

**Statement of  
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U.S. Department of the Interior  
Before the  
House Committee on Natural Resources  
Subcommittee on Federal Lands**

**Hearing on:**

**H.R. 4235, Wildfire Technology Demonstration, Evaluation, Modernization, and  
Optimization Act (Wildfire Technology DEMO Act);  
H.R. 4353, Civilian Conservation Center Enhancement Act of 2023;  
H.R. 4717, Locally Led Restoration Act of 2023;  
H.R. 5582, White Oak Resilience Act; and  
Discussion Draft of H.R. \_\_\_\_, Biochar Innovations and Opportunities for Conservation,  
Health, and Advancements in Research Act (BIOCHAR Act)**

**November 14, 2023**

Chairman Tiffany, Ranking Member Neguse, and members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony on the wildland fire management and forest management bills being considered today. Collectively, this legislation provides important tools, authorities, and resources that support the Department of the Interior's (Department) on-going collaborative efforts to reduce wildfire risk, support wildland firefighters, and improve the resiliency of our nation's forests, rangelands, and grasslands. We appreciate the Subcommittee's interest in making meaningful progress towards addressing these issues and providing the support necessary to protect communities, the public, and wildland firefighters from the devastation of wildfires.

Climate change, drought, and invasive weeds continue to intensify wildfire activity. According to the National Interagency Coordination Center, during this past year more than 50,000 wildfires burned over 2.5 million acres. While the total number of wildfires exceeded the ten-year average of 49,830 wildfires, the total number of acres burned was well below. Nevertheless, we saw significant wildfire activity in several geographic areas of the country, including the Southern and Southwest Geographic Areas, that was more consistent with the 10-year average trends. The peak deployment of federal wildland firefighting personnel totaled more than 20,400 personnel in late August, and overall resource availability continued to be a challenge, including firefighters and aerial assets during peak periods.

The Federal interagency wildland fire management community supported our Canadian partners who experienced their worst wildfire season on record. A total of 45.7 million acres of land burned throughout their country, which is more than six times the 10-year average of acres burned in the United States. Under our mutual wildfire assistance agreement with Canada, the United States deployed nearly 2,500 wildland fire fighting personnel to Canada, which was in Preparedness Level 5 consecutively from early May to September.

The Bipartisan Infrastructure Law (BIL) provides a once-in-a-generation investment in wildland fire management that is helping to tackle the climate crisis and improve the wildfire resiliency of our nation's lands. To date, the Department has allocated a total of more than \$640 million in BIL funding to address wildfire risk on Federal lands. These investments support our efforts to increase the pace and scale of fuels management projects. This past year, the Department completed a total 2.5 million acres of treatments, which is a 30 percent increase over last year's treatment level. Maintaining these accomplishments will require a commitment to a long-term, sustained investment.

Additionally, BIL funding supported \$126 million in supplemental pay for wildland firefighters. In fiscal year 2023, a total of 4,550 Department wildland firefighters have benefited from these payments. However, the Department has reached the firefighter "pay cliff" and is now funding the supplemental payments using authority and funding provided for in the current Continuing Resolution, which runs through November 17. The Administration supports a long-term solution to firefighter pay and the legislative proposals that were submitted to Congress with the Fiscal Year 2024 President's Budget to permanently address this issue. Unless Congress takes action, we anticipate that a significant number of federal wildland firefighters will leave the workforce and look for work elsewhere.

Finally, the BIL authorized Wildland Fire Mitigation and Management Commission recently finalized and submitted its report to Congress. The report includes a total of 148 recommendations that are intended to foster collaborative efforts to improve all facets of wildland fire management and solutions relevant to all levels of government, including local, state, Federal, and Tribal and other public and private entities. The Commission's recommendations recognize the urgency of addressing wildfire risk through partnerships and cross-boundary actions; being proactive in pre- and post-fire activities; expanding the use of prescribed fire and cultural burning; addressing wildland firefighting workforce reforms; and investing in training, research, development, and technology. A number of the bills being considered today help advance several of the key recommendations that are included in the Commission's report.

### **H.R. 4235, Wildfire Technology Demonstration, Evaluation, Modernization, and Optimization Act**

H.R. 4235, the Wildfire Technology Demonstration, Evaluation, Modernization, and Optimization Act, requires the Secretaries of the Interior and Agriculture to establish a wildfire technology testbed pilot program to improve wildfire prevention, detection, communication, and mitigation technologies. We appreciate the sponsors' support for real-time technology application testing and recognition of the important role that federal agencies and existing interagency wildland fire coordinating groups play in facilitating the use and advancement of new technologies.

The Department supports the goals of H.R. 4235 but would like to work with the sponsors on technical modifications to the bill. These include expanding the list of "covered agencies" identified in Section 2(a)(1) to include other science-based organizations. For example, the U.S. Geological Survey is actively engaged in a number of technological areas that are referenced in

the bill, including advanced computing; analytics; artificial intelligence; remote sensing; processing and sensor technologies; and dashboard and other advanced decision-support technologies.

Additionally, the Department recommends adding pre- and post-wildfire activities, such as environmental and fuels treatment monitoring and post-wildfire assessments and monitoring to the list of key technology priorities that are included in section 2(c)(2). Also, the priority for testing emerging technologies should not be unnecessarily restricted to those entities identified in Section 2(e). Finally, the Department recommends providing additional time to complete the initial report considering the staffing requirements and the time necessary to consider various technological needs and to solicit proposals from partners.

### **H.R. 4353, Civilian Conservation Center Enhancement Act of 2023**

H.R. 4353, the Civilian Conservation Center Enhancement Act, would authorize the Secretaries of the Interior and Agriculture to establish Civilian Conservation Centers in alignment with the Job Corps provisions of the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act. The centers would train disadvantaged youth in forest and rangeland management, wildland fire management, and other mission specific areas. Each agency would be required to hire 300 graduates annually to contribute to wildland firefighter and other workforce needs, provide for a signing bonus, and authorize direct hire authority for program graduates. H.R. 4353 would also establish a housing pilot program for wildland firefighters and other employees.

The Department supports the goals of H.R. 4353 but would like to work with the sponsor of the legislation on technical changes to the bill. These include modifications to section 303 to ensure that the pilots specifically advance the mission of the Department of the Interior and that the Department maintains involvement in the development of the curricula and course offerings that are the focus of the experimental research and demonstration pilots. The Department also recommends that pre- and post-wildfire activities be included in the list of curricula and courses. This is critical to ensuring that the workforce and program needs that are unique and essential to the Department are integrated into the pilots.

In addition, the Department would welcome the opportunity to work with the sponsor on provisions regarding signing bonuses, pay setting, and recruitment goals. Finally, the Department recognizes the important role that youth have in developing the next generation of federal employees and works collaboratively with the Office of Personnel Management to assess the needs for tools like direct hire authority that promote efficient hiring for wildland fire management.

### **H.R. 4717, Locally Led Restoration Act of 2023**

H.R. 4717 amends the Healthy Forests Restoration Act to provide a private person, or other public or private entity, with the opportunity to propose stewardship contracts to remove vegetation and requires that 10 percent of the timber covered by the contract is salvage—including wildfire kill, beetle kill, and dead or dying organic material. Under the bill, the BLM and the Forest Service are required to solicit proposals annually for the salvage-related stewardship contracts and have the authority to either accept or deny proposals within 120 days. Further, contracts must conform to resource management plans and forest plans and may not be

carried out within National Wilderness Preservation System lands, inventoried roadless areas, or any area where removal of vegetation is prohibited by Federal statute. The BLM defers to the USDA regarding the bill's provisions affecting the management of lands under their jurisdiction.

Generally, the BLM either advertises a solicitation for stewardship contracts or publishes a Notice of Funding Opportunity for stewardship agreements. H.R. 4717 would provide an additional path to stewardship contracting proposals. The Department supports the goal of the bill to promote broader use of the stewardship contracting authority and would like the opportunity to work with the sponsor on modifications. For example, we recommend modifications to define the term "best value," clarify whether the Department is intended to award the contract only to the proposing entity and extend the exclusion of contracts to lands in the National Landscape Conservation System.

### **H.R. 5582, White Oak Resilience Act**

H.R. 5582, the White Oak Resilience Act, would require the Secretary of the Interior to assess the presence of white oak on land under the Department's jurisdiction and the potential to restore white oak forests on such land. The bill would also require the Secretary to conduct five pilot projects on DOI lands to restore and regenerate white oak. The Department defers to the Department of Agriculture with respect to land under the jurisdiction of the Forest Service.

White oaks provide ecological benefits as part of complex, functioning ecosystems, and the Department supports the goals of H.R. 5582, but would like to work with the sponsor of the legislation on technical amendments to the bill. The Department recommends the addition of Tribal representation to the White Oak Restoration Initiative Coalition established in Section 2 of the bill and revision of Section 5 of the legislation to broaden funding availability to include the Department of the Interior. The Department also recommends extending the authority contained in Section 6 to authorize Civilian Conservation Centers to provide assistance in carrying out reforestation work on Department of the Interior lands. Additionally, the Department recommends that the sponsor consider addressing factors that may be impacting the health and resiliency of white oak ecosystems, such as invasive species, disease, changing climate conditions, and fragmentation of forest land, and avoid creating white oak monocultures which could negatively impact biodiversity. The Department also notes there are several species of white oak. There may be a benefit to clarifying which species of white oak the bill is intended to cover so that the Department can prepare to take the appropriate restoration actions.

### **Discussion Draft of H.R. \_\_\_\_, Biochar Innovations and Opportunities for Conservation, Health, and Advancements in Research Act (BIOCHAR Act)**

The Department notes its strong preference to testify on bills after they have been introduced. We are providing the following preliminary comments on the bill, but the Department would like to preserve the opportunity to submit additional technical input on the bill after it is introduced, if necessary.

The BIOCHAR Act discussion draft directs USDA and DOI to establish demonstration projects on Forest Service and BLM-managed public lands to support the development and commercialization of biochar. It also authorizes a competitive grant program to carry out research and development.

Biochar is created when plant materials—such as wood, bark, switchgrass and the like – generally referred to as “biomass”—are heated in a low or no oxygen atmosphere. Biomass resulting from fuels reduction treatments or logging activities can be used to produce biochar which can then be used to enrich soil and sequester carbon that would otherwise be released into the atmosphere if biomass were left aboveground to decompose, or if it were burned.

The BLM has explored uses for biochar as early as 2012 through an agreement with Utah State University, Utah Biomass Resources Group. More recently, in 2023, the BLM and Forest Service generated biochar from otherwise unusable biomass resulting from the 2020 Holiday Farm Fire in Oregon, and continue to study how biochar can be used to benefit soil as well as the cost of generating biochar relative to other biomass use alternatives. The Department is open to further research regarding developments of biochar technology and efforts to improve cost efficiency of its use.

### **Conclusion**

Thank you again for the opportunity to provide testimony on these important bills. The Department looks forward to continuing to work with the sponsors and the Committee on these important wildland fire management and forest management bills.