Statement of

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Before the
House Resource Committee
Subcommittee on Forests and Forest Health
U.S. House of Representatives

Concerning
Recovering from the Fires: Restoring and Protecting Communities
Water, Wildlife, and Forests in Southern California

Lake Arrowhead, California

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Introduction

Mr. Chairman, thank you for this opportunity to discuss with your committee the status of our efforts for restoring and protecting the natural resource values that were affected by the recent fire events in Southern California. As we concentrate our efforts on National Forest System lands affected by the fires, we also recognize the equally devastating effects from this disaster on the local population, communities and other land management organizations. The activities now being undertaken by our agency and local, county, state and federal partners may be the most challenging restoration effort that we have ever encountered. The skill that is needed and the scale of the effort are extraordinary. We are bringing the greatest expertise available to restore the vegetation and soil resources that were affected by the fires as quickly as possible.

Southern California Fire Review

As you were able to see today, the Southern California fires of 2003 were some of the most destructive wildfire events, in terms of structures lost and lives affected, in recent history. In three weeks, wildfires burned over 739,000 acres, 22 people lost their lives as a result of the fires and 3,623 homes were destroyed. Thirty-five percent of the burned acreage was on National Forest System lands. Five large fires, the Paradise, Piru, Old, Grand Prix and Cedar fires were located on the Angeles, San Bernardino, Los Padres and Cleveland National Forests. The Forest Service spent over $71 million to suppress these fires. Before the fires were fully controlled, we had teams on site evaluating and assessing the work that needed to be done. Today, I would like to describe to you the progress of our current efforts and our goals for the future.

Current Emergency Stabilization Efforts

Emergency stabilization in Southern California is a multi-agency cooperative effort, accomplished across federal, state, private and tribal lands. The Forest Service is coordinating with the Natural Resource Conservation Service, the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection, the Department of the Interior and local governments to make the emergency stabilization effort as effective and seamless as possible. The Forest Service activated four large Burned Area Emergency Rehabilitation (BAER-pronounced 'bear') Teams, one per National Forest, to implement the emergency stabilization work. These teams are the equivalent of twelve normal-sized BAER teams which usually have 6 to 8 members per team. BAER teams are assembled on fires where resources may be at risk. The teams assess and map the damage caused by a fire and design and implement a rehabilitation plan. The goal is to protect life and property and reduce further natural and cultural resource damage.

As a result of the fires, much ground cover has been burned away, exposing the soil to the direct impact of rain. In addition, depending on the severity of the fire, the soil itself may repel water, rather than absorbing it. Less water soaking into the soil makes it difficult for seeds to germinate and for surviving plants to obtain water. These conditions may set the stage for soil erosion and for more rapid flooding when rains occur. Homes that were previously considered not in the path of flood waters will be susceptible to being damaged or lost to floods.

We are working to stabilize slopes scoured bare by the fires. On the ground and from the air, crews will spread thousands of tons of rice straw. The mulching is designed to help speed the growth of grasses whose roots will help stabilize the soil. This effort, however, is not without limitations. Mulching on slopes steeper than 60 degrees can do more harm than good. The straw washes downhill and clogs culverts and storm drains.

Treatments are designed to reduce flood levels and to direct the flood waters away from homes, property and places where people are likely to be. Here in Southern California, catchment basins are used to collect and slow water and debris. We are reshaping roads, clearing ditches and installing culverts to assure that road systems have drainage systems to carry storm water safely and effectively.

Floods often carry debris and mud with them. These debris torrents can damage or destroy critical natural resources, homes and property. Silverwood Lake on the San Bernardino National Forest, supplies drinking water to 12 million people. Much of the forest surrounding the lake was burned in the 91,000 acre Old Fire. During a heavy rain, ash and debris could wash into the lake overloading the filtration and sanitation systems. We are placing hundreds of acres of rice straw on the severely burned areas to slow or reduce the ash and debris movement into the lake.

Other values at risk include the Sespe Oil Fields, on the Los Padres National Forest. Floods or debris torrents in the oil field could cut through the oil and gas transmission pipes, causing leaks. The road system that accesses the oil fields also provides access to the US Fish and Wildlife Service National Condor Wildlife Refuge, where the USFWS feeds the condors on a daily basis. If this road system were lost to a flood or debris torrent, the condors would be at risk. We are stabilizing the road system to reduce the risk to the pipelines and assure access to the condors.

Approximately $9 million in (BAER) Forest Service funds have been approved for work on the Southern California Fires. To implement the emergency work as soon as possible, funds are approved incrementally as needs are identified. As of this week we have expended $2.5 million in emergency restoration funds. Recent rains have had a positive effect by encouraging sprouting and regrowth of vegetation. The moisture has not been heavy enough to increase the damage in the burned areas. We do know that, if heavy winter rains occur, subsequent flooding and mudslides will follow. What we are trying to do now is evaluate where the biggest threats are and limit the damage as much as possible. The work of the BAER teams is expected to be completed by mid-December.

Science and Technology Transfer

As community leaders, citizens, land managers and institutions, such as the insurance industry, assess the situation and begin recovery efforts, it is important that they have the latest and best scientific expertise and information. Our Forest Service Research and Development organization is the largest natural resource research organization in the world. This group is bringing its expertise to Southern California recovery efforts by leading a coalition of scientific and technical organizations to assist the BAER teams in assessing the situation and providing advice and expertise on recovery efforts. We will also be designing follow-up studies to fill in key gaps in the science of fire recovery efforts where we still have information needs. The plan of action developed by these scientific specialists will go well beyond the initial efforts of recovery and stabilization and address such issues as: (1) advanced technologies in fire resistant housing construction, (2) factors impeding the effective implementation of biomass removal, and (3) techniques that homeowners can implement to reduce their risk within the wildland urban interface.

Rehabilitation Efforts

The emergency stabilization (BAER) work is focused on short-term actions to get burned areas through one or two seasons, especially the critical first season. This work is expected to be completed within weeks. Additional rehabilitation work will take place over the next several years to maintain the watershed work started, minimize the spread of invasive weeds into areas disturbed by the fire, revegetate land and keep

key transportation routes open.

In addition to the lands burned in Southern California this year, a total of 1.4 million acres were burned on National Forest System lands this year with over 198,000 acres so severely burned that serious erosion hazards were created. The total cost of rehabilitation work in FY 2003 was met through appropriations and by reprioritizing our program of work. We recognize that these long-term rehabilitation needs are important. We will continue to weigh the priorities of this work in light of our responsibilities to sustain our other Forest Service programs to protect, manage and restore resource values on National Forest System lands. The rehabilitation work includes: reforestation, treatments for noxious weeds, wildlife habitat improvement, follow up on erosion and sedimentation mitigation, and rehabilitation of roads and recreation trails.

10-Year Comprehensive Strategy

Mr. Chairman, our expenditures on wildland fire suppression doubled in the last 10 years, illustrating the serious forest and rangeland health problem we face. As bad as the fires were, they burned for the most part in chaparral areas and did not appreciably change the forest health situation on forested lands in Southern California, particularly on the San Bernardino National Forest which has the most serious situation. In the forested areas, much of the remaining unburned acres are still choked with mostly small trees, many of which are dead and dying from drought and bark beetle infestations. Much of these forested lands remain at risk.

In addition we know that brushlands of Southern California are serious fire hazards. We also know that high severity crown fires have been a characteristic of chaparral landscapes for thousands of years and will continue to be. Wildland fire in Southern California and across much of the United States is an integral part of nature. Large chaparral fires tend to burn under very severe drought and high wind conditions that make control difficult or impossible. This does not mean that infrastructure damage is inevitable. Because we have communities and homes adjacent to and within these landscapes, we need to work together to reduce the danger through public-private partnerships. Treating vegetation zones around communities, roads and other important infrastructure can be effective when combined with programs where communities implement projects to fire-safe their homes and communities.

We advocate a comprehensive approach to address this and other situations across the country. In cooperation with the Western Governors' Association, our federal, state and tribal partners and interested stakeholders we have developed a 10-year Comprehensive Strategy and Implementation Plan to reduce wildland fire risks to communities and the environment. We are in the second year of implementing this strategy that acknowledges fire's role in the ecosystem. Restoring and rehabilitating our fire adapted ecosystems may be the most important task that our agency undertakes. The Strategy and Implementation Plan provides a road map for helping communities to protect themselves from the risk of wildland fire.

The Comprehensive Strategy recognizes the need to shift our fire management emphasis from a reactive to a proactive approach. We are moving from treating symptoms towards treating the underlying problems and strategically placing hazardous fuel treatments throughout our nation's forests and rangelands to change large-scale fire behavior.

On the San Bernardino National Forest, implementing this strategy is underway. We have through cooperative efforts, reduced fuels along roadways to provide effective evacuation routes, thinned and removed dead trees, reduced fuel hazards and provided fuel breaks all of which were effective during the recent fires. Additional work remains, on the National Forests in Southern California as well as other areas across the country which are experiencing serious forest health problems.

On December 3rd, the President signed into law the Healthy Forests Restoration Act of 2003, which will give federal agencies needed additional tools to implement the 10-Year Comprehensive Strategy and Implementation Plan. I want to thank you Mr. Chairman for your support and leadership in the development and passage of this vitally important legislation.

The Act authorizes the Forest Service and other federal agencies to work directly with communities at risk in the development of community wildfire protection plans. The Secretaries of Agriculture and of the Interior will consider the recommendations within these community plans when developing an annual program of work. The Act requires the agencies to work collaboratively with local communities and interested parties when developing hazardous fuels reduction projects, and reduces the number of alternatives the agencies are required to conduct environmental analyses for proposed projects. The changes described in the Act should

reduce the time span that occurs prior to management actions taking place.

Successful integration of the Healthy Forests Restoration Act in the implementation of the Comprehensive Strategy will result in landscape-scale changes that significantly reduce the potential for large, damaging fires. I, along with our Regional Foresters, have made a commitment to move forward aggressively in accelerating vegetative treatments that improve condition class in fire-adapted ecosystems on National Forest System lands.

I also wish to thank the Congress for providing additional funding in FY 2004 to help meet the challenge of reducing fire risk. In California, $15 million in hazardous fuel reduction funding and $25 million for state and private funding will help the state and local communities reduce wildfire hazards.

Conclusion

We will do our best to rehabilitate and restore the resources that were affected by these fires. I am confident that we have the right talent and teams in place to accomplish this work in cooperation with local and state agencies. At this time, I will be pleased to answer any questions that the committee may have.