

**Statement of Victoria Christiansen, Chief of the USDA Forest Service  
Before the House Committee on Appropriations  
Subcommittee on Interior, Environment, and Related Agencies  
Concerning the President's Fiscal Year 2022 Proposed Budget  
For the USDA Forest Service  
April 15, 2021, 2:00 p.m.**

Chair Pingree, Ranking Member Joyce, and members of the Subcommittee, thank you for inviting me here today to testify on the President's fiscal year 2022 Budget for the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), Forest Service.

Over the past year, the coronavirus pandemic brought human loss and suffering to untold numbers of American families. Job losses, challenges with social distancing, separation of loved ones, telework, and virtual schooling, all impacted our society and agency workforce. In response, the Forest Service found new and imaginative ways of performing our mission-critical work, including suppressing wildfire with minimal risk of spreading the coronavirus (COVID-19); safely working with partners to improve forest conditions; and hosting unprecedented numbers of visitors on the National Forest System, enabling them to safely enjoy their public lands. All while keeping fiscal accountability and employee well-being as a foundation for our work.

Given the challenges of the pandemic, we were able to complete and sustain forest treatment work on the ground. The Forest Service continued its focus to improve forest conditions to reduce wildfire risk to communities on over 2.65 million acres. These actions included removing hazardous fuels like dead and downed trees, and combating disease, insect and invasive species infestations. We also improved more than 443,400 acres through watershed restoration, with many of these projects designed to improve climate resiliency, improve passage for aquatic wildlife, or protect sources of drinking water on National Forest System lands. The Forest Service moved nine watersheds to an improved condition by completing all the essential projects in the respective Watershed Restoration Action Plans. The Forest Service also focused on providing jobs and stability for local economies through a year of historic timber production, selling more than 3.2 billion board feet of timber, the second highest level in 20 years.

In fiscal year 2021, we have treated nearly 1.1 million acres to reduce wildfire risk and improve forest conditions. We have had great success in implementing prescribed fire projects thus far, and the agency is on track to meet the goal of 3.5 million acres treated by the end of the fiscal year. These prescribed burns are low-intensity surface fires that release substantially less carbon dioxide than wildfires of the same size.

The Forest Service is doing its part to support jobs and aid the economic stability of communities and municipalities where citizens have suffered significant economic downturns resulting from the ongoing pandemic. Specifically, the Forest Service has invested CARES ACT funding to create and sustain jobs in rural communities, including opportunities for university STEM students, hiring field crews and increasing funding in contracts and agreements with States to hire field crews to conduct catch-up surveys of Forest Inventory and plots. Plot surveys fell behind in fiscal year 2020 because of extreme wildfires in the West and because of the pandemic. This additional investment alone

created more than 50 jobs. Moreover, the Forest Inventory and Analysis program's data and analyses provide essential information to industry to inform mill location and to guide business planning in the forest products sector by monitoring and projecting wood volume and supply. This enhances the viability and profitability of the entire sector, directly affecting tens of thousands of jobs. Over 900 timber sale contracts have been extended, providing additional time for purchasers to harvest timber.

We are also working to sustain rural small businesses and industries by relying on local communities to fulfill logistical firefighting personnel needs rather than outsource to larger cities, keeping communities open by supporting lodging, restaurants, grocery stores, and hardware suppliers.

In a year where demand for outdoor recreation reached record levels during the pandemic, we expect a modest rise in spending from \$9.5 billion in 2019 to just under \$10 billion in 2020 and economic contributions to the Gross Domestic Product to rise from \$11.4 billion to ~\$12 billion with over 148,000 jobs supported. We have helped families that depend on firewood to meet both heating and cooking needs by issuing free firewood permits in times of public disaster or emergencies to assist those impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic.

I will now discuss how our ongoing work to implement the fiscal year 2021 budget aligns with the Biden Administration's priorities for fiscal year 2022, including helping to control the COVID-19 pandemic; tackle climate change; provide economic relief through job creation; advance racial equity; and further improve our work environment.

### **Controlling the COVID-19 pandemic**

Last year, despite the coronavirus pandemic as well as historic natural disasters and civil unrest, the Forest Service rose to the challenge. Our responsibility as an employer, a service provider to the public, and a manager of federal recreation sites, is to ensure the safety of our employees, contractors, and the public. This is our top priority. That is why agency policy requires our employees, contractors and visitors to wear a mask, maintain physical distance, and have access to essential Personal Protective Equipment.

Our 2021 field work and fire seasons are currently underway. In accordance with the Administration's priority in Executive Order 13987 to halt the spread of COVID-19, by relying on the best available data and science-based public health measures, the Forest Service will continue to follow guidance in USDA's Workplace Safety Plan. This Plan is a detailed, data-driven COVID-19 workplace safety plan that prioritizes the health and safety of our federal employees and contractors—whether they work in offices or out in the field. National Forests are evaluating local conditions and mitigating risks ahead of reopening more visitor centers, recreation sites and other public venues. We are working to continue the successes achieved last year in wildfire suppression response in maintaining the safety of our employees, contractors and partners in shared quarters and fire camps.

### **Tackling Climate Change**

Today, the need to address the climate crisis is more urgent than ever. Fire seasons are longer with wildfires occurring outside the span of historic fire seasons in different parts of the country. Other

climate change threats include regional drought, invasive species, and major outbreaks of insects and disease. The Forest Service stands ready to meet these challenges and advance the Administration's climate goals. These challenges include researching the vulnerability of water supplies and watersheds to a changing climate; conducting assessments and providing tools such as the National Insects and Disease Risk Map; and identifying optimal fuel treatment practices and accelerating the pace and scale of prescribed fire.

Wildfire Management. The 2020 fire year was unprecedented in many ways. Not only did we fight fire during a global pandemic, but more acres burned on Forest Service-managed lands than in any previous year since the historic Big Burn of 1910. The increased frequency of wildfires in the wildland-urban interface continues to impact more homes and communities than ever before, with more acres burned in California than in any previous year on record. In 2020, wildfires destroyed nearly 18,000 homes and outbuildings (structures).

In 2021, we are anticipating and are prepared for another long and arduous fire year. We continue to invest in pre-planned response using risk assessments and analytics to inform fire managers about resource allocations needed and used on fires. We are also investing in several key technology and modernization portfolios; including, Data Management, Enhanced Real Time Operating Picture, Decision Support Applications, and Modern Tools for a Modern Response. Additionally, implementation of the Large Fire Assessment process, as directed by the Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2021 (Fiscal Year 2021 Omnibus), is helping us better account for our actions while fostering a learning culture. Cooperation with partners at the federal, state, and local levels also ensures we have a strong workforce of firefighters and equipment to provide for safe and effective wildfire response throughout the year.

Climate Adaptation and Mitigation. In line with Executive Order (E.O.) 14008, *Tackling the Climate Crisis at Home and Abroad*, the Forest Service is using science to advance climate-smart land management, restoration, fire management, and science innovation and delivery for the benefit of current and future generations. We are building on past work by leading USDA's Climate Hubs. These Hubs provide practical, proactive tools informed by science for landowners and land managers. Maintaining climate-resilient landscapes is central to virtually all Forest Service research and land management activities and goals. For example, we are implementing acquisition of conservation easements on private lands and increasing capacity for carbon sequestration through reforestation and production of woody biomass for forest products. All these activities are furthering the goals of E.O. 14008 to conserve 30 percent of U.S. lands and waters by 2030. We are also coordinating with the Department of the Interior to support a strategy for creating a Civilian Climate Corps, drawing on the agency's unique expertise and history that builds on the legacy of the New Deal Civilian Conservation Corps. Through the Climate Conservation Corps, we will work to deliver forest and watershed health and resilience, carbon sequestration, wildfire risk reduction, innovation in science and science delivery, and improvements in sustainable operating infrastructure. In addition, a Civilian Climate Corps will provide career opportunities for a diverse generation of Americans in critical work to promote environmental sustainability.

Restoration and Reforestation. 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. Congress is doing their part as well. The Forest

Service has plans for the reforestation of over 1.3 million acres of National Forest System land. These plans address only one third of National Forest System reforestation needs, which are estimated at 4 million acres. Wildfires create over 80 percent of reforestation needs, including approximately 1 million acres from the 2020 wildfire season. The Forest Service is also placing special emphasis on planting the right species, in the right place, under the right conditions, so forests will remain healthy over time.

Moving forward we will maintain our Shared Stewardship approach of working together in an integrated way to make decisions and take actions on the land. With this shared approach, the Forest Service is working more closely than ever with states, tribes, and other partners on priority projects across landscapes and across all land ownerships. We are sharing decisions and risks and achieving measurable 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 climate-related challenges facing America’s forests and grasslands; they are integral to the services and experiences we offer to citizens, local communities, and our partners.

The Administration has also placed a priority to restore nature-based infrastructure including our lands, forests, wetlands, watersheds, and other natural resources. As part of the American Jobs Plan, the Administration is calling on Congress to invest in protection from extreme wildfires and the restoration of major water and land resources. To accomplish this, the plan empowers local leaders to shape these restoration and resilience project funds in line with the Outdoor Restoration Force Act.

### **Providing Economic Relief**

The fiscal year 2021 Omnibus authorized the Secretary of Agriculture to use up to \$200 million to provide financial relief to timber harvesting and timber hauling businesses that have experienced financial losses due to COVID-19. Timber harvesters and haulers are critical to forest management across the country. COVID-19 relief assistance is a top priority of the Biden Administration, and Forest Service staff are coordinating with USDA Farm Services Agency staff to implement this provision and get financial assistance to timber harvesting and hauling businesses as soon as possible.

The Forest Service will also make positive impacts on state and local economies thanks to the innovative authorities Congress provided in the recently enacted Great American Outdoors Act. This significant legislation will enable us to repair and upgrade vital infrastructure and facilities in our national forests, and permanently funds the Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF), investing in conservation and recreation opportunities on public and private lands. Projects will enrich the lives of current and future generations by improving landscape resiliency and increasing access. Recent investments in these areas are an indication of Congress’ expectations and trust in us, and I look forward to continuing to work with you to meet those expectations and trust. 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.

### **Fiscal Accountability and the Fire Funding Fix**

In fiscal year 2021, the Forest Service has transitioned to a new budget structure that will help us increase transparency of our spending over time. It also will result in enhanced budget discipline,

such as better planning to fund fixed costs and help overcome longstanding systemic challenges without negative impacts to programs that benefit the public. We are experiencing some growing pains and learning from them. Realignment of the budget structure is illuminating the need for changes to some of our business and cultural practices. We are stewarding the Forest Service through this change with strategic workforce planning and collaboratively managing all operations within our allocated budgets. This requires making difficult decisions and strengthening internal control to mitigate overspending.

At the beginning of fiscal year 2021, fire activity was at its peak with most resources committed throughout the country. In prior years the end of the most severe part of the fire season typically occurred in early to mid-September. This year, however, there were more than 24,000 firefighters engaged nationally on October 1, at the start of the new fiscal year, which is substantially more than the early October average of approximately 3,600. Pushing the severe part of the fire season more than a month later into fiscal year 2021 shifted the high spend rate the agency typically incurs in August and September into October and November. As a result, the agency transferred \$1.8 billion from the Wildfire Suppression Operations Reserve Fund (Fire Funding Fix), to fund wildfire suppression operations in fiscal year 2021. We understand congressional expectations for increasing accountability and oversight of fire spending that come with the Fire Funding Fix. We will continue to closely monitor and report on the status of spending to ensure judicious use of suppression funds during the fiscal year.

### **Advancing Racial Equity and Improving Our Work Environment**

It is essential that we create a work environment that promotes the safety of our employees and fosters equity and inclusion for all people. USDA is committed to ensuring equity across its agencies, removing barriers to access, and building a workforce more representative of America. To that end, the Forest Service strives to maintain a work environment that is equitable, respectful, and free of harassment and bullying of any kind. The Forest Service has taken significant steps to improve policies, raise accountability, upgrade reporting systems, and conduct training focused on workplace environment to stop harassment, bullying, and retaliation. We are working to permanently change our culture. I am committed to ending discrimination in all its forms wherever it exists. The Forest Service is continuing the hard work that creates the work place our employees deserve and building an organization where every individual, inside and out of the agency, is treated with respect and dignity.

In closing, we are always mindful of the need to demonstrate to Congress and the public we are striving to do our part to spend taxpayer dollars as they are intended - to address the serious challenges facing our land managing mission today. The President's fiscal year 2022 Budget request for the Forest Service will position us to fulfill our mission and invest in the Administration's immediate 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 welcome your questions.