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Testimony of Robert Farris Acting State Forester of Georgia

Before the House of Representatives Natural Resource Subcommittee on National Parks, Forest and Public Lands

June 19, 2007

On behalf of the Southern Group of State Foresters and the State of Georgia, I am pleased to present you with our views related to wildfire preparedness and funding. Thank you Mr. Chairman and members of the Subcommittee for your invitation to participate.

The South is in the middle of the worst fire siege in modern history. So far in 2007, the Southern Region has had over 28,000 wildfires that have burned more than a million acres and 404 structures. In late May four fires burned together in Georgia and Florida creating the South's largest fire in recorded history. Smoke has impacted air quality not only in Georgia and Florida but also in Alabama and Tennessee. These fires have impacted infrastructure resulting in numerous highway closures including interstates, disrupted power and telephone service and caused airport, railroad and school closures. Numerous evacuations have been ordered resulting in over 10,000 home evacuation days in Georgia. Georgia alone has had over 8,900 wildfires that have burned more than 550,000 acres. Even after as much as six inches of rain from Tropical Storm Barry, some of the fires continue to burn in organic soils of the Okefenokee area. Obviously these fires are unimpeded by landownership and political boundaries. One of these large fires started on private lands in Georgia and burned into the Okefenokee Wildlife Refuge. Another fire started inside the refuge and burned on a state forest, private land, and the Osceola National Forest. These fires come on the heels of the horrendous fires in Texas and Oklahoma last year in which 5,700 fires burned more than 1.7 million acres in those two states.

Fire is certainly nothing new to the South. Typically the Southern Region experiences more than half the wildfires in the nation and conducts the vast majority of the prescribed burns in the country.

For example the Southern Region averages about 40,000 wildfires per year and conducts over 225,000 prescribed burns on more than 6 million acres. The vast majority of these prescribed burns are conducted by private non-industrial landowners. Over 90 percent of the forested land in the South is in private ownership.

The ability to effectively suppress and minimize losses from large scale wildfire has become increasingly difficult due to the extension of Wildland Urban Interface development into the forested landscape. Fragmentation of the forest and expansion of multiple ownerships has made fire management more complex. The divestiture of industry lands has also significantly reduced the availability of firefighting resources—over 500 industry tractor plow units that were once an integral part of initial and extended attack capabilities in Southern Region are no longer available. The large number of fires in the South is compounded by the fact that according to a study done by the University of Wisconsin – Madison, the South has over 50 percent of the wildland urban interface (WUI) in the nation. The recently completed Southern Wildfire Risk Assessment identified over 50,000 communities or other populated areas at high or very high risk from wildfires in the South. Virtually every fire in the South is a threat to homes and communities.

I am not sure that it is possible to be 100 percent prepared for the kind of fires that we have experienced this year with fire spotting up to a mile in advance of the flaming front. However, preparedness can help reduce the impacts to homes and infrastructure and help protect public and fire fighter safety. There are several areas that I believe are key to being adequately prepared to deal with fires. Such as:

- Rapid detection – States in the South use single engine airplanes to quickly detect new fire starts and to guide fire crews to the fires.
- Well trained and equipped fire fighters – In addition to using cooperative agreements with the federal wildland fire agencies, the South has two interstate forest fire compacts that were approved by Congress in 1954. These compacts provide a legal means for states to share fire fighting resources. During the period June 2006 through June 2007 the two southern forest fire compacts provided:
 - 79 Dozers/Tractor Plows
 - 65 Engines
 - 3 Helicopters
 - 2 Single Engine Aircraft
 - 237 Miscellaneous Equipment

- 9,323 Personnel Days of Assistance

These resources are largely available for national deployment and for support of federal jurisdiction fires because the southern states have prepared to handle wildfires on private lands. SFA plays a major role in this preparedness.

- Homeowner education - Educating and encouraging home owners to protect their property by providing defensible space. The development of Community Wildfire Protection Plans and the use of programs such as Firewise are important elements in educating homeowners as to the need to take responsibility for taking measures to protect their homes from wildfire. State forestry agencies are the heart of the national Firewise program.
- Fuel Treatments and Pre-constructed fire breaks - Treating forests to reduce fuels around communities and constructing fire breaks is paramount to home and community protection. Prescribed burning is by far the fastest and most economical way to reduce fuels in the South. Because of the long growing season, fuel treatments in the South must be repeated every three to five years to remain effective.

Some of the areas of concern related to wildfire preparedness include:

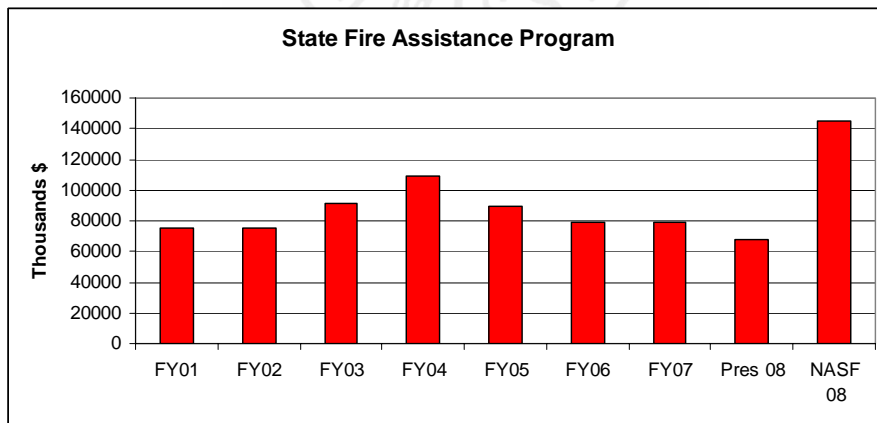
- A shortage of heavy airtankers and heavy helicopters on national contracts.
- Shortages of key wildfire management personnel such as safety officers, which may be related to concern over liability or other issues.
- Air quality issues related to prescribed burning for fuel reduction. As the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) issues evermore stringent air quality standards, prescribed burning for fuel reduction becomes more difficult.

State Fire Assistance (SFA) Funds which come to the states through the U.S. Forest Service are extremely important for state wildfire preparedness. The State Fire Assistance Program is the fundamental federal assistance program to states for developing preparedness and response capabilities for wildland fire. Improved response efficiency also reduces fire size and subsequent suppression costs. Since FY 02 about 165,000 wildland firefighters have received training through SFA that has also enhanced interagency coordination on federal lands. Moreover, approximately 65 percent of the funds have been used to mitigate high-priority hazard fuel situations on 470,000 acres within wildland-urban interface areas.

State Fire Assistance is an essential funding source for the development of Community Wildfire Protection Plans and directly helped over 19,000 communities in FY 2005 to prioritize their preparedness and mitigation efforts; however, much remains to be done.

The FY 2001 Interior and Related Agencies Appropriations Act directed the Secretaries of Agriculture and Interior to develop a joint public and private sector 10-year strategy for reducing wildfire risk and improving forest health nationwide. The Strategy was recently updated (December, 2006) and calls for increased interagency coordination and close partnerships with communities to improve fire prevention and suppression, reduce hazardous fuels, restore ecosystems and promote community assistance. Such goals are only achievable through appropriate and sustained levels of funding for the State Fire Assistance Program.

The Southern Group of State Foresters and the National Association of State Foresters are part of a national coalition advocating expansion of the State Fire Assistance Program to adequately address wildland fire in the U.S. It is estimated that \$145 million is needed in the FY 08 appropriation for State Fire Assistance to develop and maintain sufficient preparedness and protection capabilities. Extraordinary measures will also be needed to assist landowners with recovery, reforestation, and fire mitigation efforts to replace damaged forestlands.



Attached to my written comments is a briefing paper from the State Fire Assistance Coalition.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman and members of the Subcommittee, for the opportunity to present our thoughts.