

**Statement of
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Before the
House Natural Resources Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests, and Public Lands
Oversight Hearing on
Investing in Wildfire Management, Ecosystem Restoration, and Resilient Communities:
Examining the Biden Administration’s Priorities for Implementation of the Bipartisan
Infrastructure Law**

April 5, 2022

Chairman Neguse, Ranking Member Fulcher, and Members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony on the Department of the Interior’s (DOI) implementation of the investments in the Wildland Fire Management Program contained in Public Law 117-58, the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act, also referred to as the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law (BIL).

President Biden signed the BIL on November 15, 2021, making a once-in-a-generation investment in the Nation’s infrastructure and economic competitiveness. This landmark investment will help rebuild America’s critical infrastructure, tackle the climate crisis, advance environmental justice, and drive the creation of good-paying jobs. By addressing long overdue improvements and strengthening our resilience to the changing climate, this investment in our communities across the country will grow the economy sustainably and equitably so everyone gets ahead for decades to come.

The Biden-Harris Administration’s strong commitment to supporting the wildland firefighting workforce, coupled with the provisions in the BIL, represent an historic investment in Federal wildland fire management efforts, and DOI’s Wildland Fire Management Program. The BIL provides significant investments in wildfire mitigation work and post-fire rehabilitation efforts that will be integral to the restoration of ecosystems and important landscape services like reliable and clean water supplies, clean air, biodiversity and productivity, healthy native species habitat, and recreation opportunities.

We appreciate the Committee’s interest in the Department’s plans and priorities for implementing the BIL.

Drought

Current drought conditions and drought outlooks for much of the United States looks very concerning for communities and virtually every resource dependent on water or precipitation. The U.S. Drought Monitor shows some slight improvement in parts of the Eastern U.S., but moderate degradation across many areas of the West. The NOAA Climate Prediction Center U.S. Seasonal Drought Outlook (March 17, 2022) shows continuation of drought across nearly all the West, except for the coastal Pacific Northwest and a part of the Northern Rocky Mountains.

Seasonal outlooks from the Center show that warmer than normal temperatures are also likely for a good part of the West.

Wildland vegetation has not yet recovered from a long-term drought across much of the West, where we expect to see increased drought stress and mortality in shrubs and trees. One concern is that parts of the West that had seen above normal rainfall for part of the past winter, might see germination and growth of grasses that stop growing into late spring and summer, and become fuel to spread fast moving wildfires.

Climate Change

Drought conditions and other climate influences on wildfire that we have seen in recent years are consistent with scientific descriptions of climate change, including from the U.S. Global Change Research Program and the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (UN). For example, we have seen more intense precipitation for shorter periods of the winter, longer and warmer growing seasons accompanied by drought, and earlier snowmelt in higher elevations. We are beginning to see changes in vegetation itself, driven by drought and insect infestations and in some instances, shorter periods of time between high severity wildfires. These factors have contributed to increasingly devastating, intense, and historic fire seasons in recent years.

In the near term, wildfires near communities, watersheds, critical resources, and infrastructure are of greatest concern with climate-induced wildfire changes, including elevated risk to human health and the environment from unmanaged smoke. However, over the longer term, wildfires that change vegetation types, and wildfires burning in peat lands and tundra, may have longer lasting effects that ultimately contribute to further warming, compounded wildfire risk and greater carbon emissions.

Climate change is creating longer fire seasons and American communities continue to bear the brunt of the resulting cycle of intensifying droughts, wildfires, poor air quality, and flooding. Wildfires can undercut the many benefits and services we receive from lands managed by DOI, including those held in trust for Tribal nations, such as foraging, hunting and fishing, clean water, clean air, wildlife, recreational opportunities, and cultural resources. Additionally, wildfires threaten drinking water and cause billions of dollars in damages to homes and infrastructure.

Managing wildfire risk is key to the protection and stewardship of these federal lands and honors our trust responsibilities and special commitments to American Indians, Alaska Natives, and affiliated Island Communities. Addressing this challenge will require us to focus the significant investment of resources, to scalable risk reduction strategies informed by the best available science around changing climate conditions and shifting demographics. As we all know, wildfire knows no boundaries and solutions will require collaboration and cooperation. The National Cohesive Wildland Fire Management Strategy's goals of creating resilient landscapes, promoting fire-adapted communities, and ensuring a safe and effective wildfire response, culminates in the vision of a Nation able to live with wildland fire.

The United States has over one billion acres at some level of risk from wildfire. More than 250 million of those acres are at high or very-high hazard potential, and 7.1 million acres of lands administered by DOI are identified as having a very-high or high likelihood of exposure to wildfires. To address this, the Department is putting people first by working with U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) and the Office of Personnel Management (OPM) to recognize the efforts of our Federal wildland firefighters who respond to ignitions, implement fuels treatments to reduce the risk from wildfires before they start, and administer post-fire rehabilitation efforts to reduce further damage from severe wildfire events and set these landscapes back on the path to recovery.

As part of this effort, with support from the BIL, the Department in collaboration with the USDA Forest Service, Tribal Nations, and other Federal and non-Federal partners, will increase fuels treatment accomplishments that reduce risk to adjacent communities and watersheds, and that align with the Department's Fuels Management program objectives:

- Integration with Resource and Land Management activities.
- Stewardship-Based projects with shared stewardship values and joint, mutually agreed upon priorities coordinated with partners and stakeholders.
- Geographic Landscape-Based projects that contribute to a broad-scale strategy to achieve mutually agreed upon management goals and objectives that are coordinated locally.
- Outcome Based projects that protect, maintain, and improve resiliency to wildfire; mitigate significant wildfire risk to Department and Tribal values; protect, maintain, or improve resiliency to wildfire; and meet bureaus' statutory obligations for wildland fire management responsibilities.

Over the past decade, the Department has invested more than \$2 billion in pre- and post-hazardous fuels management treatments to protect communities and ecosystems. Maintaining this investment in areas where the Department has successfully reduced wildfire risk is an important component of the Department's long-term success. As the Department completes treatments in new areas we will continue to protect and maintain these investments in pre-wildfire risk reduction, post-fire hazard mitigation, and ecosystem restoration.

Ecosystem Restoration & BIL Overview

Under the BIL, the Department will dramatically expand its efforts to reduce wildfire risk, improve community resiliency to wildfire, prepare for and respond to harmful wildfires, and support post-fire recovery, including in communities that have traditionally been overlooked.

The BIL provides more than \$5 billion to both DOI and the USDA Forest Service Wildland Fire Management programs over the next five years for coordinated efforts for managing wildfire risk. Of that amount, nearly \$1.5 billion is provided to DOI, including:

- \$255 million to support science, technology, training, and workforce reforms including increased pay and mental health and safety programs for firefighters.
- \$325 million to support recovery after a fire. These actions will help mitigate the damaging effects of wildfires and set landscapes on a path towards natural recovery and climate resilience.

- \$878 million to manage fuels and mitigate wildfire risk before a wildfire occurs. This work will protect vulnerable communities from wildfire while preparing our natural landscapes for a changing climate.

The BIL also provides the Department \$905 million for ecosystem restoration. These resources will be targeted to projects nationally to build climate resilience, restore and connect core habitats as well as build partnerships and leverage strategic conservation plans. The ecosystem restoration funds include several areas where we are coordinating internally and with the Department of Agriculture across Wildland Fire Management and Ecosystem Restoration programs and see opportunities to amplify our efforts such as \$70 million to Interior to support a national revegetation effort including implementation of the National Seed Strategy.

The BIL also provides \$50 million to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service for sagebrush ecosystem conservation. Priority investments for those resources include complimentary efforts of protecting sagebrush habitat against the spread of the invasive annual grasses and the destructive wildfires they fuel as well as restoring mesic (wet) habitats to combat the effects of extreme drought.

Overall, this funding will directly create private sector, state, Tribal, and local jobs in forestry, rangelands, land and water management and related industries. This includes opportunities to supply materials and carry out restoration work, conduct science, as well as generate economic ripple effects as those new hires spend their money in the local economy. Restored, fire-resilient ecosystems will also create jobs in the tourism, outdoor recreation, and commercial fishing sectors, as well as the many other sectors that depend on plants, animals, and healthy landscapes.

Workforce Reform

In coordination with the Department of Agriculture and the Office of Personnel Management, the Department is developing a new wildland firefighter classification series and pay and compensation reforms. The goals of this reform include:

- Advancing the President's commitment to ensuring that wildland firefighters receive a livable wage and pay that is commensurate with the arduous work that they perform. DOI in coordination with the Forest Service is taking steps again this year to pay firefighters no less than \$15/hour. Additionally, both agencies are working with the Office of Personnel Management to develop a wildland firefighter occupational series and increase base pay, as directed by BIL. The agencies are also exploring a long-term solution to increase future compensation to better support the contemporary wildland firefighter workforce. Continuing to convert temporary wildland firefighters and support positions to permanent, full-time positions available year-round for fire response and risk mitigation activities. The Department and the U.S. Forest Service began conversions in FY 2021 and will continue converting wildland firefighters with the support provided in BIL.
- The Department's Wildland Fire Management Program is coordinating with the U.S. Forest Service to establish programs and capacity to recognize and address mental health

needs of firefighters and ensure access to appropriate resources. The Department is immediately focused on further defining firefighter mental health needs and identifying evidence based primary prevention and early intervention strategies. Next, adequate Critical Incident Stress Management response capacity will be established in every bureau. Additional responder-tailored mental health support services that will be prioritized and made available through interagency national contract or contracts.

Partnerships

The Department has established and maintains strong relationships with states, Tribal Nations, local governments, other Federal agencies, and stakeholders. Together, we continue to work in partnership to address wildland fire management issues and manage wildfire risk. Our work with elected officials, tribes, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) such as the Western Governors Association and the National Association of Counties are key to implementing sound principles of wildland fire management and prioritizing post-fire restoration needs across landscapes.

The Wildland Fire Leadership Council (WFLC) remains a vital partner and a key player in the implementation of BIL. Through WFLC, the Department is continuing work with the Environmental Protection Agency, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the U.S. Forest Service to assess the impacts of smoke on air quality and public health from wildfires and prescribed fires to inform future land management and wildland fire management strategies. BIL funding provides an opportunity to expand this innovation and implement additional smoke exposure mitigation activities. The Department continues to partner with WFLC to better coordinate management activities across boundaries and jurisdictions to implement the Cohesive Strategy and support its member agencies and organizations to better address the challenges and needs of underserved communities.

Approximately 6.5 million acres of land managed by the Department are adjacent or near Tribal land. The proximity and interconnectedness necessitate close communication and collaboration on wildland fire management. We have solidified our relationship with tribes by establishing a Memorandum of Understanding with the Intertribal Timber Council (ITC). The ITC is a non-profit consortium of 54 member Tribes. All are dedicated to improving the oversight and management of resources of interest to Native American communities. Under the memorandum, the Department and ITC commit to work collaboratively on reducing wildland fire risk and mitigating post-wildfire impacts.

Wildland Fire Mitigation and Management Commission

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. Authorized under the BIL, the Commission will play a key role in recommending federal policies and strategies to more effectively prevent, mitigate, suppress, and manage wildland fires, including the rehabilitation of affected lands.

The commission is reviewing applications for membership from volunteers from diverse backgrounds, with a specific focus on members who represent non-federal interests as required by the BIL. Membership will include state, local, Tribal, territory, and non-government partners with experience in preventing, mitigating, and managing wildland fires and the wildland-urban interface.

Conclusion

Thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today to discuss these important investments in partnerships, ecosystem restoration, and the mental health and well-being of our wildland fire professionals. These investments are integral in supporting the Department's efforts to meaningfully address wildfire risk and respond to the complexities of longer and more intense wildfire seasons.

This concludes my written statement. I am happy to answer any questions.