Committee on Resources

Subcommittee on Forests & Forest Health

Witness Testimony

Testimony on
Oversight hearing on
Regional Haze
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US Department of Agriculture
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I am Janice McDougle, Associate Deputy Chief for State and Private Forestry with responsibility for fire and aviation, forest health, and cooperative forestry programs. I am accompanied by Denny Truesdale, our national Acting Director of Fire and Aviation Management. I appreciate the opportunity to testify on the relationship between the Forest Service fire management program and the proposed Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) regional haze rule.

In October 1997, Bob Joslin, Deputy Chief for National Forest System, testified before the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee on the agency's history in air management. He talked about our research program, our role in new pen-nit review for regulatory agencies, and how proposed changes might affect Forest Service programs. I would like to submit his testimony for the record, in addition to my comments.

Our fire management program, including wildfire suppression and fuels reduction efforts, affects air quality. Our air quality objective is to reduce the long term cumulative smoke impacts from all types of fire. The full effect of the regional haze rule on Forest Service programs is difficult to project until a final haze rule is promulgated and each state and tribe develops its own Implementation Plan, and related smoke management plans.

We appreciate EPA's efforts to integrate wildfire suppression and prescribed fire issues in their policies. I am confident that, among EPA, the states, tribes, and land management agencies, we can balance vital public interests in clean air and fire protection. We believe that EPA is developing a common sense approach that will provide a logical context for us to carry out our goals of restoring ecosystems, caring for the land, and serving people.

Before I discuss the regional haze issue specifically, I'd like to discuss the role of fire in ecosystems, the responsibilities the Forest Service has related to air quality, and our fire management program. Then I will discuss the EPA regional haze proposal and its potential effect on our fire management program.

Fire plays an important role in ecosystems; it is a natural, inevitable part of ecosystems in most forested

areas of the country. A number of forest and brush types across the United States reflect fire-adapted ecosystems. Vegetation actually needs regular fire to maintain native species diversity and to promote regeneration. Over the last one hundred years, effective fire suppression efforts have changed the frequency of fires, allowing changes in the vegetation and ecosystem function.

In the 1995 Interagency Fire Management Policy and Program Review, the U.S. Department of Agriculture and Department of Interior recognized the significant role that fire plays in these fire-adapted ecosystems, and the departments called for a substantial increase in the use of planned, or prescribed, fire as a management tool to restore forest health.

FOREST SERVICE ROLE IN AIR QUALITY

The Forest Service has two primary responsibilities related to air quality. We protect air quality related values, including visibility, in Class I Federal Areas and manage National Forest System lands in a manner consistent with regulations implementing the Clean Air Act. A part of our Class I Area protection includes integrated air quality monitoring.

Monitoring

The Forest Service manages over 191 million acres of our nation's public land as part of the National Forest System. Included within that land base are 88 areas that Congress designated as. Class I Federal Areas with special air quality protection under the Clean Air Act Amendments of 1977. Visibility is used as an indicator of particulate matter and other pollutants that are transported over relatively long distances. These pollutants can adversely affect both natural resources and human health. Formal monitoring information from all Class I Areas, which includes measures of both visibility and particulates, is used to review permit applications for new major point sources of air pollution, to determine the impacts of existing sources of air pollution, and to identify trends nationally. Fuel Treatment

The air quality objective in our fuel treatment program is to reduce the long term smoke impacts from the combined wildfire and prescribed fire programs. Local results will vary annually, and that is why our fire management plans must be considered as part of a state's long-term strategy for regional haze in accordance with the Clean Air Act.

The Forest Service has estimated that as much as 40 million acres could be at risk of high intensity wildfire. The Administration and Congress have increased funding to reduce this fire hazard. I will submit for the record a map that shows generally where fire-adapted ecosystems are located. The acres at risk are within those fire-adapted systems, are distributed across the United States, and reflect a variety of fuel conditions. Historical fuel conditions have changed in locations where fires have been suppressed and excluded. Increased fuels result in fires that will bum with high intensity, causing watershed and other resource damage, or increasing the threat to property, firefighters, and to public safety.

Each individual forest stand has unique site specific conditions. The Forest Service currently is inventorying stands to determine the resources at risk, the fuel conditions that exist, the likelihood of a fire starting in **that specific location, and** the cost of treatment. The Forest Service identifies areas as high priority if they have high value resources at risk, high hazardous fuel conditions, and frequent ignitions. After assessments are completed, local managers determine the need for treatment based on local land and resource management plans, consistent with the National Environmental Policy Act, and identify specific tools needed to treat specific situations.

The Forest Service decision to ignite a prescribed fire is based on localized fuel and weather conditions and the availability of personnel and equipment. P-escribed fire plans identify the conditions and resources required to meet the desired objectives, including smoke management. If all smoke management plans are in place and the prescribed fire can be conducted consistent with those plans, the agency completes the bum and monitors the effects. If prescribed fires cannot be implemented consistently with smoke management plans, the prescribed fires are modified or postponed to meet smoke management objectives.

CHANGING EPA RULES: NATURAL EVENTS POLICY, INTERIM AIR QUALITY POLICY AND REGIONAL HAZE

The Grand Canyon Visibility Transport Commission was chartered under authority of the Clean Air Act amendments of 1990 by EPA to look at the regional haze standards and help develop equitable implementation strategies in the Grand Canyon Area. The Commission's recommendations and the 1995 Interagency Wildland Fire Policy Review were considered in development of the EPA Natural Events and Interim Wildland and Prescribed Fire policies that implement new standards for particulate matter and ozone. Congress has endorsed the recommendations of the Commission.

When the final regional haze rule is adopted, there may need to be some modifications to the natural events and wildland and prescribed fire policies. The guidance in those policies refine the roles of land managers and regulators in response to many issues that a haze rule is likely to address. We expect that the regional haze rule will result in regulators and land managers working more closely together. We have recognized the need to increase collaboration and are taking steps to make it happen now.

All of the EPA changes reinforce the states and tribes responsibilities for implementation of the Clean Air Act and development of programs to implement these new rules. The Federal land managers' role to protect air quality related values is to monitor, provide recommendations, and help mitigate potential problems that federal management or other proposed actions might generate.

Natural Events Policy

EPA's Natural Events Policy was the first policy change resulting from the interagency wildland fire policy. The Natural Events Policy considers air quality impacts from wildfire as a natural event. When air quality standards are violated due to a natural event, EPA will not penalize states or tnibes who develop and implement a plan to respond to health impacts and fire managers who mitigate the effects of the wildfire on air quality. This means that wildfire generated air quality problems will trigger cooperative development of emergency notification plans, appropriate suppression actions, and communication of anticipated smoke dispersal so that people can be advised of and take actions to protect their health. The policy also encourages the treatment of hazardous fuels to minimize the effects of wildfires on air quality.

Interim Air Quality Policy on Wildland and Prescribed Fires

The EPA Interim Policy on Wildland and Prescribed Fires expands on the natural events policy, applies to all wildland fires on public lands, and integrates two public policy goals: (1) to allow fire to function, as nearly as possible, in its natural role in wildland ecosystems, and (2) to protect public health and welfare by mitigating the impacts of smoke on air quality and visibility. The policy provides guidance on mitigating smoke caused by fires in the wildlands and the wildland/urban interface. It identifies the responsibilities of wildland mana ers and state and tribal air quality managers (air regulators) to work together to coordinate fire activities, minimize smoke. manage srroke from wildland and prescribed fires, and establish emergency

action programs to mitigate any unavoidable impacts on the public.

The EPA policy allows flexibility in regulating prescribed fires and includes incentives for states or tribes to adopt and implement smoke management programs. When adequate smoke management plans exist and a prescribed fire is burning within smoke management plans, the EPA will not punish states or tribes for exceeding air quality standards.

Proposed Regional Haze Rule

Administrator Browner proposed a regional haze rule in July, 1997, and EPA is responding to concerns received during its public comment period. which closed in December, 1997. The proposed regional haze rule is designed to improve visibility in all Federal Class I Areas through efforts to achieve reasonable progress targets agreed to by states or tribes and EPA. The proposed rule expands monitoring, calls for improved inventory and modelling systems, plans emissions reduction including assessing sources that do not have existing emission controls.

I do not know when the final rule will be promulgated but I anticipate that the new regional haze rule will enhance collaboration in monitoring efforts and improve the effectiveness of the Forest Service fire management program.

New EPA standards and policies, in combination with the proposed regional haze rule, will integrate data from Forest Service Class I monitoring sites with state data. Expansion of Forest Service monitoring to identify the individual components of haze in Class I Areas is a likely result of any new haze rule.

The effects on individual forests' fire management protirams from these new EPA policies will vary based on the strength of individual state or tribal smoke management programs, and existing coordination. Where state or tribal implementation plans have adequate smoke management plans, our efforts will be focused on complying with the plans and cooperating to improve long range plans. Those existing plans will establish the strongest foundations for transition to the future haze rule.

Where states or tribes do not have adequate smoke management plans, the Forest Service will focus on the development of voluntary smoke management agreements, particularly if it anticipates any significant increase in prescribed fire. Broader smoke management plans will then need to be developed to implement an effective prescribed fire program once the haze rule is promulgated.

The Forest Service, consistent with current policy, will continue, and improve, efforts to work with regulators to (1) notify them of plans for the use, and any significant increase in the use, of fire for resource management, (2) consider the air quality impacts of fire and take appropriate steps to mitigate those impacts, (3) consider appropriate alternative treatments, and (4) participate in the development and implementation of State or Tribal implementation plans.

Our wildfire suppression program will continue to utilize smoke management considerations in the development of wildfire suppression strategies and tactics. I would expect to see greater coordination between regulatory agencies and incident management teams.

SUMMARY

Certainly, it is a challenge for the Forest Service to meet both land managerrent and air quality objectives. I

believe that the EPA has worked hard to come up with an interim policy that maximizes opportunities to protect public and private property while assuning the protection of public health and welfare. The Forest Service's objective is to reduce the long-term impacts of smoke from both wildland and prescribed fires. The Forest Service has utilized smoke management planning for over 20 years to mitigate the impacts of its fire program.

To obtain the desired benefits to wilderness ecosystems, visibility, and public health, we will need to further improve our prescribed fire program planning and implementation, including fuelwood utilization, modifying project level planning and monitoring, improving Forest Service and regulators practical prescribed fire and smoke management skills, and improving our visibility monitoring. As prescribed fire practitioners, we are subject to the same state and tribal air quality authorities as others. This may include enforcement actions such as fines, direction to modify our programs, and reviews to determine whether fires were authorized, whether bum plan were followed, and why prescriptions may have failed. We are working hard to ensure that these types of actions are rare.

We can effectively implement both wildland and prescribed fire programs under the Natural Events Policy and the Interim Policy on Wildland and Prescribed Fires. Their implementation will position all land managers for transition to the future haze rule by giving us better information, improved skills, and a better ability to assess the impacts to our programs from the haze rule, once it is developed.

The Forest Service is committed to the partnership with the EPA, states, and tribes, and will be working closely with them as we move forward towards implementing the final regional haze rule. We believe that current policies are a common sense approach that will form the basis for what we will need to do under the regional haze rule.

That completes my formal statement. I would be happy to answer any questions.

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