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BEFORE THE  
UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES  
COMMITTEE ON NATURAL RESOURCES  
SUBCOMMITTEE ON NATIONAL PARKS, FOREST, and PUBLIC LANDS**

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**Concerning  
Investing in Wildfire Management, Ecosystem Restoration, and Resilient Communities:  
Examining the Biden Administration’s Priorities for Implementation of the Bipartisan  
Infrastructure Law**

Thank you for inviting us to testify about the Forest Service’s implementation of the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law (BIL). We deeply appreciate Congress’s passage of the BIL, which provides a significant down payment on the work we intend to accomplish under the 10-year Strategy to Confront the Wildfire Crisis. Of the \$5.5 billion in funding provided by the BIL for the Forest Service, about \$3 billion will be invested over five years to reduce the risk of wildland fire to communities and restore ecosystems.

**Value of Forests to People**

Since before America’s founding, the health and productivity of the continent’s lands and waters supported an abundance of human life and activity. Native peoples built some of the most enduring and advanced civilizations on Earth and are the original caretakers of all the beautiful lands across our nation. Traditional Ecological Knowledge continues to be at the heart of sustainable agriculture, environmentally sound fire management, and good land stewardship practices.

Today, people continue to depend on the nation’s forests and grasslands for their social, economic, and personal well-being. National forests and grasslands are critical for climate resilience, providing benefits that include carbon storage, habitat and connectivity for wildlife, and clean air and water. For example, nationwide, more than 60 million people living in 3,400 communities across 36 states depend on the national forests and grasslands for their drinking water.

Americans also rely on their national forests and grasslands for outdoor recreation, cultural and spiritual connections, and respite. The benefits include physical exercise and all the mental and other health improvements that come with it. In 2020, the National Forest System had 168 million visitors, equivalent to more than 50% of the United States population. For local

communities, this is where they live and gather. Outdoor activities and scenery give communities a sense of identity and place, adding to their quality of life.

The National Forest System is also a tremendous source of jobs and economic opportunities for hundreds of thousands of Americans. In 2020, the National Forest System (NFS) supported more than 370,000 jobs and contributed more than \$35 billion to our nation's Gross Domestic Product (GDP). In 2020, 66 percent of the NFS GDP contribution (\$23.3 billion) was associated with direct use of forest and grassland resources, including hunting, fishing, and other forms of outdoor recreation, livestock grazing, energy and mineral development, and forest products. Of this, recreation visitor use supported about 168,300 jobs and contributed \$13.5 billion. In addition, 31 percent of the GDP contribution (\$10.9 billion) was tied to resource management investments, such as construction and maintenance of infrastructure, firefighting, ecosystem restoration, research and development, fuels treatments, and Job Corps. Finally, 3 percent of the GDP contribution (\$872 million) was derived from payments to states and counties to support schools, roads, and other government services.

All this and more are at risk on forests and grasslands nationwide.

### **The Risks to Forests**

Nearly a quarter of the contiguous U.S. is currently in a high to moderate wildfire condition. Over the last two decades, we have witnessed what has become a now familiar pattern: bigger and more destructive wildfires that are extremely challenging and costly to suppress due to over 100 years of fire suppression, climate change, and expanding Wildland Urban Interface (WUI). We have experienced back-to-back catastrophic fire seasons in the last two years, devastating communities and destroying resources in their wake. Big destructive wildfires threaten human health, water quality, homes, jobs, local economies, communities, and infrastructure. They also threaten key ecological values, including carbon storage, species habitat, soil stability, and watershed function; and in some cases, even result in long-term deforestation.

Conditions are only expected to worsen as the climate continues to change, and development in the WUI continues unabated. Vast areas of the West and across the country are at risk from huge wildfires that can quickly spread 10 to 30 square miles or more, burning through multiple landownerships, forest types, and communities.

This growing wildfire crisis created the need for a new land management strategy—one designed to support strategic management and restoration of millions of acres of land in high-risk areas to protect forest health, ecosystem and watershed function, and human infrastructure. The need for increased pace and scale of restoration necessitates a holistic response in partnership with the Department of the Interior (DOI) and other Federal agencies, State and Tribal governments, communities, industries, organizations, and private landowners.

This collaborative response needs to be a paradigm shift from small-scale, independently managed treatments to strategic, science-based landscape-scale treatments that cross boundaries and meet the scale of the problem, starting initially with those places critically at risk. It also

needs to be paired with thoughtful reforms to address growth into the WUI and the growing climate crisis.

### **The Wildfire Crisis Strategy**

Our 10-year Wildfire Crisis Strategy would increase science-based fuels treatments by up to four times previous treatment levels, especially in those areas most at risk. Fuels treatments by the Forest Service together with partners have made a difference over the years. But the scale of treatments has been outmatched by the rapid increase in the scale and severity of wildfires as climate change accelerates.

This strategy calls for treating up to 20 million additional acres of National Forest System lands over the coming decade, and working with partners, including colleagues at the Department of the Interior, to treat up to 30 million additional acres on adjoining lands of multiple land ownerships, while building a long-term maintenance plan. The intent for these treatments is to reduce the trajectory of wildfire risk to people, municipal water sources, communities, and natural resources, and restore fire-adapted landscapes so they are more resilient.

Active management rooted in sound science and ecological principles will remain a key tool in this work. We are using every tool and authority we have to protect and improve the health of America's forests. The tools we have include, but are not limited to, prescribed fire, mechanical thinning, targeted grazing, Good Neighbor Authority agreements, Tribal Forest Protection Act agreements, and stewardship contracts.

It will be imperative to use fire itself for fuel and forest management in our western landscapes because many of those ecosystems evolved with fire. Fire is an essential and highly effective fuel treatment to reduce wildfire risk and can have ecological benefits for many western forest types.

Connecting landscape risk reduction and resilience with community risk reduction and resilience at the necessary scale is a critical part of the paradigm shift. Our tools for these connections include community fire prevention programs, community wildfire protection plans (CWPP), and Firewise practices for homes and communities to reduce the risk of catastrophic wildfire.

I want to stress that the additional acres treated under the 10-year strategy will be over and above regular appropriations. That means the work that we have historically accomplished- in timber production, recreation, mining, wildlife habitat management, and more- will continue. We look forward to working with Congress on the President's Fiscal Year 2023 budget and beyond to ensure sufficient resources are in place to deliver on the 10-year strategy.

### **BIL and the Wildfire Crisis Strategy**

The Bipartisan Infrastructure Law provides a down payment to begin the critical work outlined in our 10-year Wildfire Crisis Strategy. To achieve the collective impact that our forests and communities need, we must build a coalition to work across land management jurisdictions, leverage diverse capacities, and build broad public and community support for the work at the scale necessary to make a difference. This includes work across Federal, Tribal, State, local, and

private lands. Partnerships, including those beyond existing contracts and agreements, will help identify barriers to success and ways to overcome them.

### Hazardous Fuels Reduction

The Forest Service has worked closely with the regions to identify projects within high risk firehatched landscapes designed to reduce wildfire risk to communities and watersheds. The funding of these projects, using the over \$1.6 billion in the BIL, will allow us to begin implementing the 10-year Wildfire Crisis Strategy. The Forest Service is also leveraging this moment to increase funding opportunities to work with Tribal partners, young adult, Native youth, and veteran crews to treat hazardous fuels in firehatched on federal lands.

The Forest Service is prioritizing investments of the \$400 million authorized under Section 40804 of the BIL to provide financial assistance to facilities that purchase and process byproducts from ecosystem restoration projects and the \$12 million from Division J of the BIL that support wood innovations and community wood proposals in priority firehatched landscapes. The Forest Service will also explore options to establish innovative new approaches for delivering financial assistance to forest products facilities via existing authorities.

Section 40804 of the BIL provides \$160 million to provide funds to States and Tribes for implementing restoration projects on federal lands through the Good Neighbor Authority.

Section 40808 of the BIL codifies the Joint Chiefs Landscape Restoration Partnership Program, including criteria for evaluation of proposals, and authorizes the appropriation of \$90 million for each of fiscal years 2022 and 2023, with not less than 40 percent allocated to carry out eligible activities through the National Resource Conservation Service (NRCS) and not less than 40 percent allocated to carry out eligible activities through the Forest Service. The Joint Chiefs program reduces wildfire threats to communities and landowners, protects water quality and supply, and improves wildlife habitat for at-risk species. The Joint Chiefs program also leverages technical and financial assistance to increase the pace and scale of restoration efforts across all lands. This multi-year partnership between the Forest Service and the NRCS has been in place since fiscal year 2014 and has provided \$335 million in funding for 110 projects.

Section 40806 of the BIL provides the Forest Service with new National Environmental Policy Act authorities, including a new Categorical Exclusion for linear fuel breaks. The Forest Service has prepared guidance to assist Forests and Regions in applying the new Categorical Exclusion and it is available for use currently. We will update Forest Service NEPA directives to include the categorical exclusion in the future.

### Cooperative Fire Risk Mitigation

The Forest Service is working with the National Association of State Foresters, Intertribal Timber Council, and other partners to implement the Community Wildfire Defense Grant (CWDG) Program authorized in Section 40803(f) of the BIL and funded with \$1 billion to be spent over a five-year period. The CWDG program will provide financial assistance to “at-risk” communities to develop CWPPs and to implement prevention and mitigation activities described within CWPPs which will reduce wildfire risk. Communities that have a high or very high risk of

wildfire, are considered low-income, or have been impacted by a severe disaster will all be given priority in the consideration process for grants.

Division J of the BIL appropriates not less than \$88 million additional funds for State Fire Assistance (SFA) and \$20 million for Volunteer Fire Assistance (VFA) to be spent over a five-year period. The additional SFA grant funding will assist State forestry agencies to improve the capacity State forestry agencies to assist communities with wildfire mitigation efforts and to increase local capacity to respond to and suppress wildfires. The additional VFA funding will assist rural volunteer fire departments to make initial attack response on wildfires while they are small and easier to suppress.

### **BIL and Post Fire Recovery**

Sections 70301-70303 of the BIL, the REPLANT Act, gives us a historic opportunity to address the reforestation backlog needs from wildfires and other disturbances. This provision removes the \$30 million annual cap on the Reforestation Trust Fund, giving the Forest Service more resources for post-fire reforestation. With the REPLANT Act, we anticipate spending between \$140 to \$260 million per year for reforestation and related work. This will enable us to ramp up reforestation treatments to almost 500,000 acres/year, including 200,000 acres of planting – a more than 300% increase. The Forest Service is developing policy to implement this program using existing programmatic structures. Reforestation provides one of the main tools for national forests to adapt to and mitigate the effects of climate change. By reforesting in the right place, at the right time, with the right trees, we foster development of future resilient forests, and the ecosystem benefits they provide for us and future generations.

Section 40803 of the BIL provides \$100 million to the Forest Service for burned area rehabilitation activities that must be implemented within 3 years of containment of a wildland fire. Division J includes \$45 million each of fiscal years 2022-2026 for post-fire recovery as well. These funds are being focused on the repair or improvement of lands unlikely to recover naturally to a management-approved condition and to repair and replace minor infrastructure and facilities damaged by the fire.

Section 40804 of the BIL also provides funding for revegetation activities which will involve interagency collaboration and coordination in support of the National Seed Strategy.

Section 40807 of the BIL authorizes emergency determinations that allow for proactive or post-event emergency actions to address underlying emergency conditions. The authority can be used for single event responses or be applied to larger landscapes as conditions warrant. Procedures and guidance for applying the emergency determination authority are being developed.

Division J of the BIL appropriates \$300 million in additional funding for the Emergency Watershed Protection Program to repair damages to the waterways and watersheds resulting from natural disasters. The Forest Service is currently working with NRCS to develop an MOU to guide the process of using these funds to implement projects on NFS lands.

## **BIL and Wildland Firefighter Compensation**

Hiring and retaining firefighters in increasingly long and complex fire years is a challenge that we take seriously. The BIL provides targeted funds that enable the Forest Service to make significant investments in a stable, professional, permanent wildland firefighting workforce, and in programs that focus on mental health, resilience, and well-being. Section 40803(d) of the BIL calls for the classification of a wildland firefighter series, provides for possible pay increases for wildland firefighters, and for the Forest Service and the Department of the Interior to convert 1,000 seasonal firefighters into permanent fire managers. USDA, in collaboration with its partners at DOI and the Office of Personnel Management (OPM), is working to implement the BIL classification, pay, and staffing conversion provisions.

To implement Section 40803 (d) (4)(B), we are coordinating with DOI and OPM to provide the Secretaries with analyses of “specified geographic areas in which it is difficult to recruit or retain a Federal wildland firefighter” as outlined in the BIL.

The funds allocated in the BIL are a first step in appropriately compensating our federal wildland firefighters. We are looking beyond the BIL to develop longer-term proposals to permanently revise wildland firefighter pay.

## **BIL and Technology Investments in Wildland Fire**

Section 40803 of the BIL establishes \$10 million for the Forest Service and DOI to spend on the Geostationary Operational Environmental Satellite (GOES) Program to rapidly detect and report wildfire starts; \$30 million for USDA grants to States and local governments to establish and operate Reverse-911 telecommunication systems; and \$10 million shared between Forest Service and DOI for the procurement and placement of wildfire detection and real-time monitoring equipment, such as sensors, cameras, and other relevant equipment, in areas at risk of wildfire or post-burned areas.

On March 9, 2022, the initial kickoff for the ground-based cameras and sensors project was conducted and we are working with Alert Wildfire regarding architectures and agreement structures. We have also met with NASA and Delphire Technologies regarding sensors and integrating sensor data. We are working with the Colorado Center of Excellence to secure agreements and kick off pilot testing.

We have been meeting weekly with NOAA and Interagency Council for Advancing Meteorological Services (ICAMS) to coordinate work plans and spend plans through active public-private partnerships. We are also working with the Thermal Working Group to build an evaluation plan of GOES, Fire Autonomous Detection & Dissemination System (FADDS), and other sources of data.

## **Wildfire Commission in BIL**

In December 2021, USDA, DOI, and the Department of Homeland Security through the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) announced the establishment of a Wildland Fire Mitigation and Management Commission. This Commission fulfills Sections 70201-70207 of the

BIL and represents a critical step in combating the wildfire crisis and improving resilience on the nation's landscapes. The Wildfire Mitigation and Management Commission is tasked to study and make recommendations to improve Federal policies relating to— (1) the prevention, mitigation, suppression, and management of wildland fires in the United States; and (2) the rehabilitation of land in the United States devastated by wildland fires. An announcement calling for applications to the commission, with a focus on non-federal members, representing State, local, Tribal, and private stakeholders, was announced on March 10, 2022, and closed on March 25, 2022. Applications are currently under review, with the first Commission meeting targeted for late spring.

### **Conclusion**

We greatly appreciate the significant resources Congress has provided through the BIL that will allow the Forest Service, with our many partners, to take the initial steps to address the wildfire crisis. This work will result in resilient landscapes that have ecologic integrity, provide essential ecosystem services including carbon storage and habitat for wildlife, and boundless opportunities for American citizens to recreate.

The Forest Service looks forward to working with this Subcommittee to reduce the severity of wildfires in our country. This concludes our testimony. We welcome any questions the Subcommittee may have.