

STATEMENT OF
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U.S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE, FOREST SERVICE
BEFORE THE
HOUSE NATURAL RESOURCES SUBCOMMITTEE ON FEDERAL LANDS

REGARDING:

"THE STATE OF OUR NATION'S FEDERAL FORESTS AND OUTLOOK FOR THE 2026 WILDFIRE YEAR"
FOR THE USDA FOREST SERVICE
JUNE 4, 2026

Chairman Tiffany, Ranking Member Neguse, and Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today to discuss the Forest Service's current priorities and recent accomplishments.

The Forest Service is committed to a back-to-basics approach that focuses on the work that matters most: keeping people safe, protecting communities from wildfire, actively managing our forests for health and productivity, supporting communities recovering after disasters, expanding access to the outdoors, increasing domestic mineral production, cutting unnecessary red tape, and strengthening the partnerships that bolster our ability to deliver our mission-critical work. The following statement provides an overview of these agency priorities and a summary of key accomplishments over the past year.

Safety at the core

The top agency priority is safety —of agency employees and the public—in every action. Safety is the foundation of everything the Forest Service does. This includes making safety the first and last step of every operation—from fireline to fieldwork. The agency promotes a culture of care, where safety goes beyond just avoiding injuries or accidents. Last year, the Forest Service reduced OSHA recordable incidents by over 15 percent from 2024 to 2025.

Wildfire readiness and response

The agency remains focused on safeguarding lives, communities, and natural resources through strengthened wildfire readiness and rapid response capabilities. The agency continues to emphasize an aggressive, coordinated initial attack to keep fires small and reduce the likelihood of large, destructive events. To meet the reality of year-round fire seasons, the Forest Service has invested in interagency coordination, contracting, infrastructure, and staffing to enhance operational capacity and support community preparedness. To continue to improve Federal operations efficiency and effectiveness, the 2027 Budget proposes to shift the Forest Service's wildland fire programs into the U.S. Wildland Fire Service within the Department of the Interior.

The Forest Service is also expanding the use of proven hazardous-fuels reduction strategies—including prescribed fire, mechanical thinning, and cross-boundary treatments that strengthen wildfire resilience and protect communities and natural resources. Fiscal Year (FY) 2025 demonstrated the effect of clear priorities and focused implementation: despite the highest number of wildfire starts on national forests since 2016, total acres burned were held to nearly half the 10-year average—a reduction of nearly 1 million acres. The Forest Service initial attack success rate was the highest in 12 years. In addition, the agency reduced wildfire risk on more than 3.3 million acres through hazardous-fuels treatments.

Active forest management—Timber production, grazing and reforestation

Active forest management remains essential to creating resilient, productive forests. Timber production—critical to both forest restoration and rural economies—continues to be a core component of our management strategy. In FY 2025, the Forest Service exceeded its timber outputs, selling 2.95 billion board feet and offering 3 billion board feet. Supporting domestic mills strengthens both local economies and the agency’s ability to carry out effective forest restoration.

Livestock grazing is also a central component of the Forest Service’s multiple-use mission. The agency is working to expand access, modernize processes, and elevate producer input to ensure grazing continues to contribute to healthy landscapes and resilient rural communities.

Reforestation remains another essential element of our management responsibilities. The agency is accelerating efforts to restore areas impacted by wildfire and streamline permitting and environmental review processes to deliver results more efficiently. In FY 2025, the Forest Service completed the highest level of reforestation in over 25 years, reforesting almost 287,000 acres and improving timber stands on an additional 165,000 acres.

Minerals and energy development

National Forests play an important role in ensuring American energy security and supporting innovation. The Forest Service is committed to facilitating responsible development of domestic energy and mineral resources, including critical minerals necessary for national security, technology, and energy. The agency is taking steps to reduce regulatory burdens that slow responsible exploration and permitting.

Disaster recovery

When disasters strike, the Forest Service plays a critical role in helping communities recover by restoring damaged landscapes, repairing trails and infrastructure, and supporting community resilience. This work not only addresses immediate needs but also strengthens relationships and reduces vulnerabilities to future disasters.

Following the 2024 hurricane season, the agency reopened more than 1,570 miles of roads, 695 miles of trails, and reopened 34 recreation sites. Across more than 100 disaster-recovery events nationwide, the Forest Service awarded \$885 million in contracts and \$1.5 billion in agreements to support landscape and infrastructure restoration.

Recreation access and infrastructure

Outdoor recreation continues to grow, and millions of Americans rely on national forests for access to the outdoors. Expanding that access and improving visitor experience is a key agency priority. The Forest Service is modernizing trails, campgrounds, and facilities; improving roads and recreation sites; strengthening on-the-ground engagement; and using tools like [Recreation.gov](https://www.recreation.gov) to help visitors plan safe, enjoyable trips. The goal is simple: more access, better service, and a visitor experience that reflects the pride the agency takes in stewarding its forests.

Our public lands offer some of the best recreational opportunities in the world. National forests alone receive more than 160 million visitors annually, maintaining safe and reliable infrastructure for these visits and other management activities is critical. As stated in the FY 2027 President's Budget, the Administration is supportive of reauthorization of the seminal Great American Outdoors Act (GAOA) (P.L. 116-152) Legacy Restoration Fund for another five years. The Legacy Restoration Fund has been critical to the Forest Service's ability to repair and upgrade vital infrastructure and facilities in the national forests and grasslands. With these funds in FY 2025 under the GAOA Legacy Restoration Fund, the Forest Service completed 125 deferred-maintenance projects, improving 162 recreation sites and 78 roads and bridges.

Partnerships and cooperative federalism

The Forest Service is working alongside state, tribal and local governments to manage the nation's forests more effectively. Shared stewardship and local collaboration are essential to improving forest health, wildfire resilience, recreation access and conservation outcomes. In 2025 and 2026, the Forest Service entered into Shared Stewardship Agreements with seven states and three Tribal Nations, continuing to build partnerships that support landscape-scale outcomes.

By the fourth quarter of FY 2025, the agency had 540 active Good Neighbor Authority agreements across 39 states—426 with states, 50 with counties, and 45 with Tribal Nations. These partnerships enhance capacity, remove operational barriers, and enable locally driven restoration work. The agency also announced \$200 million through Community Wildfire Defense Grants across 58 projects in 22 states and two Tribes.

Deregulation and organizational efficiency

The Forest Service is taking deliberate steps to reduce excessive administrative processes that constrain innovation and slow on-the-ground results. New attention is being brought to ensure critical projects can be accomplished easier and faster by clearing obstacles that make it hard to do business with the Forest Service.

The agency is currently implementing a sweeping organizational restructuring designed to move leadership and decision-making closer to the communities and landscapes it serves. Key elements include relocating the headquarters to Salt Lake City, transitioning to a state-based leadership model, establishing a network of Operations Service Centers, and unifying the agency's research programs. This reorganization plan will strengthen local leadership, streamline operations, and improve mission delivery. For an agency whose lands, partners, and operational

challenges are overwhelmingly concentrated in the West, this shift represents a structural reset and a common-sense approach to improve mission delivery.

Fire Outlook

Wildfire preparedness and response remain at the core of the Forest Service mission, and the agency's ongoing reorganization will not impede our ability to protect lives, communities, and landscapes during the 2026 fire year. We enter this season amid higher-than-average national fire activity, reflecting the cumulative impacts of a dry winter and early-season fuel conditions across large portions of the West. As of May 26th, approximately 29,000 wildfires have burned more than 2.6 million acres nationwide, signaling an early and active start to the year. Yesterday, the new [National Significant Wildland Fire Outlook](#) was published by National Interagency Fire Center that includes the latest wildland fire predictions for the summer and demonstrates many areas of the West will experience above average activity.

USDA and the Forest Service enter this fire year with a unified posture, as clearly set forth in the [Chief's 2026 Fire Letter of Intent](#) and the [Secretary's Memorandum \(1078-022, April 28, 2026\)](#). Their direction emphasizes firefighter safety, rapid initial attack, hazardous fuels reduction in high-risk areas, and strengthened cooperation with federal, state, Tribal, and local partners.

Our firefighting workforce is stronger than at any point in recent years. As of late May, the Forest Service has hired over 11,000 firefighters—a 6 percent increase over the same point last year and 5 percent above 2024. We will reach our goal of 11,300 firefighters by July at the peak of season. The number of non-fire red-carded personnel has also grown, increasing from over 9,800 in 2024 to more than 10,310 in 2025, resulting in more than 450 additional responders available this season. These increases ensure that we are fully staffed and equipped to respond aggressively to every unplanned ignition.

Our success hinges on continued collaboration with our federal, Tribal, state, and local partners. Through shared stewardship, unified response, and the removal of barriers to active management, we are strengthening our collective readiness and ensuring decisive, coordinated action when fires occur. This commitment also extends to the ongoing Administration effort to modernize the nation's wildland fire management system. In alignment with [Executive Order 14308](#) and congressional direction, the Forest Service is working closely with the Department of the Interior to identify opportunities to streamline functions, reduce duplication, and strengthen interagency wildfire operations as the Administration advances the unification of federal wildland fire responsibilities within the U.S. Wildland Fire Service at DOI.

These efforts are underway without compromising operational readiness. The consolidation of administrative and support functions will not hinder our ability to respond to wildfires this year. Firefighters, incident management teams, and support staff across both Departments will continue to operate under existing, well-established interagency coordination structures. The operational posture for the 2026 fire year remains fully intact, fully staffed, and fully prepared.

In the joint explanatory statement accompanying the FY 2026 Interior Appropriations, Congress directed USDA and DOI to conduct a study examining potential options for consolidating Forest Service fire programs with the U.S. Wildland Fire Service. As part of the directed third-party study supporting this unification effort, USDA issued the formal solicitation on the General

Services Administration contracting site on May 19th, with responses due on June 8, 2026. The Forest Service is committed to working with Congress and the Department of the Interior to modernize the nation's wildland firefighting system. Our priority remains ensuring the nation has an effective, coordinated wildfire response that supports federal, state, Tribal, and local partners.

Throughout these transitions, our fundamental commitment remains unchanged: to protect the public, support our partners, and ensure a rapid, effective, and unified response to wildfires across the nation. The Forest Service will continue to bring the full strength of its personnel, partners, and resources to bear as we prepare for and respond to the challenges of the 2026 fire season.

Chairman Tiffany, Ranking Member Neguse, and Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to present these priorities and accomplishments. I look forward to continuing our work together to ensure the health, resilience, and productivity of our nation's forests and grasslands, and I would be pleased to answer any questions.