

**TESTIMONY of
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UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE—FOREST SERVICE
BEFORE THE
UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
COMMITTEE ON AGRICULTURE—CONSERVATION AND FORESTRY SUBCOMMITTEE
SEPTEMBER 24, 2020
Concerning
The 2020 Wildfire Year: Response and Recovery Efforts**

Madam Chairwoman, Ranking Member and Members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today to discuss Wildfire Management during the 2020 Fire Year. My testimony today will outline the current status of the USDA Forest Service response to wildfires, the efforts that we have undertaken to take care of our employees and communities before, during, and after fires occur, and the outlook for the remainder of this year.

Our nation is enduring a devastating wildfire year, one that has cut destructive swaths through states like California, Oregon, Washington, Colorado and Arizona, and made more difficult by the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. As of September 19, 2020, there have been 42,866 fires that have burned 7,236,139 million acres across all jurisdictions. In addition to homes and property damage, these fires have taken lives throughout the country. This includes one of our own firefighters, who died last Thursday in California.

These fires threaten urban and rural communities, farm and ranchland, municipal water supplies, timber, recreation sites, and important wildlife habitat. They are stark reminders of the need to partner with communities to prepare for wildfires, while also proactively conducting forest management projects to create healthy, fire-resilient conditions on our nation's forestlands.

Unprecedented Year

This is an unprecedented year. Since mid-August, numerous large fires have been in and around very large communities and developed areas across California and the Pacific Northwest. Smoke impacts have been widespread across the western United States. Firefighting resources have been prioritized to fires with the greatest threat to public safety. Several tropical cyclones have also made landfall this year, causing damage and requiring the response of firefighting and incident management personnel. One of the most notable challenges this year is the number of fires burning at the same time across the West. Typically, firefighting resources move around the country to meet demand. Right now, that demand for resources is high across the system. As with any fire year, it takes all partners including Federal, State and local government, Tribal, contractors and volunteers to respond. We all work together to ensure we are making the best use of our resources to protect the public and our firefighters.

To bolster our capabilities, we requested assistance from the active military as well as our international partners. Additionally, States have requested assistance from the National Guard. Our partners all around the country are pitching in to help us through this unprecedented event. Our fire response capabilities, both on the front lines and in supporting our fire response and other incident response, is our priority work, and we will need to make trade-offs with other critical work.

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We are experiencing a multi-region complex wildland fire event like we have never seen before. The explosive growth of the Labor Day fires was sparked by bone dry conditions, periods of high temperatures and low relative humidity that make forest vegetation and grasslands incredibly receptive to fire. Add in a historic strong wind event that covered the West Coast, and wildfires grew exponentially. In a situation like that, the primary challenge and mission becomes making sure we get people out of the way of fire.

On September 10, 2020, all 18 National Forests in California announced a temporary closure order due to unprecedented and historic fire conditions. Additionally, the Agency announced temporary closures of several forests in Oregon and Washington. Implementing fire restrictions, burn bans or associated closures is a particularly difficult decision that is not taken lightly. Criteria for determining when an area should be placed under fire restrictions or burn bans is determined locally with the input of partners, agencies and communities. Recognizing how important public access is to so many, the Forest Service is evaluating these closures daily, and we are committed to lifting the closures as soon as conditions allow.

Key Partnerships with State and Local Partners

Wildfire response is inherently interagency as wildfires do not recognize jurisdictional boundaries. Effective response requires that all the firefighting capability – including Federal, State, local government, Tribal and volunteer partners – work together. These partnerships and relationships have evolved over many years, creating a robust interagency capability to support wildfires across the country. Many of the on-going incidents span jurisdictional boundaries and are in unified command, which means Federal, State and local government resources are jointly managing fires.

As of September 19, 2020, over 32,700 interagency firefighters are currently supporting wildfire operations across the country, primarily in California, Oregon and Washington. This is the highest number of firefighters deployed since record-keeping began. More than 18,500 interagency wildfire personnel are currently deployed to California, and over 9,100 personnel are deployed to Oregon and Washington.

The Department of Defense is a key wildland firefighting partner this year, as they have been for decades, providing aircraft and personnel to serve as wildland firefighters. Over 200 soldiers from Joint Base Lewis-McCord in Washington are currently assigned to the August Complex on the Mendocino National Forest in California; also 200 marines from Marine Base Camp Pendleton in California were deployed to the Creek fire in California on September 22, 2020. In addition to the U.S. Army and Marine activation, four military C-130s equipped with Modular Airborne Fire Fighting Systems (MAFFS) are currently serving as airtankers, providing wildfire support in California.

The Departments of Agriculture and Interior requested assistance from Canada and Mexico, through reciprocal agreements established under the authorities of the Wildfire Suppression Assistance Act (P.L. 100-428). On September 2, 2020, 62 firefighters arrived from Canada. On September 17 and 18, 2020, 444 additional Canadian firefighting personnel arrived in the Pacific Northwest. Mexico is providing firefighters as well. This week, 100 firefighters from Mexico will begin working in Southern California. We are in contact with fire agencies in both Australia and New Zealand – the only other countries with which we have reciprocal cooperative fire assistance agreements. While they are interested in providing support, currently they are unable to do so because of the need to meet their own countries' COVID-19 requirements.

COVID-19 and Fire Suppression

Preventing the spread of COVID-19 among our first responders and communities is an important addition to our safety focus this year. The Forest Service and our interagency partners have seen success with our COVID-19 prevention and mitigation measures. In addition to fewer cases than may have been expected, the learning culture of the interagency wildland fire agencies allows for lessons-learned to be shared in real time as fire incidents occur.

All firefighters and fire camp personnel are strictly adhering to current social distancing protocols wherever possible. Large fire camps are no longer the norm. Most firefighting efforts are accomplished in small groups and dispersed into isolated camps to provide firefighters and the public better social distancing and safety from the spread of COVID-19. Smaller fire camps allow local health officials to contain positive cases and limit the spread of disease. Virtual communications ensure internal and external stakeholders receive the most up-to-date information as safely as possible. Spreading out fire camps, issuing personal protective equipment such as masks and gloves, screening and testing firefighters, and developing more contracts for logistical support are all built into our firefighting plans. The Agency continues to work with community leaders and local law enforcement to ensure their needs are met, and wildfire threats and capacity are clearly understood when planning firefighting strategy and evacuations.

Smoke from extreme wildfire events has posed significant risks to public health and safety. The Interagency Wildland Fire Air Quality Response Program has developed approaches for early warning of wildfire smoke impacts through efforts at the Forest Service Pacific Northwest Research Station and partner agencies. Successful products include working with the Environmental Protection Agency to provide fire and smoke information on the popular [AirNow.gov](https://www.airnow.gov) website and phone app, which received over 10 million views over the last month. A recent pilot project adds data from low-cost sensors and local smoke advisories to the AirNow Fire and Smoke map to provide the public with additional air quality information they can use to protect their health. Currently, 20 Air Resource Advisors are assigned to 21 different fires in three (3) different geographic areas of the western United States. Advisors provide Smoke Outlooks to inform approximately 21 million people, many in rural and underserved communities. Community preparation for wildfire smoke allows public health officials to be aware and prepare for effects on individuals and facilities vulnerable to smoke impacts.

Improving Forest Conditions

To address the threat of wildfire, President Trump issued Executive Order (EO) 13855, directing active management of America's forests and rangelands to reduce wildfire risk. The EO includes specific targets to reduce accumulated vegetation and increase active forest management. Further, as part of its budget request, the Department submitted to Congress a package of legislative reforms to improve forest management and reduce wildfire risk. The proposals are intended to support healthy forests and rangelands and aid in efforts to protect homes, watersheds and critical infrastructure from catastrophic wildfires. The Department would like to work with the committee to identify solutions that match the threat of the wildfire problem.

We continue to move forward with our shared stewardship approach to improving the conditions of our Nation's forests. Actively working with states, tribes and other partners is a priority to share decisions, risks and mutually beneficial outcomes. In 2019, the Forest Service sold 3.3 billion board feet of timber, the most in 22 years. That same year, we were able to conduct hazardous fuels treatments on 2.7 million acres. Over the last 5 years, more than 700,000 acres were treated annually with mechanical treatments,

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and more than 2.1 million acres were treated annually through prescribed fire or natural wildfires. Over the last 5 years, approximately 1.7 million acres have been treated annually within the wildland-urban interface. While there is much work to be done, we remain committed to doing the right work, in the right places, at the right scale.

Conclusion

The USDA Forest Service is committed to keeping our communities and firefighters safe. Even as we continue to battle these fires, we are also looking ahead to post-fire recovery and restoration of these forests. The work we will need to do to restore these newly devastated forests is in addition to the hard work already underway to improve conditions at the right scale and right places. The dedication, bravery, and professional integrity of our firefighters is second to none. Many have lost their own homes as they helped save their communities. As we work without pause 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 thank the Committee for your continued focus and help. With the Congressional Fire Funding Fix in place, the Forest Service no longer must transfer money from other Forest Service programs to cover the cost of fire suppression. Further, the authorities and capacity provided by Congress have helped us achieve our highest wildfire fuel reduction and prevention actions in more than 20 years. We are working hard; but we know it's not nearly enough. The scale of our action must match the scale of the problem and, in California that means treating two to three times more acres per year than our current efforts. We look forward to working with the Committee to increase the scale of our tools and capacity to a level that matches the great challenge associated with reducing the wildland fire threat facing the nation.