

Statement of
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Office of Wildland Fire
Department of the Interior
Before
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Subcommittee on Public Lands and Environmental Regulation
Concerning
Wildland Fire and Forest Management
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Introduction

Chairman Bishop, Ranking Member Grijalva, and members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to testify today on the Department of the Interior's readiness for the 2013 wildland fire season. The U.S. Department of the Interior (DOI), along with the Forest Service within U.S. Department of Agriculture, is prepared for the 2013 wildland fire season with our available resources.

2012 Wildfire Season

For the Department, the 2012 wildfire season was an active year. The fire season was especially notable because about 9.3 million acres burned across the United States (all jurisdictions) one of the largest fire seasons in terms of annual acreage burned, based on the reporting of fire statistics from 1960 to present. Fifty-one fires exceeded 40,000 acres in 2012, ten more than in 2011. Over 4,200 structures were reported destroyed by wildfires, including over 2,200 residences, nearly 2,000 outbuildings, and approximately 70 commercial structures. This is well above the annual average of 1,400 residences, 1,300 outbuildings, and 50 commercial structures (data from 1999 through 2012, NICC).

More than twenty percent of the United States (510 million acres) is managed or held in trust by the Department's bureaus with fire management responsibilities. Those lands stretch from Florida to Alaska, from Maine to California. DOI has achieved a high success rate in suppressing unwanted fires during the initial attack stage, and uses fire where appropriate to achieve management goals for long-term ecosystem health and resilience.

2013 Fire Season

Since January our nation has suffered the loss of 24 wildland firefighters in the line of duty. The last 19 were members of an elite firefighting crew--the Granite Mountain Interagency Hotshots

from the state of Arizona. These men perished in the course of their duties on the Yarnell Fire in Arizona on June 30--just two days after the fire was started by lightning, when the weather changed, and the fire behavior intensified. This tragedy represents the worst in Arizona's history and the worst loss of wildland firefighters for our country since 1933. Federal wildland fire assets responded at the onset of the Yarnell Fire; and we continue to support the incident today. A Type 1 Incident Management Team and a National Incident Management Organization team were dispatched immediately after the tragedy to manage the fire operation and provide support to the incident by dealing with the issues surrounding the fatalities. Together with our partners at the US Forest Service and from the US Military, we have federal crews, engines, aviation assets, and other large firefighting equipment deployed to provide assistance. Our hearts go out to the families, friends, and co-workers of these fine men.

We are expecting the remainder of 2013 fire season to be similar to last year's. The National Wildfire Potential Outlook for the period of July through September predicts:

July

Long-term drought across the West coupled with hot, dry weather in early July, will raise fire potential across portions of Oregon, Idaho, Nevada, and northern California;

Southern California, southern Utah, Arizona, New Mexico and Colorado will continue to experience extremely dry conditions and be at significant risk for significant fires throughout July;

August

Heat and normal summer precipitation in the West will keep above-normal fire potential across most of California and Oregon, and parts of Washington, Idaho, and Montana during August;

September

For September, above-normal significant fire potential will continue for much of the coastal and interior California while returning to normal by October over the Sierras, Oregon, and parts of Idaho and Nevada.

Wildland fire behavior and the Department's response are influenced by complex environmental and social factors as discussed in the 2009 Quadrennial Fire Review (QFR), the National Cohesive Wildland Fire Management Strategy, and other strategic foundational documents used to guide the Wildland Fire Management program. The impacts of climate change, cumulative drought effects, increasing risk in and around communities, and escalating emergency response continue to impact wildland fire management and wildfire response operations. Drought is forecasted to persist or worsen across much of the western United States and parts of Alaska and Hawaii.

Since the beginning of the year, more than 25,000 fires have burned over 740,000 acres, predominantly in the Southwest and Western states.

Effects of Sequestration

Much like other Departments across the federal government, programs within Interior have felt the impact from sequestration. As we developed our sequestration implementation plan, we made every effort to prioritize preparedness for the upcoming fire season and to absorb the cuts in a way that would not compromise our ability to respond to fires this season. Therefore, we focused cuts to the wildland fire management program in areas such as travel, training, contracted services, and operating supplies first. Overall, the sequestration resulted in a \$37.5 million cut to Interior's fire program and resulted in a reduction of approximately 7 percent of the Department's firefighter seasonal workforce, with reduced lengths of employment for those hired.

Exceptions from the DOI-wide hiring freeze were granted for seasonal firefighters; and I believe that, in the short term, we have the necessary resources to respond. The long-term impacts of sequestration are impossible to avoid. We have had to make difficult choices that will reduce our overall capacity in the longer term, such as not filling permanent staff vacancies, reducing seasonal firefighter employment periods, and reducing the number of hazardous fuels crews. In addition, other reductions in seasonal hiring across Interior will have a residual impact on the overall numbers of firefighters available for dispatch, since many of these hires, while being non-fire positions, are "red-carded" or trained to fight fire when needed.

Expected Available Fire Resources

Among its bureaus, the Department will deploy just over 3,400 firefighters, including 135 smokejumpers, 17 Type-1 crews; 750 engines; more than 200 other pieces of heavy equipment (dozers, tenders, etc.); and about 1,300 support personnel (incident management teams, dispatchers, fire cache, etc.); totaling nearly 5,000 personnel.

In aviation, this year, Interior has 27 single-engine airtankers or SEATS on exclusive use contracts --double the number we have had in the past, and an additional 42 on call-when-needed contracts. The Department made a conscious decision to double the number of SEATs on exclusive use contracts in order to be prepared for the 2013 season and to reduce the overall costs to the program. SEATs are a good fit for the types of fires that the Interior agencies experience. Many of these fires usually burn at lower elevations, in sparser fuels, on flatter terrain. We also have small and large helicopters and water scoopers available. We will utilize Forest Service contracted heavy airtankers and, if necessary, Modular Airborne Fire Fighting System (MAFFS) aircraft from the Military. Agreements are in place to acquire supplemental aircraft from our state and international partners, if necessary.

Department of Defense Assistance

Over the past year, officials from the Departments of the Interior and Agriculture have worked with officials from Northern Command (NorthCom), in Colorado, to develop a new approach for obtaining support from the Department of Defense (DoD) should their assistance be needed during the 2013 fire season and into the future.

Previously, the DoD provided ground forces configured as battalions--550 soldiers each. Future requests for support will now include approximately ten 20-person crews from regionally based installations, within a reasonable distance from the incident. This ability will provide flexibility in the use of DoD resources as well as providing the anticipated numbers needed based on

historical use. Our staffs are in the process of developing options for training that will include a smaller training cadre and include qualified DoD personnel. An Incident Awareness Assessment is also being conducted to identify potential gaps and areas where DoD may be able to provide specialized and/or surge capability in imagery products for use on wildfire incidents.

Fiscal Year 2014 Budget

The President's FY 2014 budget proposes a total of \$776.9 million to support the fire preparedness, suppression, fuels reduction, and burned area rehabilitation needs of the Department. The budget fully funds the inflation-adjusted 10-year average of suppression expenditures of \$377.9 million, with the funding split between \$285.9 million in the regular suppression account and \$92.0 million in the Federal Land Assistance, Management, and Enhancement (FLAME) Fund. This represents a program increase of \$205.1 million over the 2012 enacted level, because the full 10-year average was not appropriated in 2012 and the program relied on available balances from prior years. Consistent with the FLAME Act, the regular suppression account will fund the initial attack and predictable firefighting costs, while the FLAME Fund will fund the costs of large, catastrophic-type fires and also serve as a reserve when funds available in the regular suppression account are exhausted. While the budget provides funding to cover anticipated preparedness and suppression needs, the Department recognizes the need to invest not just in firefighting related activities, but also hazardous fuels reduction, community assistance, and rehabilitation of burned areas. Interior has made significant improvements to management information tools to provide program leadership information on determining where funds may best be directed. The Department will continue to pursue efficiencies and reforms that reduce project cost, increase performance, ensure the greatest value from invested resources, all while strengthening the accountability and transparency of the way in which taxpayer dollars are being spent.

Hazardous Fuels Reduction Program

The 2014 budget requests \$95.9 million for the Department's Hazardous Fuels Reduction (HFR) program, a reduction of \$88.9 million from 2012 and \$49.4 million from 2013. The increase in complexity and intensity of fires over the last ten years presents enormous budgetary challenges for the wildland fire program. With today's fiscal climate, and competition for limited resources, we are being asked to make tough choices. The reduction to the fuels budget is one of those tough choices. This presents an opportunity to re-evaluate and recalibrate the focus of the HFR program to align and support the direction in the National Cohesive Wildland Fire Management Strategy and the Federal Wildland Fire Management Policy. Affirming a commitment to the intergovernmental goals of the Cohesive Strategy, HFR program activities will be planned and implemented to mitigate risks posed by wildfire. The program uses a risk-based prioritization process to ensure activities are implemented in the areas of greatest risk from wildfire, and will foster closer alignment and integration of the program into the bureaus' broader natural resource management programs. To encourage this, the 2014 program includes \$2 million to conduct additional research on the effectiveness of hazardous fuels treatments. As a result, the Department will take a serious look at how we can make the most difference on the ground with what we have. The program will continue to focus fuels reduction on the highest priority projects in the highest priority areas resulting in the mitigation of risks to communities and their values.

BLM Forest Management

The BLM manages about 60 million acres of forests or woodlands, including 2.2 million acres of O&C forest lands. The BLM manages forests to restore and maintain forest ecosystems, reduce the risk of catastrophic wildfire, and generate a sustainable flow of forest products that can be sold through commercial and salvage timber sales and personal use permits that support rural communities. Resilient forests store and filter water for aquifers and reservoirs, offer opportunities for recreation, provide habitat for thousands of species, store carbon, provide clean air, support timber and other jobs, and provide millions of board feet of lumber and thousands of tons of biomass for alternative energy. According to the Department of the Interior's 2011 Economic Impact Report, timber harvested from BLM forests supported \$659 million in economic activity in 2011, and biomass from BLM forests has become part of the feedstock that meets various State and Federal renewable energy portfolio standards. BLM forests also support local businesses dependent on tourism and outdoor recreation. Additionally, the value of forests for biological carbon storage is being increasingly studied and understood and can help the United States toward a better carbon balance.

Extreme drought, wildfires, pests, and invasive species infestations have plagued much of the West over the past decade, causing significant impacts to both forest health and local economies. The BLM has worked collaboratively with Federal, State, and other partners to develop strategies for addressing forestry issues such as the mountain pine beetle outbreak and whitebark pine tree decline. In 2012 fire affected over 287,000 acres of BLM forests and a cumulative 1.7 million acres of BLM forest mortality have been attributed to bark beetles, other insect attacks, and pathogens. Overall, the BLM estimates that about 14 million acres of BLM-managed forests are at elevated risk of insect and disease attacks or catastrophic wildfire. In 2012, as part of the Bureau's hazardous fuels reduction program, the BLM conducted restoration and hazardous fuels reduction treatments, including thinning, salvage, and prescribed burns, on more than 465,000 acres of BLM-managed forests, woodlands and rangelands.

Because potential threats to forest health often cross jurisdictional boundaries, the BLM has increasingly adopted a landscape approach to resource conservation and treatments to reduce the buildup of hazardous fuels. The BLM has begun developing vegetation management policies that consider entire landscapes, through integrating a number of programs – including forestry, rangeland management, riparian management, plant conservation, invasive weeds, and fire rehabilitation. This integration should result in more coordinated policies. The BLM also offered over 242 million board feet of timber and other forest products for sale and used timber sales to treat over 20,000 acres of vegetation in fiscal year 2012. In addition, the BLM routinely works with partner agencies, organizations, and landowners to engage in land and watershed restoration and hazardous fuels reduction activities on Federal, state, and private lands, and the BLM has used the pilot Good Neighbor Authority in Colorado on projects where small parcels of federal lands were interspersed with state and private lands.

Stewardship contracts, timber sales, and service contracts are tools that the BLM uses to manage our forested lands. Stewardship contracting authority allows the BLM to award contracts for forest health and restoration treatments, including hazardous fuels reductions, for a period of up to ten years and to use the value of timber or other forest products removed as an offset against the cost of services received. The BLM has enjoyed many successes in using stewardship contracting authority, thereby achieving goals for

forest and woodland restoration, and conducting both hazardous fuels reduction and habitat restoration treatments. In addition, stewardship contracts create jobs and revenue growth for local communities, and protect local communities from wildland fire. From 2003 through 2012, the BLM entered into over 400 stewardship contracts on approximately 108,000 acres of BLM-managed lands. This important authority expires in September, 2013, and the President's Budget for FY 2014 proposes to make the authority permanent.

Partnerships

The realities of today's federal funding challenges, such as the reduction to the hazardous fuels program, highlights the importance of working together across landscapes, and with our partners to achieve our goals.

The federal government wildland fire agencies are working with tribal, state, and local government partners to prevent and reduce the effects of large, unwanted fires through preparedness activities like risk assessment, prevention and mitigation efforts, mutual aid agreements, firefighter training, acquisition of equipment and aircraft, and dispatching; community assistance and hazardous fuels reduction. These actions demonstrate Interior's continued commitment to the goals of the National Cohesive Wildland Fire Management Strategy (restore and maintain resilient landscapes, create fire-adapted communities, and response to wildfire).

Federal Wildland Fire Management Policy

The Department will also continue to take full advantage of the current Implementation Guidelines for the Federal Wildland Fire Management Policy. Our unwavering commitment to firefighter and public safety in managing wildfire is the foundation of the wildland fire management program within each DOI bureau. We will continue to respond quickly and effectively to control unwanted wildland fires. Initial action on human-caused wildfire will continue to suppress the wildfire at the lowest risk to firefighter and public safety. When appropriate, we will also allow fire managers to manage a wildfire for multiple objectives and increase managers' flexibility to respond to changing incident conditions and firefighting capability, while strengthening strategic and tactical decision implementation supporting public safety and resource management objectives.

Actions by wildland fire managers will be supported by the best available science and decision support systems such as the Wildland Fire Decision Support System (WFDSS). These tools afford our wildland fire managers an enhanced ability to analyze wildfire conditions and develop risk informed strategies and tactics, which result in the reduced exposure to unnecessary risk during a sequester-impacted wildfire season.

Long-Term Programmatic Challenges

There are several longer-term programmatic challenges facing the Department's wildland fire management program including the need to re-align the overall program to better integrate with land and resource management activities. We must continue to develop strategies to deal with the long-term effects of declining budgets, the changing climate, evolving workforce, and the continued need to develop technologies and decision support tools to better inform our wildland fire managers of the future.

The Department of the Interior is prepared to meet the wildland firefighting challenges of today and tomorrow with the most efficient use of its available resources. DOI will maintain operational capabilities and continue to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of the wildland fire management programs. These efforts are coupled with other strategic efforts and operational protocols to improve oversight and use of the latest research and technology in order to ensure wildland fire management resources are appropriately focused. Specific actions include:

- Continued reduction of hazardous fuels in priority areas, where there is the greatest opportunity to reduce the risk of severe wildfires;
- Continued improvement in decision-making on wildland fires by leveraging the Wildland Fire Decision Support System's capabilities to predict what may happen during a wildfire, to safeguard lives, protect communities, and enhance natural resource ecosystem health;
- Continued enhancement to wildfire response that comes from efficient use of national shared resources, pre-positioning of firefighting resources, and improvements in aviation management;
- Continued review of wildfire incidents to apply lessons learned and best practices to policy and operations; and
- Continued strategic planning in collaboration with the Forest Service and our tribal, state, and local government partners to develop meaningful performance measures and implementation plans to address the challenges posed by wildfires in the nation.

Conclusion

The Department of the Interior and the Department of Agriculture (USDA) work collaboratively in all aspects of wildland fire management, along with our other federal, tribal, state and local partners. Together, with all our available resources, we will provide a safe, effective wildland fire management program. We will continue to improve effectiveness, cost efficiency, safety, and community and resource protection with all our available resources.

This concludes my statement. Thank you for your interest in the Department's wildland fire management program and for the opportunity to testify before this Committee. I welcome any questions you may have and appreciate your continued support.