

Committee on Resources

Subcommittee on Forests & Forest Health

Witness Statement

Testimony to Subcommittee on Forests and Forest Health Oversight Field Hearing on Western Catastrophic Wildfires: Prevention, Suppression, and Rehabilitation.

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I thank the Committee for inviting me here today to testify. As the Region's Union representative, I would like to acknowledge the employees who worked diligently all summer battling fires. We not only need to thank those who were on the fire lines but also those who worked in supporting roles, including our families. The success of our recent fire suppression efforts reaffirms my belief that the Forest Service has as dedicated and capable employees as does any agency.

Extreme fire behavior and the sheer numbers of aircraft, equipment, and firefighters generated serious safety issues. We all should be thankful not one life was lost here in the Northern Region. While I am grateful that such a catastrophic fire season ended without tragedy, I am concerned about field level employment in the firefighting organization. There are many inexperienced employees involved in fire suppression and our more experienced employees are over-worked. Some employees worked over four consecutive, fourteen day, rotations this fire season and are out again rehabilitating fire-damaged areas.

One needs to closely examine what is happening to budgets and the number of employees at the field level in all functional areas. In the last eight years, the Agency eliminated nearly 6,200 employees, who mostly worked in the field. During that period, we also saw a reduction of roughly 1,600 field-based seasonal employees. While not all of these employees were part of the fire organization, most took part in fire prevention and suppression activities when needed. Traditionally, these employees were available to assist in fire support and suppression activities.

The Forest Service's presence at the District level has been significantly reduced in nearly every Region and in nearly every functional area. Given the extreme fire behavior that occurred this year, there is no way to reliably predict that a greater field presence may have reduced the acreage burned. Possibly, more fires would have been suppressed before they got out of hand. It is our concern that without adequate resources we will be ill prepared to conduct effective fire management activities in the future.

Downsizing depleted our workforce to the extent that there would seldom be anyone left covering critical program areas while an employee took a fire assignment. Consequently, many employees are no longer available for fire duty, so their credentials and fire skills lapse, over time.

Even when attempting fire rehabilitation work, downsizing has become an issue.

On the Bitterroot National Forest, a forest severely impacted by fire and fire suppression efforts, there is

only one certified Contracting Officer's Representative (COR) remaining to oversee rehabilitation projects. The Lolo National Forest, which also had several large fires, is experiencing similar staffing problems.

While the projected budget for 2001 appears to be slightly higher than what the Forest Service received in 2000, the picture for the Forests in Region 1 is bleak. Many are bracing for yet another round of downsizing. It is impossible for Forests to prepare for even a normal fire year, let alone a catastrophic one, while in a continuous downsizing mode. In addition, downsizing makes it equally impossible to infuse much needed new employees into our graying workforce.

The Union is concerned over the disparity between the funding which reaches the field and that retained at the Washington Office. Field units have endured 20 to 50 percent budget reductions while the budget at the WO has increased 150 percent since 1991. This fiscal year several million dollars were withheld from the forests to deal with National Initiatives at the WO level with little regard for the impacts of those actions on the field. Loss of public support and Agency credibility at the District level are serious concerns for line officers and employees alike.

The following e-mail comment provided by a respected District Ranger in Region 1 is a good summary of the situation in field.

"We lost too many trained seasonals last year because of the late budget.

We need a final budget in October so that we can hire and groom our seasonal workforce.

We need more term seasonals and permanents in the fire organization, new blood we can train to be tomorrow's overhead and provide more depth in our organization to deal with years like this.

We need to be more proactive with County and State Governments to deal with planning and developments in the urban interface. We may not have been able to reduce the size of the fires but we could have lowered our suppression costs with better designed subdivisions.

We need a sound, consistently funded fuel management program especially near the urban interface. We need less finger pointing and more collaboration in dealing with the problem we have all helped create."

Regardless of the actions the Forest Service decides to take to deal with pending fire issues, whether it is providing safer urban interfaces, reducing fuel loading or more prescribed burning, all require implementation at the field level. Once the decision is made as to which actions to take, the Agency must ensure there is adequate funding to successfully implement the projects. To do anything less is irresponsible to our dedicated employees.

Madam Chairman, thank you for the opportunity to provide you with this testimony. I am willing to answer any questions the Committee may have.

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