spreading to our neighbors Chico and Oroville.

From my perspective, more needs to be done when it comes to managing the forests that lie outside the Paradise Town limits. As the Mayor, I can work with my staff and with the residents of our community to put into action the steps that protect our community within our borders. But what I can't do is take any action to protect us from the wildfires that start in our neighboring forests. Prior to 2016 the federal government had a "hands off" approach to forest management. Federal

forestry officials have said the agency's budget has been tied up reacting to fires, rather than trying to prevent them. From 1995 to 2015, the Forest Service went from spending 16% to 52% of its budget fighting fires, according to the Ecological Society of America, a non-profit.

Since 2017, the federal government has had a renewed focus on forest management. In the year that ended October 1st, 2018 the federal government thinned, cut, burned and mulched about 235,000 acres in California according to Bernie Gyant, the U.S. Forest Service's deputy regional forester for California and the Pacific. The trend toward thinning forests needs to continue.

While there were many factors that led to the Camp Fire, addressing any one of them will help lessen the severity of future fires in my community and those like it.

Once the fire was out, 17 days after it ignited, our community began the long recovery process. It took 9 months for fire debris to be removed from private property, which is much faster than we expected, to the credit of FEMA and the California Office of Emergency Services (Cal OES). We also had to address restoring power, water, communications (phone and internet), as well as removing the thousands of trees that had fallen into roadways, or across access ways that were needed for immediate response activities. We issued our first building permit in February 2019, and since then rebuilding has not slowed down. We have rebuilt 2,300 housing units, including single family homes and multi-family units, and at any given time we have about 700 homes under construction.

It is important to note that as we rebuild, our community recognizes the importance of rebuilding stronger and better than we were before so we may be resilient to future fires or other disasters. Paradise has the unique opportunity to rebuild from the ground up and be at the forefront of resilient building to be a model for other communities who hopefully will not need to experience the devastation we did to learn what we learned. Paradise has sought out experts in resilient methods and technology to make sure we are doing all we can do. We have incorporated the Institute for Business and Home Safety (IBHS) Wildfire Prepared Home Standard into our local building codes, going a step further than the California Building Codes and the Wildland Urban Interface (WUI) codes. With requirements like Class-A rated roofs, enclosed eaves, and a 5 foot non-combustible zone around the home, Paradise's building standards follow science to be as resilient as we can. We also require strict defensible space standards on individual properties, keeping weeds and brush low near homes. We not only encourage this, we require it, and inspect every property every year to ensure compliance. In addition to individual property efforts, the Town is working with our Parks District to create buffer zones in areas along the perimeter of our community to help slow fires that enter from neighboring forests. The efforts described here have been studied by Milliman and Core Logic through a Bay Area Council Report and have been found to reduce wildfire risk by 70%.

Wildfire is a reality for Paradise and thousands of communities just like it. What has worked in the past, just isn't working anymore to keep our communities safe. That said, as Paradise has discovered, there are ways to make living in the Wildland Urban Interface (WUI) and high fire severity zones possible with some effort on the part of residents, communities, local and state governments, and federal policy.

Mr. TIFFANY. Thank you, Mayor Bolin, for your testimony.

I would like to recognize Members now for 5 minutes, and we will start with Representative LaMalfa.

Mr. LAMALFA. Thank you for that, Mr. Chairman. I appreciate the special consideration on that.

Mayor Bolin, indeed, a very emotional and moving experience that you have brought to us here today. We stood beside you in living it, but there is nothing like what we see here, with the photos and, indeed, the movies that were made by Ron Howard and others to depict what it was really, really like. And the only thing I guess that would be comparable or worse would be an actual war zone or something, but it felt like that to everybody. And this was the immediate result.

Now, optimistically, it is great to see how well things are bouncing back. Your town has done an amazing job of keeping a positive spirit and cleaning up the debris and hauling off those burned-out vehicles. And indeed, you have many new home permits in place. I have been up there for ribbon-cutting on some of those and the businesses that were able to re-open again, the restaurants and all that. So, there is indeed a very fierce spirit of building back there, and we are proud of that effort and all that your council has done.

We had great help from FEMA on that, California Office of Emergency Services, all the different agencies, Federal, state, county, and town. And our neighboring towns, Oroville, Chico, they have really stepped up to find places for people and helping with the debris, hauling the concrete and the steel and the other stuff that had to be hauled off from clearing up those lots. It took a lot of effort to get all these agencies aligned, but everybody had a really great spirit of aligning. FEMA hadn't really handled wildfire. A lot of hurricane and tornado and such things, but there hadn't been something like this scale. So, hats off to a lot of people pulling together.

So, I am sure they are completely pinned down, but what did the firefighting response look like in the immediate time while you were there, trying to escape down the Skyway and such? Was it just overwhelming? Were there aircraft? Could you see that some important avenues were saved? How did that look to you at the time?

Mr. BOLIN. Thank you for the question. The fire was so quick, all efforts were just to evacuate. There was very little firefighting that happened those first couple of days. As the houses burned, the water system was completely depleted, so we had no water pressure in Paradise, and all water had to come up from down the valley on trucks. At that point the smoke was so dense and so bad they couldn't fly and do any good from the aerial.

Mr. LAMALFA. Yes, indeed. I heard about the fire early that morning too. You have dodged several big ones over the years. You had that one south of town by the airport, which got pretty close and they always make you nervous, but the wind was different that day, and the amount of fuel.

Can you speak to the significance, and maybe touch on the piece up by Magalia there, where Sierra Pacific and your Fire Safe Council had done a lot of work. Magalia is the next town up the ridge from Paradise. And we don't want to forget, too, the towns of Concow and Yankee Hill nearby. Those folks the next ridge over that suffered so much.

But the thinning projects that had been happening, talk to us about how those ended up looking for that effort.

Mr. BOLIN. Up by our reservoir there was an area in which they did a significant amount of thinning of that little forest up in there. And many are convinced that that kept that fire from going into that upper part of Magalia. It skirted down to the lower part of Magalia and took out that part. But because of that thinning, it actually gave it a barrier to stop that fire from going in the upper part.

And, subsequently, fire retardant was used on the Camp Fire, it was just afterwards to keep the fire from going. It was heading to Chico and to Oroville, and they laid down some lines and saved several housing developments in those cities.

Mr. LAMALFA. And indeed, right now we are contemplating whether we can keep fire retardant in time for this upcoming fire season.

The lady from Bend, thank you for your thumbs up on H.R. 1585, and the rest of your testimony. I would give you a virtual congressional hug, but maybe that is not allowed, on your great comments there.

But other towns, Mayor Bolin—and I will cut off here—but Paradise is always worried about the route up the hill out of Paradise in case of a fire, and you were able to get road work done after a lot of years. Supervisor Yamaguchi and Supervisor Teeter, a lot of conversation. Have you had a chance to talk to other communities around the western states on their evacuation routes and how they can help if they are in that situation?

Mr. BOLIN. I have. I was able to talk to a few different communities, and they had questions. How did you know how to evacuate so quickly? We had practiced that, and I encourage them, practice evacuations. Each of these communities were in a severity zone where they were eventually going to have some issues. And I said, “Come up with a plan, practice it, and try it. You have to.” We were prepared, we had tried it, and we knew what to do. So, hopefully, communities start doing that.

Mr. LAMALFA. Yes, thank you. My time is up.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I appreciate it.

Mr. TIFFANY. The gentleman yields, and I would like to recognize Ranking Member Neguse for 5 minutes.

Mr. NEGUSE. I thank the Chairman. Thanks again to all of the witnesses for their testimony and a very informative and meaningful panel.

And Mayor, thank you for sharing your story, which is harrowing and, obviously, underscores the deep, lasting damage that was done in your community. And hearts and thoughts go out to you and to Mr. LaMalfa’s community as they continue to recover years later. And we know that well in Colorado, as I mentioned in my opening statement.

Questions for Dr. Schultz, and then I wanted to ask a question of the gentleman, Mr. Dias, from the Forestry Association.

Dr. Schultz, I want to talk a little bit about collaboration. And again, thank you for joining us today. But as you referenced in your testimony, much of your research is focused on the benefits of building collaboration and consensus. And this is especially true in wildland-urban interface communities like many of our communities in Colorado, as you know, where some of the most at-risk acres occur across a patchwork of ownership and jurisdiction boundaries.

One of the bills that I have introduced this year with Senator Bennett is a bill to reauthorize the collaborative Forest Landscape Restoration Program, which I think kind of models the type of collaboration that you spoke of. I wonder if you might be able to expound in a little greater detail about the benefits of collaboration

and the challenges as far as the obstacles that might be getting in the way.

Dr. SCHULTZ. Yes. Thank you for the question, Mr. Neguse.

I think the benefits of collaboration are that it asks people to get together to work across boundaries and figure out how they are going to treat fuels across boundaries, and also to work together to build a workforce, and also potentially to work together to explain to the public what they are doing. So, for example, under the CFRP, you will see people sort of forced into a forest restoration marriage for 10 years, and they essentially have to commit to working together to make a difference on that landscape.

And what we see is that sometimes this happens through large-scale, innovative NEPA processes. They figure out how are they going to combine capacity from state, local, and Federal fire agencies to put fire under the ground, to respond collectively? They engage with industry in a consistent way, and they are able to explain to the public why they might see a lot more truck trips in their communities, why they might be seeing thinning outside their back door. And I think those collaborative efforts have led to tremendous success.

My research on CFLRP has indicated that it is probably the best thing that has happened to Forest Service policy in a long time, and I appreciate your efforts to support it.

Mr. NEGUSE. Well, thank you, Dr. Schultz. And I couldn't agree with you more, and a lot more for us to do, so excited to get the CFLRP reauthorization across the finish line and continue to build on that work.

Mr. Dias, I have limited time left, so I am going to try to go through this quickly. I reviewed your written testimony. I appreciate your oral testimony today. My sense, if I could condense your testimony, is that you would like to see more of this landscape work done by the Forest Service, and I certainly agree with you on that front. But I assume you would concede that the investments that we made over the course of the last several years are significantly higher than any investments at least in the modern era, let's say the last 40 to 50 years of the Forest Service's work. Is that fair?

Mr. DIAS. Yes, I would say that is accurate.

Mr. NEGUSE. And as I said, I think the challenge now is, of course, as you said in your written testimony, and I think many of us agree, is to scale that up, and to have the Forest Service do more of that.

And I think Dr. Schultz raises a really important salient point in terms of the reporting that the Forest Service should do, moving forward, so that we can carefully calibrate how many acres are actually being treated. I think that is an important metric, something I suspect we could work on a bipartisan basis on.

What I wanted to ask you about is there is a lot of conversation these days, at least here on the dais anyway, about NEPA, and I am sure you have heard that from many of my colleagues. You detail pretty extensively in your written testimony the various authorities that exist within the Forest Service to do this work. It doesn't seem like the regulatory obstacles are, let's say, as large as some of my colleagues would have us believe.

And just to go to your testimony, I mean, you talk about, for example, the Infrastructure Act creating a new emergency action authority for the Forest Service. Is that correct?

Mr. DIAS. That is correct.

Mr. NEGUSE. And also the Infrastructure Act creating rather, or I don't know if this is the Infrastructure Act or if this is existing law, the ability under alternative arrangements under Federal regulations to execute projects, which, obviously, could be very important, particularly as it relates to fuel breaks. Is that correct?

Mr. DIAS. Yes, pre-existing infrastructure, but that is correct.

Mr. NEGUSE. So, I think I am out of time here and I am not going to go through the full list, but I offer that to suggest that I think the Forest Service has the ability today to do this work, which is precisely why they have launched their 10-year landscape project plan. So, we are best positioned, I think, to encourage the Forest Service to continue on the path that they are on. That is certainly the approach I am going to take.

And I appreciate the testimony of all the witnesses here today.

Mr. TIFFANY. The gentleman yields, and that is certainly something we are going to watch very closely, is how many acres are being treated, and are the agencies going to take those authorities and actually turn them into acres treated.

I would like to recognize the gentleman from Oregon for 5 minutes.

Mr. BENTZ. Thank you, Mr. Chair, and thank all of you for your thoughtful testimony and your written testimony. I would like to start with Ms. McNair.

I am looking at, I think, the last page of your written testimony. And I really appreciate and I was speaking with Congressman LaMalfa about your suggestions contained on that last page. And we would like to work with you in bringing the type of legislation you suggest about the ambient air quality standards. That is really an excellent observation on your part, and I certainly was not aware of it. So, we may be reaching out to you, if that is acceptable, and finding out what we can do to move legislation forward in that space.

But because you have been with the Forest Service for so long, it gives me an opportunity to ask you something that has been asserted over the years that I have observed the Forest Service, and it appears that over time the firefighting space has turned into, because of the huge addition of heavy volumes of fuel, to more of a fire watching and try to stay out of the way space. And I don't blame anybody for that. I have been around those kinds of fires, and they are horribly frightening and horribly dangerous.

My question to you is this. Do you think that the type of approach that is being used by the Forest Service now in how it approaches these fires is the proper approach?

And I will just say this. I have a lot of ranching clients that I used to have in my law practice who, in the summers now, they spend their time fighting fire. That is what they do. It was not the case before. And they come in, and they tell me about how firefighting works. And the way it works is you get up in the morning, and you wander into a tent around 10, 11, and you talk about how everybody is going to stay safe, and then you decide on a plan, and

you coordinate with a bunch of other folks, and eventually everybody goes out and does something for a while, and then everybody stops working at the end and you start out the next day. Is that a correct reflection of what you have seen in the firefighting space at least once or twice? I am sure it doesn't happen all the time that way, at least I hope.

Ms. MCNAIR. That is a good question, Congressman. I will say this, that our fires are getting more complex, they are getting larger and more difficult to fight. And let me give you an example of that.

In 1987, we had the Silver Fire in southern Oregon. It was 100,000 acres, and we thought that was a big fire, an anomaly. In 2013, we had the Rim Fire in California. It was 2.5 million acres, or 250,000 acres. We thought, oh my, that is really big. In 2021, we had the Bootleg Fire in Oregon and we hit a half-a-million acres.

What we are seeing is every fire is either a controlled, a controlled and maintained, or a monitored. I don't think we have ever seen people walk away from a fire. It is really one of three strategies. It is either direct or indirect attacked. But I think that, as we see our firefighters approach these fires, it is always their safety we have in mind and communities.

Mr. BENTZ. And forgive me for interrupting, but I have to ask Dr. Schultz a question; I am going to be out of time.

Ms. MCNAIR. OK.

Mr. BENTZ. But I appreciate what you were going to say, and the last thing I want to do is put people at risk. But I think it leads directly into how in the world are we going to reduce the amount of fuel that is in these spaces? Because once these things get rolling, you better get out of the road. So, that brings me to Dr. Schultz.

Dr. Schultz, I really appreciate your written testimony. I was reviewing it here. And you talk about collaboratives, and you also say on the first page of your testimony in the last paragraph, center line, "If we want to get to the scale needed to make a difference." I have used that phrase a lot, and I know what scale is. My district is bigger than the state of Washington, so I get scale. Is that what you meant?

Were you saying, hey, we have, what, 90 million acres of forest in the western United States? Is that what you talk about? Is that what you mean when you say scale?

Dr. SCHULTZ. Thanks for the question. I am talking about planning at a large-enough scale to have an impact on fire behavior and also on forest conditions.

We often talk about a history of putting in smaller projects in a less strategic way sometimes really doesn't make a difference. So, if we really want to go big across the landscape to reduce fuels enough to affect fire behavior and have some impact on communities, then we need to be planning large projects. And that is when collaboration and good planning come into play. We need to do those things in order to really scale up and be working at the landscape level.

Mr. BENTZ. Right, and we don't have enough time for me to share my frustrations with collaboration, but I view it also as

perhaps the only device that has any real chance of getting anything done, short of all-out litigation.

Thank you, Mr. Chair, I yield back.

Mr. TIFFANY. The gentleman yields. I would like to ask a couple of questions here, then I want to yield to Mr. LaMalfa.

You talked about obligatory supply agreements, Mr. Dias. Tell me about obligatory supply agreements.

Mr. DIAS. When I use the term "obligatory," I am suggesting that the shared stewardship, 20-year agreements or any shared stewardship, doesn't have an obligation or a triggering mechanism to guarantee delivery of any kind of material that is going to unlock investment in any kind of innovative infrastructure or conventional infrastructure.

So, from my perspective, the state of California also has this on its dashboard: trying to drive investment in new facilities, if you will, to have capital be a driver in getting treatment done, but we don't have any obligations, so folks are just not seemingly ready to invest.

Mr. TIFFANY. So, are you saying the state of California uses obligatory supply agreements?

Mr. DIAS. No, I am not saying that. I messed up. That is not what I am saying. What I am saying is California is very interested in having drivers to get investment settled in the state.

The Forest Service, by far and away, is the largest landowner in the state. So, without supply agreements coming from the largest landowner in the state, it is very difficult to have new infrastructure established because existing infrastructure is already set up based on the landscapes which it serves.

Mr. TIFFANY. Dr. Schultz, will we get to scale? We just had that conversation about will we get to scale. Will we be able to do that if the lawsuits continue, if there is not lawsuit reform?

Dr. SCHULTZ. Thanks for the question, Representative Tiffany.

I think there is actually quite a lot of NEPA considered shelf stock. So, on the shelf, millions of acres that are through the NEPA process and could be treated. Our biggest problems, and I agree with Mr. Dias, tend to have to do more with industry and markets to actually bid on those projects when they are done. We see a lot of projects that go unbid, or even projects that are bid on and then never get worked on.

I think industry and markets for the low-to-no-value wood products are our biggest challenge, and I would ask this Committee to focus on that as a major area where we need solutions.

Mr. TIFFANY. So, how do we get them back? They were there 30, 40 years ago. How do we get them back, Dr. Schultz?

Dr. SCHULTZ. Yes, they are quite a bit different. There is a long history of the Forest Service doing a lot of intensive, high grading and timber harvest during the height of the timber-producing era that took a lot of the large sawlogs. And those industries that used to treat those sawlogs in some places no longer are there. There are also the impacts of globalization on the timber economy.

What we are looking at now is low-to-no-value product. We have to get a lot cleared through NEPA, and then we need to incentivize small businesses that can work on biomass and take that small product to create something of value with it. We also just have to

pay to get it out of the woods, which is part of what the investments from the Congress are going to be paying for.

Now we need to make sure that the Forest Service has the contracting capacity to do that work, to get the contractors on the ground where they have the NEPA shelf stock in place to actually get the work done.

And then we have to follow it with prescribed fire, because if we don't remove those small fuels, we won't actually see the fire risk reduction.

Mr. TIFFANY. I yield to the gentleman from California.

Mr. LAMALFA. Thanks so much again, Mr. Chairman, I appreciate the time and being in your Subcommittee today. This is an excellent panel, one of the best panels I have seen in a long time, with a diversity of experience and thought. So, I appreciate you all.

I wanted to, quickly with Mayor Bolin, you did not really have an evacuation system in place at the time, but now you have sirens and, of course, the practice and such. Is this something we can use to emphasize to other mountain and forested communities?

Mr. BOLIN. Right after the fire we had a large community outreach to come up with what are things that would encourage you to come back, and what are things that would help you feel comfortable——

Mr. LAMALFA. Right, because we want people to come back——

Mr. BOLIN. We want them to come back to town, yes.

Mr. LAMALFA. I was reminded that had this happened in the middle of the night, after the tinder dried, November in California is still dry. And the whole summer and the fall of that, everything was super dry. Had that wind and that fire started late at night, I imagine the loss of life would have been just tremendous above what we already saw.

Mr. BOLIN. If this would have been 2 or 3 hours earlier that this happened, we would have lost thousands of people in our town, because they would have still been in bed.

Mr. LAMALFA. Thank you. Ms. McNair, you really perked my ears up with this PM2.5 business here, because as Dr. Schultz mentioned, too, prescribed fire is going to have to be a big part of what we do, and it is even more difficult these days. And we saw one got away, a big one, in New Mexico. Yet, we have to work even harder to find ways. If this PM2.5 thing is allowed to stand, what do you see happening there with that?

How far is that a threat, or whatever, from using this tool?

Ms. MCNAIR. Well, as it is proposed, some of the research that I have been reading, in some of our communities it will limit prescribed fire by 80 to 90 percent.

Mr. LAMALFA. Wow.

Ms. MCNAIR. So, we can choose the way we have fire. We will have fire. We will either have wildfire smoke or we will have prescribed smoke on our communities. And the effects of wildfire smoke right now are showing a 25 percent increase since the mid-2000s that represent hazardous air that our folks are virtually breathing in our communities. And every time you hit a wildfire, you are probably having propane tanks, you are having roofs burned, you are putting toxic things in your air system. So, it is

either you have wood burning, prescribed fires, for the most part, or you have wildfires. And it is a choice we can make.

Mr. LAMALFA. Certainly, we can carry the logs out on a truck or we can burn them out is one of the other common sayings. And what Mayor Bolin has experienced in Paradise, the toxics, just on a footprint of a home or a building that have to be hauled away, as well as Greenville, my other town that got burned, and Canyon Dam, my other town that got burned, same thing. The toxics are on the ground.

And you also mentioned the renewable fuels that we should be putting to work for us in making energy, as well. I just wish we had so much more time. It has been a great Committee today.

And Matt, I didn't even get to touch on your good work here in California from my questions and such. But real fast if you don't mind, Mr. Chairman, when I see our previous Committee today, in Ag, I am just so built up with frustration at the speed with which Forest Service is not doing things. The pace and scale keeps coming up. I mean, I don't want to go out of here feeling hopeless, but I just do not see how we are going to do this without a great sea change in attitude and getting after having the private sector help us in a much more aggressive approach. Do you have any comment on that, on acreage, and on thinning and everything?

Mr. DIAS. I will be very quick. I think the Forest Service is experiencing some symptoms of capacity and technical expertise to a certain extent, and I think that partnerships are very, very, very important in today's world. And when we look at the NEPA process, or we look at the permitting process, we have partners out there that can do that work on behalf of the forest, or work with them: Great Basin Institute, Wild Turkey Federation, so on and so forth.

As we look at other portions of the work that needs to be done, the practical on-the-ground work, we can turn to other entities out there that have capacity. And I stand before you representing the forestry sector in California and say that we are interested and stand before you wanting to help the Forest Service get that work done around communities and around shared property lines so that we are building a more resilient environment.

And it is that cooperative that is going to have to be done, but it is not a very fast process, and better tools for cooperation through contracting and such is something I would encourage you to look at.

Mr. LAMALFA. Chairman Tiffany, you have been very kind. Thank you. I yield back.

Mr. TIFFANY. The gentleman yields, and I would like to echo his comments. This is one of the finest panels that we have had before Federal Lands and the Natural Resources Committee in the short time that I have been here. We want to thank you so much for taking the time to come from the western states to join us here. It is greatly appreciated. I will be talking about your testimony with other Members. It is greatly appreciated.

Members of the Committee may have some additional questions for our witnesses today, and we will ask that they respond to those in writing. Under Committee Rule 3, members of the Committee must submit questions to the Committee Clerk by 5 p.m. on

Friday, May 19, 2023. The hearing record will be held open for 10 business days for these responses.

If there is no further business, without objection, the Subcommittee on Federal Lands stands adjourned.

[Whereupon, at 4:45 p.m., the Subcommittee was adjourned.]

[ADDITIONAL MATERIALS SUBMITTED FOR THE RECORD]

Submission for the Record by Rep. Bentz

**The National Wildfire Suppression Association
Mill City, OR**

May 18, 2023

Hon. Tom Tiffany, Chairman
House Natural Resources Committee
Subcommittee on Federal Lands
Washington, DC 20515

Re: "Examining the Challenges Facing Forest Management, Wildfire Suppression and Wildland Firefighters Ahead of the 2023 Wildfire Year"

Dear Chairman Tiffany, Vice Chair John Curtis, and members of the Natural Resources Subcommittee on Federal Lands:

Thank you for the opportunity to provide written testimony regarding the May 16 hearing "Examining the Challenges Facing Forest Management, Wildfire Suppression and Wildland Firefighters Ahead of the 2023 Wildfire Year".

The National Wildfire Suppression Association represents over 348 member companies across twenty-nine states that provide resources to the agencies under a variety of contracts and agreements for wildfire suppression response. Our resources are the "boots on the ground" and the scope of resources available from our industry is substantial. We make up over forty-five percent (45%) of all resources on the ground on fires, and up to ninety percent (90%) of all "iron (heavy equipment)". Our agreements are of excellent value to the agency and the taxpayer as we "call when needed" resources to supplement the agency contingency when there is need. We have been providing resources to the agencies for over 30 years, and many times we still see no recognition of what we bring to the table in their efforts against these catastrophic wildfires.

Currently the agency uses a variety of agreements Incident Blanket Procurement Agreements (IBPA), Emergency Equipment Rental Agreements and Request for Proposal (RFP) to hire these types of resources. As of 2022 there are over 419 Type 2 Hand Crews, 37 Types 2 Initial Attack Hand Crews and over 14,000 pieces of equipment including water handling, heavy equipment, camp support as well many other types of specialized resources.

Sustain the Workforce:

In all areas of industry, we are struggling to sustain our workforce, and in an industry such as emergency response with no guarantee of work that is a challenge we face. They involve long days, periods of time away from family, and few creature comforts on the job.

We have seen the agency in some rural locations having to stand down equipment due to lack of staffing, and even in areas where large signing bonuses are offered (sometimes up to \$25,000 signing bonuses for an engine boss) they are still unable to fill those positions. Due to the limitation of bid ranges and the nature of "call when needed" work we cannot offer those kinds of incentives in private industry.

Fuels Mitigation/Prescribed Burning

We believe in the philosophy of all hands, all lands and the Professional Private industry and we are proud to be a partner with the agencies in these efforts. We also have a long history of expertise in wildland fire, fire rehab, prescribed burning, and fuels mitigation.

We have worked with Chief Moore and Ms. Hall-Rivera about the opportunity to increase the capacity of the public/private partnership utilizing the current contract vehicles in place for these fire resources.

They have the equipment, qualifications, and expertise to immediately help address the substantial backlog of work which urgently needs to be addressed, and we look forward to continuing that collaboration.

Our industry also has some newer technology that currently the agency does not contract for that could boost productivity if it were utilized for fuels treatment. Things such as whole tree chippers, track mulchers, and more that our companies have invested in for work they do with the states and with private landowners but currently there are avenues to provide those to the federal agencies.

We are concerned about whether the Emergency Declaration being utilized fully; in some cases, we have seen a slow response in making the funding available, which is causing missed opportunities to get work done.

In Summary:

Private industry has, will and can continue to play a significant role in providing much needed resources including heavy equipment, water handling, hand crews and other specialized equipment. We also have the qualifications and expertise to assist with large landscape fuel projects to help address those backlogs and reduce wildfire risk on the landscape. The agency would need to look at some changes to the current contract vehicles to allow us to have a wider scope of work in some cases, but the workforce is there and the equipment also. These companies have invested substantial amounts of dollars in the companies to be able to provide these resources, and we just want to be sure that the companies with the "best value" to the agency and taxpayer get the opportunity to provide those resources.

We are happy to answer any questions or provide more information to the committee upon request.

Thank you for the opportunity.

DEBORAH MILEY,
Executive Director

