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Restoration After Recent Hurricanes and Other Natural Disasters:
Federal Role in Recovery After Catastrophic Events Affecting Forest Lands

Title: *Restoration After Recent Hurricanes and Other Natural Disasters: Federal Role in Recovery After Catastrophic Events Affecting Forest Lands*

Testimony: Mississippi Forestry Commission, a state agency with fire protection and forest stewardship responsibilities on non-federal lands.

The Mississippi Forestry Commission is a public service agency created by Mississippi Legislature in 1926. The primary responsibility of the Forestry Commission is to provide wildfire protection to the state's forested and uncultivable lands. The commission is also responsible for the management of timber on the state's School Trust Lands and other public lands. In addition, the Forestry Commission provides technical assistance and advice to Mississippi's private, non-industrial forest landowners.

Damage caused by Hurricane Katrina has affected every aspect of the forest community, including the state and federal agencies that provide support to the forest community and protection to the forest resource. The Mississippi Forestry Commission is obviously one of those agencies. This report presents how Hurricane Katrina has affected the Forestry Commission's ability to perform its functions and how the hurricane significantly impacted the quality of life for thousands of south Mississippians who relied on their timber holdings for financial support and future plans.

Fire Protection

The broken and uprooted trees resulting from Katrina have created an extremely dangerous potential for wildfires. The amount of tree-type storm debris available for fueling a wildfire is 10 to 20 times the normal levels in south Mississippi. The excessive buildup of downed timber and associated storm debris will significantly hinder firefighting efforts.

Wildfires occurring in storm-damaged areas will burn more intensely due to the increased amount of debris on the forest floor. Larger fuels in the 3- to 8-inch diameter range are drying rapidly, which will increase the intensity of fires. The heat released will make it too dangerous to attack larger fires directly. In areas where downed timber has limited access, tactics will shift to burning out strips in advance of a fire and using roads or other natural barriers as fire breaks. If available, water drop capability utilizing helicopters and tankers would assist in knocking down fires before they grow to large sizes.

Maneuvering equipment and personnel through areas thick with broken and uprooted timber is not only difficult but also very dangerous. Existing fire lanes and woods roads, which at one time provided access into a fire incident, are now blocked with debris. Many public roads have had only small lanes cut through down trees that are not wide enough for MFC fire units. Although these conditions are improving week by week, the forested areas are strewn with downed timber. Some timber can be salvaged, some cannot. The Mississippi Forestry Commission's fire units are not large enough to push through this type of debris and construct fire lines. This greatly increases the chance of injury to MFC personnel.

Storm-killed timber will take years to deteriorate to the point of not being available to burn in a fire. The increased potential for extreme wildfire conditions will also remain, thus the need for wildfire mitigation activities.

To address the immediate need for adequate fire suppression equipment and resources, the Forestry Commission requested through FEMA a Type 1 Incident Management Team to evaluate the situation and develop a plan for needed equipment and fire suppression tactics. The plan will be active for 45 days, lasting to mid-November at which time the wet winter weather pattern begins in the South. Fire prevention teams will also be providing public awareness messages about wildfire danger through the same period.

The Forestry Commission is preparing a Hazard Mitigation and Preparedness Plan to cover a three-year period. The plan will address the long-term wildfire potential and the process of providing wildfire mitigation in high-risk communities in the storm-damaged area.

Forest Stewardship on Private Lands

Hurricane Katrina caused significant damage to timber growing on 1.2 million acres in Mississippi. The estimated value of the damaged timber is \$1.3 billion. The volume of timber damaged by this storm equals an amount normally harvested over a three-year period in Mississippi.

The impact to the state's economy due to the effects of Hurricane Katrina will be felt for years. In Mississippi, forestry and the forest products industry have an annual economic value of \$13.4 billion. Hurricane Katrina has caused the loss of forestry jobs, loss of timber resource, significantly impacted the short- and long-term production of quality forest products. The impact on jobs reaches beyond the immediate forestry-related jobs to jobs needed to support the forestry and forest products industry.

The volume of the timber resource lost due to storm damage will take years to replace. Much of the large timber destroyed by Katrina was planted as timber recovery following Hurricane Camille. The amount of high quality timber needed for producing lumber and poles and other valuable forest products was greatly reduced due to damage caused by Katrina. This will certainly have a significant impact to the forest products industry, wood consumers, and the owners of the timber resource.

Sixty-two percent of the forested land damaged by Katrina belongs to private, nonindustrial landowners. These landowners own tracts of land ranging from 40 to 1,000 acres. It is estimated that between 50,000 and 60,000 private landowners have timber damaged by the hurricane. The area hardest hit by Katrina is in one of Mississippi's most heavily forested regions. The people who live here are rural and dependent on their timber for a number of reasons, including retirement, college education, and a source of supplemental income.

The Mississippi Forestry Commission is working with USDA Forest Service and the private sector in timber salvage and recovery operations.

Public Lands Management

The Mississippi Forestry Commission provides active forest management on the forested lands belonging to the state of Mississippi. Most of this ownership is on public school trust lands. Income made on these lands is used for public school buildings and other facilities for local schools.

Through the Forestry Commission's active and sound management of the state's forested School Trust Lands, an average of \$20 million of revenue is made each year on scheduled annual timber sales. Hurricane Katrina destroyed nearly \$25 million worth of timber scattered over 30,000 acres. The management of public forestland is a top priority to the Forestry Commission.

Timber salvage operations are underway, as the commission tries to recover as much timber value and volume as possible.

Urban and Community Forestry

Hurricane Katrina caused varying degrees of damage to the trees growing in 181 communities and cities in Mississippi. These trees make up the urban forest, which plays a vital role in local economic development.

It is estimated that Katrina caused damage to over 2.7 million trees, having an economic impact of \$1.1 billion. The needs concerning the damage to the urban trees include tree replacement, removal, and repair.

Technical assistance and public education and outreach will be needed as communities and cities begin to restore their urban forests.

Needs

Adequate funding for a three-year Wildfire Hazard Mitigation and Preparedness program.

Additional funding made available to local volunteer fire departments for equipment, firefighting supplies, training, etc.

Adequate resources for fire suppression activities (equipment acquisition, time-limited positions, training, etc.).

Forest restoration program for non-federal private, nonindustrial forest landowners.

Financial relief for the private, nonindustrial landowners (tax relief, disaster assistance, etc.).

Financial and technical assistance needed for restoration of urban forests.

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