Testimony of
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Subcommittee on Forests and Forest Health
Committee on Resources
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Regarding
Response after Recent Hurricanes

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Introduction

Mr. Chairman and members of the Subcommittee, thank you for inviting me to talk with you today about Forest Service involvement following two major hurricanes: Category 4 Hurricane Katrina, which made landfall on the Gulf coast of Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, and the Florida Panhandle on August 29, 2005 and Category 3 Hurricane Rita which made landfall on the southwest coast of Louisiana and east coast of Texas on September 24, 2005.

We have all seen the human tragedy caused by these catastrophic storms either in person or through the media. In the hours before the storms, the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) began making assignments and the Forest Service was moving people throughout the country to assist in response efforts. At the same time, Forest Service employees were working and living throughout the storm area including some of the hardest hit communities along the Gulf Coast (Saucier, Gulfport and Biloxi, MS) and New Orleans.

The Forest Service has contributed to the entire spectrum of the disaster response and recovery efforts. We are providing emergency response though assignments from FEMA, and our crews are beginning the work to cleanup and restore national forest lands. The State and Private Forestry branch of the Forest Service has begun extensive coordination with the affected states, other federal agencies, and industry and conservation organizations to assist with response efforts on state and private lands. The Research and Development branch has provided critical resource damage information through its Forest Inventory and Analysis unit.

Earlier this week I visited the Gulf region and I was shocked at the extent of the wind and water damage. While a great deal of response work has been accomplished much remains to be done.

Emergency Response

I am very proud of our emergency response. The Forest Service is the primary agency for the emergency firefighting support function in the National Response Plan. We have been tasked with more than 50 missions since requests for assistance from FEMA began shortly before Hurricane Katrina struck. The National Interagency Fire Center in Boise, Idaho began mobilizing crews and interagency Incident Management Teams from across the country and strategically positioned those teams along the Gulf Coast for quick deployment.

Emergencies and crisis events are often chaotic and highly dynamic; they create physical, emotional, and social disruption. Having a common and integrated command and control structure permits agencies to better coordinate and respond to emergencies. The Forest Service pioneered the use of the Incident Command System many years ago in order to respond to wildland fires. The Incident Command System is a standardized emergency management organizational structure that can be expanded up or down depending on the complexity of the emergency. In 2004, the Department of Homeland Security adopted the Incident Command System as part of the National Incident Management System (NIMS) to organize incident management for all agencies on a nationwide basis.

Our interagency Incident Management Teams are comprised of emergency response professionals from federal, state, and local wildland fire organizations. These teams are able to use their logistical, organizational, and adaptation skills to rapidly deploy people and resources from many areas and respond to a wide variety of tasks needed during emergencies.

After September 11, 2001, the Fire Department of New York City (FDNY) was trained by the Forest Service in the Incident Command System. In response to Hurricane Katrina, FDNY assisted the New Orleans Fire Department initially in fire protection and then in the inspection of buildings and reopening fire stations in New Orleans. The wildland fire agencies are managing the base camp in Jackson Square and Holy Cross and are providing the New Orleans Fire Department preliminary training in the Incident Command System.

As of Monday, October 3, there were 28 interagency Incident Management Teams and approximately 126 crews involving about 5,000 people. In the days after Hurricane Katrina, the interagency teams managed all-agency radio/phone/ data communications, coordinated the receiving and distribution of thousands of truckloads of supplies, provided evacuees with food, clothing and shelter, and supported emergency medical operations at the New Orleans Airport base camp. For example, four crews moved 2,400 patients in a three day-period to and from the Air Force triage hospital at the New Orleans airport. An Incident Command Team managed a staging area in Mississippi that was one of the largest air operations in the storm affected area. Crews unloaded, refueled, and stored ten to twelve 747 planeloads of commodities every day. One Incident Command Team shipped over 2.9 million meals (MREs), 5.6 million gallons of water, and 39 million pounds of ice. That is enough drinking water for 11 million people for one day.

Interagency incident management teams have managed or are managing evacuation centers in Phoenix, AZ, and Houston and San Antonio, TX. We are currently providing base camp operations and support to emergency responders in 14 locations in Mississippi, Louisiana, and Texas. Camp operations include feeding, billeting, and providing showers and laundry services. We have also cleared hundreds of miles of roads to re-establish safe transportation routes in Mississippi, and now in Texas.

With massive amounts of downed trees and other woody debris, we expect the impacted areas to experience a high risk of wildland fire in the coming months. Teams are in place and are working with the States to plan for long range fuel mitigation, fire readiness and prevention, and fire suppression. Fire prevention education teams are also working with local agencies, media, and publics in stressing caution about hurricane debris disposal. We have moved additional firefighting crews and equipment to the affected areas in anticipation of increased fire activity.

Natural Resource and Facilities Damage

Early estimates from forest inventories indicate potential timber damaged or placed at risk from Hurricane Katrina amounts to roughly 4.2 billion cubic feet of timber (15 to 19 billion board feet), spread over 5 million acres on all ownerships in Mississippi, Alabama, and Louisiana. This area represents about 30 percent of total timberland within the affected area, 90 percent of which occurred on non-federal lands. These initial estimates indicate that 60 percent of all damage was light to moderate and 40 percent of all damage was severe. Of the total timberland, 18% sustained light to moderate damage and 12% sustained severe damage. One-third of the damaged timber was concentrated in 8 counties of southern Mississippi. About 90 percent of all forest damage occurred within 60 miles of the coast. Nearly 60 percent of the damage occurred to softwoods – predominately pines. We estimate the down and damaged wood is equivalent to an amount of material sufficient to produce 800,000 single family homes and 25 million tons of paper and paperboard.

The current condition of aquatic and wildlife resources in the impacted area is not entirely known at this time. Preliminary assessments are ongoing as to the storms' effects on watershed conditions, and wildlife habitat including those of Threatened, Endangered and Sensitive (TES) species such as Red-Cockaded Woodpecker, Gopher Tortoise and Gopher Frog habitats.

Within the National Forest System, the DeSoto and Chickasawhay Ranger Districts (RD) of the National Forests in Mississippi sustained the heaviest damage. All 382,000 acres of the DeSoto RD suffered some damage, with nearly 152,000 acres significantly impacted with downed and damaged trees. The main office in Wiggins, MS was rendered uninhabitable by water damage, and communication via phone or internet remains unreliable. On the Chickasawhay RD, 33,000 acres sustained damage. In addition to the National Forest System facilities we sustained severe damage to our Research laboratory in New Orleans and less severe damage to the Research lab in Saucier, MS.

While federal and state lands have sustained damage, the largest landowner group, private non-industrial forest landowners, has suffered the most from the storms. These forest landowners have had, in many cases, their entire forests and their attendant values wiped out. Since the forest economy has relied to a major extent on non-industrial private forest lands for their timber supply, there is a grave concern of the impacts if these lands are not restored quickly.

Recovery Efforts

One of the most important recovery challenges is the need to begin removing dead and down trees from the forests as quickly as possible. We are concerned about the amount of new fuel now on the forest floor. We estimate there is up to three times

the normal manageable amount of fuel on national forest lands where we have an intensive fuels reduction program; and even higher amounts on some lands where fuel reduction treatment has not been as rigorously applied. Greater fuel loading will increase the intensity of a wildfire, causing it to burn hotter and making it more difficult to control. There is also increased potential for wildfire along the wildland urban interface where the burning of large debris piles could result in escaped fires.

An equally important reason for quickly removing damaged timber is the rapid rate of deterioration of dead and damaged material caused by the warm, humid climate of the area. There will be a massive need for wood products as the recovery and rebuilding proceeds, and it just makes good sense to capture as much usable fiber as possible with salvage efforts.

In the weeks following Hurricane Katrina, two Incident Management Teams worked on the DeSoto National Forest districts and cleared forest roads opening over 700 miles of primary and secondary roads. These roads will provide access for local traffic, utility crews, fire suppression crews, and will serve as fire breaks.

A Storm Recovery Incident Management Team is now in place on the De Soto National Forest, which will coordinate short and long-term recovery efforts for all resources, including fuels treatments, timber salvage, trail clearing, invasive species mitigation, and facility repair. The team is preparing an environmental assessment under the Healthy Forest Restoration Act (HFRA) for a project to remove damaged trees through commercial sales where feasible, accomplish other mechanical fuels treatment in selected areas (by chipping for example), and perform associated road maintenance and temporary road construction on the forest with priority on heavy to moderately damaged sites. This project will be conducted with a collaborative process involving interested citizens. Specially designated areas such as the wilderness and research natural areas will be excluded from salvage and mechanical treatment.

The Incident Management Team will be using other tools developed within the Healthy Forest Initiative and the Healthy Forests Restoration Act (PL 108-148) authorities, as applicable. Other serious restoration priorities include road repair and maintenance, the removal of leaning and fallen trees, administrative site repair and maintenance, and the restoration of TES species habitat for Gopher Tortoises, Gopher Frogs and Red-Cockaded Woodpecker.

Beyond national forest boundaries, our State and Private Forestry branch is providing extensive coordination with affected states, other federal agencies, and industry associations to assist with recovery efforts on state and private lands. Our folks in the Southern region in partnership with state forestry agencies in the affected states have convened representatives from these groups and are developing approaches to address forest recovery, utilization and restoration needs. This group is constructing ways to salvage down and damaged trees quickly, put the biomass and timber products to effective use, and to restore these important and productive private forests. One key area of interest is tax benefits available to qualified taxpayers.

As a result of recent enactment of revisions to the tax code, timber owners may utilize code provisions to help compensate for losses, including significant tax benefits that allow revenue from sales to be treated as capital gains rather than ordinary income, generous amortization schedules for reforestation costs, and a reforestation tax credit. Taxpayers—both private individuals and companies— may now expense up to $10,000 of qualifying reforestation expenditures incurred during the taxable year for a qualified timber property. These qualifying reforestation expenditures include the direct costs a taxpayer incurs in connection with the forestation or reforestation of a site by planting or seeding, costs for the preparation of the site, the cost of the seed or seedlings, and the cost of the labor and tools—including depreciation of long lived assets such as tractors and other machines—used in the reforestation activity. In the case of an individual, the amortization deduction is allowed in determining adjusted gross income (i.e., an ‘‘above-the-line deduction’’) rather than as an itemized deduction. This encourages investments in reforestation. By shortening the recovery period for reforestation costs, taxpayers will find a greater investment return to investments in reforestation. Timber landowners eligible for capital gains treatment of the proceeds of timber sales without requiring a continuing economic interest in the timber.

The Forest Inventory and Analysis (FIA) unit of the Southern Research Station has developed early estimates of timber damage losses and we will continue to refine this data. FIA will also be used to conduct water quality evaluations in key watersheds. Our Economics of Forest Protection and Management Research unit has provided estimates of the market value of timber damage from Hurricane Katrina in MS, LA, and AL. In conjunction with the lost timber value economic impact information, the Southern Research Station will estimate potential losses from what appears to be a complete shutdown of the recreation/tourism sector. The Forest Products Laboratory may assist the cleanup and restoration efforts with several innovative proposals including: assessing wood structure damage and restoration of historic and residential houses; the reuse of damaged lumber; identifying toxins released from treated/painted wood products; and coordinating the use of waste wood for fuel with local forest products industries.

Conclusion

Mr. Chairman, the Forest Service, in its one hundred year history, has responded to catastrophic events from major fires to insect and disease infestations to windstorms including other highly damaging hurricanes. We assisted in the recovery of the Space Shuttle Columbia after its tragic disintegration on February 1, 2003 and the emergency responses for the Pentagon and World Trade Centers after the horrors of September 11, 2001. All of these events tested our management skills and our determination to serve the American people to the best of our abilities.

The area of destruction and the widespread nature and severity of the damage makes this post-catastrophic event very different. There is truly no way to overstate the massive job ahead. The job will take years and must begin now. We are acting quickly to address the damage to the national forests and assist other public and private landowners. We will be using all the tools available. We appreciate the legislative support from this committee in providing tools to expedite healthy forest activities.

This concludes my statement. I will be glad to answer questions.