

Statement of Victoria Christiansen, Chief of the USDA Forest Service
Before the House Committee on Appropriations, Subcommittee on Interior, Environment and
Related Agencies
Concerning President's Fiscal Year 2021 Proposed Budget
For the USDA Forest Service
February 27, 2020, 1:00 p.m.

Chair McCollum, Ranking Member Joyce, and members of the Committee, thank you for inviting me here today to testify on the President's fiscal year 2021 Budget request for the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), Forest Service.

The fiscal year 2021 President's Budget for the USDA Forest Service discretionary appropriations totals \$5.3 billion for base programs and \$2.04 billion of the wildfire suppression cap adjustment (in the Wildfire Suppression Operations Reserve Fund). In addition to discretionary appropriations, the request includes \$747 million in mandatory funding. The fiscal year 2021 request focuses on three primary areas: risk-based wildland fire management, improving forest and grassland conditions through shared stewardship, and contributing to rural economic prosperity.

The President's FY21 Budget Request for Specific Priorities to Support Focal Areas

Each of the new investments detailed below align with and enhance the focal areas of the budget.

- \$10 million to develop the Risk Management Assistance framework to enhance capacity to make risk-informed wildfire response decisions;
- \$15 million to implement the Wildfire Technology Modernization section of the John D. Dingell, Jr. Conservation, Management, and Recreation Act (Dingell Act) to increase accountability for firefighter safety and for program spending during wildland fire suppression operations;
- \$10 million in Scenario Investment Planning to build capacity to maximize cutting-edge scientific tools to target wildland fire risk.
- \$15 million to implement an inter-agency (OneUSDA) Land Mobile Radio (LMR) shared service. This merge of USDA LMR operations will lower costs, improve operational efficiencies, and close gaps in delivery and security to better respond to emergencies, criminal activity, wildfires, and other disasters.

Each of the investments detailed below represent significant commitments to priority focal areas.

- \$78.5 million is for the Forest Inventory and Analysis Program, which enables the natural resource community to understand the magnitude of changes in forest conditions and trends, and to make projections of future conditions.
- \$2 billion for the management of NFS lands, which includes:
 - \$385 million for Forest Products to support the sale of 4 billion board feet of timber.
 - \$510 million for Hazardous Fuels, which supports the agency's emphasis on improving the condition of the Nation's forests and grasslands while enhancing their resilience to the negative effects of wildland fire by treating 3.5 million acres to reduce hazardous fuels.

- \$453.2 million for Capital Improvement and Maintenance
- \$2.4 billion for Wildland Fire Management
 - Within this amount, \$1.4 billion is proposed for Fire Preparedness, which enables the Forest Service to maintain its existing firefighting capability and funds all base 8 salary costs for firefighters.

Legislative Proposals

The FY 2021 President's Budget proposes several key legislative changes to improve our effectiveness in delivering programs and services:

- *Forest Management:* This proposal would provide categorical exclusions for active forest management on national forest lands, including the ability to harvest dead, dying, or damaged trees as well as proactive fuels management, including the use of fuel breaks. These changes will help reduce fire risk, improve forest health, minimize post-fire impacts, prevent re-burn of fire impacted areas, and improve safety for wildland firefighters.
- *Public Land Infrastructure Fund:* This proposed fund is included in the Department of the Interior's FY 2021 Budget request to address deferred maintenance needs. This proposal would allow the Forest Service to be eligible to use up to 10 percent annually from the Administration's Public Lands Infrastructure Fund. On the National Forest System, infrastructure is the physical link between Americans and their public lands. It strengthens communities by giving them safe access to the many ecological, economic, and social amenities these lands provide.

Perhaps most critically, forest infrastructure provides fire protection for communities. We estimate the cost for preventive maintenance, rehabilitation, and capital improvements; replacing structurally deficient bridges; upgrading many of the 22,000 culverts; and trail maintenance and capital improvements would require a funding level of \$445 million per year for 10 years. The Public Lands Infrastructure Fund would be supported by the deposit of 50 percent of all federal energy development revenue that would otherwise be credited or deposited as miscellaneous receipts to the Treasury over the 2021-2025 period, subject to an annual limit of \$1.3 billion.

- *Cost recovery Minerals:* This proposal would authorize the Forest Service to retain and spend new fees to recover costs of processing applications and monitoring compliance for locatable mineral plans of operations and surface use plans of operations for oil and gas leases, and other written Forest Service authorizations relating to the disposal of locatable and leasable (but not saleable) minerals on all NFS lands. This authority would greatly enhance customer service and expedite these activities. The provision caps the amount that may be retained at \$60 million annually. This proposal also better aligns the Forest Service with the Department of the Interior's mineral program.
- *Lands and Realty Management-Threshold Waivers:* Two proposals would amend the Federal Land Policy and Management Act to both reduce the administrative burden of land

exchanges (by approximately 70 percent) and increase the quantity of eligible land exchange proposals (by up to 30 percent).

- The first proposal increases the dollar threshold for waivers from the requirement for payment to equalize land exchange values when there are relatively minor value differences.
- The second proposal amends the formal appraisal requirement to reflect present day land values. This amendment would also reduce the legislative burden on Congress to authorize individual land exchanges due to the current limitation.
- *Roads and Trails Fund*: This proposal would authorize the Forest Service to retain funds deposited in the Roads and Trails for Fund to repair or reconstruct roads, bridges, and trails on NFS lands. The proposal would allow the Forest Service to carry out and administer projects to improve forest health conditions—which may include road, bridge or trail construction and repair—on NFS lands in the wildland-community interface where there is an abnormally high risk of fire.
- *Federal Lands Recreation Enhancement Act Reauthorization (FLREA)-Extension*: The proposal would extend the Federal Lands Recreation Enhancement Act through September 30, 2023. The revenues collected from these recreation fees are an important source of funding to enhance the visitor experience through maintenance, operations, and improvements to recreation facilities on public lands. This is an interagency proposal with the Department of the Interior.
- *Forest Service Facility Realignment and Enhancement Authorization – Extension*: This proposal would extend the authority through September 30, 2021. This authority provides that an unlimited number of administrative sites, and up to 10 isolated, undeveloped parcels per year acquired or used for administrative purposes, may be conveyed through sale or exchange.
- *Grazing Permits*: The proposal would amend the Federal Land Policy and Management Act (FLPMA) to include all National Forest System lands in the 2015 National Defense Authorization Act amendment to Section 402 of FLPMA. That amendment applies to grazing permits on national forests in the sixteen western contiguous states that have expired or are transferred or waived and requires the continuation of their terms and conditions until an environmental analysis is complete. The proposal would add grazing permits on the remaining National Forest System lands (grazing permits on the national forests in eastern States and National Grasslands).
- *Wild and Scenic Rivers*: The Wild and Scenic Rivers Act requires that comprehensive river management plans be prepared within three years following a Wild and Scenic River designation. This proposal would amend the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act to provide that the Secretary of Agriculture shall not be in violation of Section 3(d)(1) of the Wild and Scenic

Rivers Act solely because more than three years have passed since a river was designated “wild and scenic” and a comprehensive river management plan has not yet been completed. If more than three years have passed since designation without the completion of a comprehensive river management plan, the proposal would require that a plan must be completed or appropriately updated no later than during the next forest plan revision process.

- *Forest Botanical Products - Extension:* This proposal would extend the authority for charging and retaining fees for the harvest of forest botanical products for one year, to September 30, 2021. This program provides for the sale and harvest of forest botanical products in a sustainable manner that contributes to meeting the Nation’s demand for these goods and services.

An estimated 63 million acres of National Forest System (NFS) lands and 70,000 communities are at risk from uncharacteristically severe wildfires. Other threats include regional drought, invasive species, and major outbreaks of insects and disease. Natural resource challenges are best met with collective action. Stakeholders of the Forest Service broadly agree on the need for active measures to address the threats across many of the landscapes we manage, and Congress has done their part to help. I appreciate the support and innovative authorities that Congress has provided in the Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2018, the Agriculture Improvement Act of 2018 (the 2018 Farm Bill), and the Dingell Act to help us do more to improve landscape resiliency for present and future generations. This is an indication of Congress’ expectations and trust in us, and I look forward to continuing to work with you to meet those expectations. There is much more work to be done, and we are committed to doing the right work in the right places at the right scale.

As the Forest Service moves forward with its shared stewardship strategy, we are working more closely than ever with states, tribes, and other partners on priority projects across landscapes and all ownerships. We are sharing decisions and risks and achieving outcomes that we mutually define. This strategy is dependent on our employees—our largest and most important investment. The successful delivery of services and work starts with a highly skilled, motivated workforce. They are essential to confronting the arduous challenges facing America’s forests and grasslands; they are integral to the services and experiences we offer to citizens, local communities and our partners. We have taken significant steps to improve policies, raise accountability, upgrade reporting systems, and conduct training around the workplace environment to stop harassment, bullying, and retaliation and permanently change our culture. I am committed to continuing the hard work that creates the work place our employees deserve; to continue transparency before this Subcommittee, Congress, and the citizens we serve; and to build an organization where every individual, inside and out of the agency, is treated with respect and dignity.

In recent years, the agency’s budget structure has not efficiently supported mission critical work; nor has it provided necessary transparency to Congress to enable decision-making. I thank Congress for providing for the establishment of a new Forest Service Operations account in the Further Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2020. As directed, we will be prepared to implement the new account on October 1, 2020. The President’s fiscal year 2021 Budget request also proposes additional changes to the budget structure. Specifically, we request establishment of Salary and Expense accounts, as well as modest consolidation and movement of some line items. These

changes will allow the agency to plan and fund fixed costs in an accountable and transparent manner without any negative effects on program implementation.

In closing, the President's fiscal year 2021 Budget request for the Forest Service prioritizes investments to reduce wildland fire risk, improve forest and grassland conditions through shared stewardship with our partners, and contribute to rural economic prosperity. It requires tough choices within our existing program of work, including the reassessment of Research and Development priorities. I look forward to working with this Subcommittee to fulfill the President's goals and our key responsibilities for the long-term benefit of the Nation's forests and grasslands, and for all Americans. I will be glad to answer your questions.