

STATEMENT OF
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SUBCOMMITTEE ON FEDERAL LANDS

CONCERNING THE STATE OF OUR NATION'S FEDERAL FORESTS

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Chair Tiffany, Ranking Member Neguse, and members of the Subcommittee, thank you for inviting me here today to testify on the state of our Nation's federal forests.

The United States has an abundance of timber resources that are more than adequate to meet our domestic timber production needs, but Federal policies have prevented the full utilization of these resources. As a result, effective forest management on the National Forest System has been hindered. Many Americans, particularly in the West, worry that overgrown forests pose significant wildfire risk to their families, homes and communities. In many other instances, the lack of timber supply from federal forests have resulted in mill closures, lost jobs and livelihoods and shuttered communities. Years of declining timber harvests, frivolous litigation leading to unnecessary delays for timber and restoration projects, a cumbersome permitting and planning process and a number of other factors have left the National Forests at significant risk of wildfire, insect and disease outbreaks and in an overall state of disrepair. However, this administration, with the bold leadership of President Trump and Secretary Rollins, is taking decisive action to correct this dangerous situation to bring us back into a stable and proper course.

According to the 2023 National Wildfire Potential Report, 66,940,000 acres of National Forest System (NFS) lands are under a very high or high fire risk and roughly 78,800,000 acres of NFS lands are already experiencing or are at risk of experiencing insect and disease infestations. These threats—combined with overgrown forests—have all contributed to what is now a full-blown wildfire and forest health crisis. Vast areas of the country, particularly the West, are at risk from huge wildfires that can quickly spread, burning through multiple landownerships, forest types, and communities. These conditions are only expected to worsen over time without action.

This Administration recognizes the urgency that is needed to address the threat wildfire poses to over 70,000 communities across our nation. In March, President Trump, issued Executive Order (E.O.) 14225, entitled “Immediate Expansion of American Timber Production.” Through E.O. 14225, the President made it clear that forest management and wildfire risk reduction projects can help protect American lives and communities and ensure that Americans prosper.

Secretary Rollins has also committed to managing our forests in a way that will reduce

wildfire risk, provide a stable domestic timber supply, create jobs, improve wildlife habitat, and unleash numerous other benefits. The Forest Service has taken an aggressive stance to meet the President's vision to supply the nation's wood from domestic sources. The agency has deployed a *National Active Management Strategy* that sets a goal to increase the annual timber volume offered by 25 percent over Fiscal Year 2020 through FY 2024 average, with a goal of selling 4 billion board feet by FY 2028.

In further support of E.O. 14225, Secretary Rollins issued direction through Secretarial Memo 1078-006 which establishes an Emergency Situation Determination on over 112 million acres of NFS land. This direction empowers agency field units to take the steps they need to address risks of fire, insects, and disease. Specifically, agency line officers are directed to use innovative and efficient approaches to comply with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), Endangered Species Act, National Historic Preservation Act, and other environmental laws. This includes the use of categorical exclusions, emergency authorities, condition-based management, determinations of NEPA adequacy, and tiered decision making. Additionally, the Forest Service will comply with the NEPA statutory time limits for completing environmental assessments and environmental impact statements. These innovative approaches provide the tools and efficiencies to help field units achieve their timber and fuels goals. This E.O. and the Secretary's memo support American jobs, rural economies, and the domestic industry.

Recently, Secretary Rollins took another major step forward in ensuring the National Forests are managed to reduce the wildfire risk by publishing a notice seeking comment on rescinding the 2001 Roadless Rule. For nearly 25 years this rule has frustrated land managers and served as a barrier to action – prohibiting road construction, which has limited wildfire suppression and timber harvesting on millions of acres. Of the 58.5 million acres of inventoried roadless areas covered under the 2001 Roadless Rule, 28 million acres are in areas at high or very high risk of wildfire. Rescinding this rule will allow these areas to be managed at the local forest level, with more flexibility to take swift action to reduce wildfire risk and help protect surrounding communities and infrastructure. Since 2001, we've seen more than 8 million acres of Roadless Areas burn. To put that into perspective, the average forest acreage lost to wildfire each year has more than doubled since the rule's inception. Instead of protecting our forests, the rule has trapped them in a cycle of neglect and devastation. The Secretary's decision to rescind the rule unlocks 30 percent of the National Forest System, much of which is vulnerable to catastrophic wildfire, for common-sense forest management practices to strengthen the health and productivity of America's forests.

Recreation and Increased Deferred Maintenance

Alongside the need to protect communities from wildland fire, ensuring public access to our forests and facilities remains paramount. Visitation to national forests and grasslands has grown substantially over the last five years – from approximately 150 million to more than 160 million annual visits. In Fiscal Year 2023, these visits supported 167,000 jobs and \$16.2 billion in gross domestic product. However, these visitation trends present additional impacts on our public lands and facilities. Increased visitation leads to growth in average daily traffic on NFS roads, crowded trailheads, more vandalism, and other impacts. These can often accelerate maintenance needs and increase operating costs while leaving visitors' needs and expectations

left unmet.

In total, the Forest Service currently administers more than 372,000 miles of roads, 6,600 bridges, 163,000 miles of trails, 7,400 trail bridges, 460 dams and reservoirs, 1,100 communications sites, 30,000 recreation sites, nearly 5,000 each of drinking water and wastewater systems, and 40,000 buildings.

The Forest Service is also working to safeguard access for hunting, fishing and other recreational uses of NFS lands. A significant amount of this work is possible through the Great American Outdoors Act Legacy Restoration Fund, which was signed into law by President Trump in 2020. As of August 2025, the agency has completed over 434 infrastructure projects to improve public access while resolving more than \$200 million of deferred maintenance. Over 170 of these projects have improved the agency's transportation system, providing access for active management, firefighting, and recreation activities. There are approximately 800 additional projects underway. Once completed, these projects will have addressed more than \$1 billion in deferred maintenance.

President Trump's Fiscal Year 2026 Budget proposed to reauthorize the Great American Outdoors Act Legacy Restoration Fund to continue the important work of addressing the deferred maintenance backlog at the Forest Service. These funds will continue to improve public access and visitor experiences on National Forest System lands by reducing the deferred maintenance backlog. Additionally, the fund continues to improve outdoor recreation opportunities across the country. Reauthorizing this law ensures generations of anglers, hunters, and other public users will enjoy National Forest System lands for generations to come.

Response to Wildfire

As always, USDA is taking this fire season seriously, and our federal wildland firefighters are working around the clock, alongside state and tribal leadership, local government, the Department of the Interior, and private industry, to protect lives and communities. The current fire year is challenging. Under President Trump and Secretary Rollins' leadership the Forest Service has the largest and most prepared wildland firefighting force in the world. The agency successfully puts out 98% of wildfires during the initial attack, keeping fires small so they don't threaten communities or require large amounts of resources. The agency has been directed to respond to every fire quickly and decisively with a risk-based containment strategy that matches the threats.

In support of the President's vision and the Secretary's direction, the Forest Service worked with the Office of Personnel Management (OPM) to exempt wildland fire hiring from the national hiring pause. The agency has met our target of having 11,300 firefighters on board for the summer peak. We wish to thank Congress for enacting permanent pay reform which has enhanced the agency's ability to recruit and maintain federal wildland firefighters. Additionally, over 100 staff who had voluntarily separated from the Forest Service through the Deferred Resignation Program and who hold current red cards, returned to the agency to support a fire assignment this season. We will continue to do everything we can to reduce the risk of catastrophic fires and respond effectively to new fires when they start.

The Forest Service is bringing added focus and is reducing unnecessary distractions during the period when we need to prioritize wildfire response. Leadership has eliminated barriers and unnecessary procedures that impeded resource capability or mobilization. It has prioritized employees' ability to maintain or update their Fireline qualifications (red cards) to make red-carded personnel available for fire assignments. Additionally, new agency administrators filled critical needs on fires, and mentored, supported and filled in where new line officers had limited fire qualifications. Furthermore, agency support personnel ensured adequate, timely contracting and agreement support, and emphasized that fire response is our agency priority. These actions take place alongside agency guidance to continue to prioritize wildfire risk reduction for the communities we serve by conducting vegetation management projects where capacity is available to do so.

Looking forward, President Trump has directed the entire federal government to take immediate action to protect people, communities, and the natural resources of our country. The President has laid out his vision for reducing wildfire risk through Executive Order 14308 entitled "Empowering Commonsense Wildfire Prevention and Response." We are working with DOI to implement the E.O. direction to reform and streamline the Federal approach to wildland fire management, including the 2026 President's Budget plan to consolidate Federal Wildland Fire Management into a new U.S. Wildland Fire Service at the Department of the Interior.

Conclusion

At the direction of President Trump and Secretary Rollins, the Forest Service will continue to focus on increasing timber production while also reducing wildfire risk to protect all Americans. The agency's goal is to return to basics and prioritize active forest management. Focusing on active forest management will achieve goals that range from the removal of insect infested and diseased trees to reducing wildfire risk, improving wildlife habitat, and producing timber. Our aim is to continue to reduce fuel loads, improve forest health, sustain watersheds, all while maintaining hunting, fishing and other recreational opportunities.

The Department is committed to meeting the President's vision to increase domestic timber production and streamline federal policies to enhance forest management and reduce wildfire risks. We know more can be done to reduce the bureaucratic burdens that stand in the way of accomplishing work on the ground. We greatly appreciate and support the "Fix Our Forests Act", as we testified to the Senate in May. If enacted, the Act will help improve the condition of Federal forests. USDA looks forward to working with this Subcommittee to fulfill the President's goals for the long-term benefit of the Nation's forests and grasslands so that they may be enjoyed by Americans for generations to come. Thank you for the opportunity to testify.