STATEMENT OF
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US FOREST SERVICE, SOUTHERN REGION
UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE
BEFORE THE
HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
COMMITTEE ON RESOURCES
SUBCOMMITTEE ON FORESTS AND FOREST HEALTH
CONCERNING
ISSUES AFFECTING SOUTHERN FORESTS

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MARY KAHRS WARNELL FOREST EDUCATION CENTER
SOUTH GUYTON, GEORGIA

Mr. Chairman:

Thank you for the opportunity to participate in today's field hearing to discuss issues affecting Southern Forests. My name is Ken Arney. I am the Deputy Regional Forester for State and Private Forestry for the Southern Region of the Forest Service. The Southern Region encompasses National Forest System land in Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, Puerto Rico, the Virgin Islands, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, and Virginia. The Mary Kahrs Warnell Forest Education Center here in South Guyton, Georgia is an appropriate setting to discuss forest health conditions and challenges facing southern forests, given that this property is home to a working forest where sustainable forest management is both practiced and demonstrated.

Background

The need to actively restore our Nation's forests and rangelands to long-term health has never been greater. Southern forests play a critical role in the quality of life of southerners, providing, clean air, drinking water, recreation opportunities, timber, as well as scenic beauty.

The southern forest products industry is a major contributor to the economic stability of most southern states, producing more than 58 percent of the nation's timber and 15.8 percent of the world's supply of wood for industrial production. Southern Forests, however, are facing tremendous health challenges—both on private and public lands. The complexity of these challenges is compounded by the intermingled ownerships of public and private lands. About 5.5 million landowners oversee 89 percent of southern forestlands, while National Forest lands comprise about 8 percent of the landscape. Unlike western forests, it is apparent the future health and sustainability of forested lands in the South ultimately rest with private landowners—who

may not fully grasp the critical role they play in maintaining and restoring healthy forest conditions. Moreover, it is a challenge for states--which are facing sharp budget cuts--and federal agencies to reach these landowners and provide incentives to implement responsible land stewardship practices on their lands.

For the 13.5 million acres of National Forests, as well as the privately owned forest land in the South, the greatest challenges are skyrocketing population growth, catastrophic wildfires, and diseases and infestations that will require consistent, active forest management.

Challenges from Urbanization and Population Growth

In 1999, four federal agencies, working collaboratively with southern state forestry agencies, studied pressures placed on southern forests and forecasted their future condition. While it appears southern forests are sustainable – which means they will remain diverse and productive, while providing economic and social benefits for the future – the Southern Forest Assessment pointed to a number of trends that require attention.

Population growth and urbanization tops the list as the most significant challenge facing Southern forests. The rate of forest conversion to urban and industrial uses has increased from about 667,000 acres in the 1980's to 1.1 million acres a year in the 90's. This trend doesn't appear to be slowing. Between 1992 and 2020, about six percent of the South's forests could be lost to urban uses. Effects of forest conversion to urban and suburban areas extend far beyond city limits, and include wildlife habitat fragmentation, a scarcity of forest benefits such as recreation opportunities, and limitations on management options necessary to keep forests healthy. Most of these effects will be focused in the Piedmont and along the coastal areas of the South.

Threats from Wildfires

Catastrophic wildfires represent the most visible consequence of the deteriorating forest and rangeland health. On average, more than 45,000 wildfire outbreaks consume approximately one million acres of the 215 million acres of southern forests. Runaway blazes destroy about 250 structures a year. Historically, prescribed fire programs have been a key element to offset catastrophic wildfire risks in the South. Forest Service specialists have used controlled burns to treat about 1.2 million acres of National Forests System lands each year. As a result, many southern forest acres have achieved favorable condition classifications that reflect a reduction in their risk to catastrophic fire outbreaks. However, an annual hazardous fuels treatment program that exceeds 2 million acres is what southern forests will require to prevent catastrophic fire outbreaks. Growth in southern population presents a challenge for the prescribed fire program. Increases in wildland interface and construction of residences near forests boundaries, have raised additional concerns for fire planners.

Threats from Stand Density, Diseases & Invasive Species

In addition to fire, forests and rangelands across the country face unusually high threats from the spread of invasive species and insect attacks. Insects and pathogens have historically existed in

our forests and rangelands. However, the frequency, extent, and timing of recent outbreaks are out of the ordinary. The South leads the nation in the number of non native insects and diseases. More than 21 million forest acres of all ownerships are at risk of death because of insects and diseases causing standing timber losses of over $100 million. Southern forests have been extremely vulnerable to attacks from insects like the southern pine beetle, which infested 1.5 million acres between1999 and 2002 and the red oak borer, which destroyed 300,000 acres in the Ouachita – Ozark Highlands in Arkansas, Oklahoma and Missouri. Further, older-aged hardwoods dominate Appalachian Forests, rendering them susceptible to insect and diseases such as Oak Decline, Red Oak Borer and Gypsy Moth. Other infestations in the South include the hemlock woolly adelgid, found in Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee and Georgia, which threatens the continued existence of eastern and Carolina hemlocks. Sudden Oak Death, which was inadvertently transported to southern nurseries, is one of our newest threats. This nonnative disease has been killing oaks in central California and poses a significant threat to all eastern oak species should this disease become established. In 2003 alone, the Southern Region of the Forest Service spent $15 million to suppress insect infestations and diseases.

In the past 20 years, insect outbreaks are occurring more frequently and continuing for a greater duration due to changes in tree stand density, as well as in species composition and structure, resulting from decades of excluding or immediately suppressing fire, the lack of active management, and extended drought. Several thousand acres of southern pine are in need of first thinnings to reduce crowding and competition for water and nutrients. Without this type of treatment these stands are susceptible to Southern Pine Beetle attacks, wildland fire and severe damage from other catastrophic events such as wind and ice storms. Native insects are expanding at an alarming rate. The latest southern pine beetle outbreak (1997-2002) destroyed 1.5 million acres of trees at an estimated value of $1 billion. In the South, there are over 89 million acres at risk to bark beetle loss. Often when these areas burn with uncharacteristic intensity, they become very susceptible to invasive species, further prolonging poor forest and rangeland health. Nonnative invasive plants are a direct threat to the productivity, biodiversity, and integrity of our forestlands.

Nonnative plants infest over 100 million acres in the United States and continue to increase by 8% to 20% annually; they are a major concern for the South, where the notorious kudzu covers a total of 7 million acres. In the South, we face added challenges to provide coordinated strategies across multiple ownerships, and differing jurisdictions to adequately address multiple threats from invasive weeds like cogon grass to zebra mussels in our rivers.

Using New Tools to Address Threats – Administrative Authorities

In March of this year the Forest Service entered into an Alternative Consultation Agreement with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the National Marine Fisheries Service on threatened and endangered species as required under Section 7 of the Endangered Species Act (ESA) for qualifying projects under the National Fires Plan. The purpose of the counterpart regulations is to enhance the efficiency and effectiveness of the Section 7 consultation process by providing an optional alternative to the procedures when the Forest Service determines a project is “not likely to adversely affect” any listed species or designated critical habitat. After analysis by a qualified and trained biologist, Forest Service line officers will be able to certify that projects meet the

ESA regulations and requirements without additional concurrences from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the National Marine Fisheries Service. On southern National Forests, with over 180 federally listed threatened and endangered species, we will see benefits of this new process through more timely and simpler decisions.

In addition, responding to the Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ) Guidance of December 9, 2002 to the Secretaries of Agriculture and Interior on the preparation of Environmental Assessments (EAs), the Administration identified several hazardous fuels treatment pilot projects across the Nation. One of these projects was the Four Notch/Boswell Creek Watershed Healthy Forest Initiative Pilot Project on the Sam Houston NF in Texas. This project included the assessment of the fuels conditions and the need to reduce fuels on the portions of the Sam Houston NF in the Boswell Creek watershed. The NEPA analysis has since been completed and a decision made. This is another example of how the Southern Region is using HFI administrative authorities to address pressing fuels treatment needs. As we continue project planning for FY2005 we are looking for many other opportunities to use the new administrative tools under HFI and HFRA.

Using New Tools to Address Threats – Legislative Authorities

Recognizing the impending forest health crisis, Congress, last year passed the Healthy Forest Restoration Act (HFRA) of 2003, which provides key tools we need to confront many of the challenges we are facing as land managers for private and public lands. The successful passage of this legislation has equipped managers of both public and private lands with much-needed tools to address the challenges we face. Since its passage, we've already begun utilizing these tools. At the Forest Service, we are now positioned to pursue activities that effectively address critical health risks we face. In addition, we will take steps to engage other landowners so they can employ these tools on private lands, as well.

Title I of HFRA, increases our ability to reduce hazardous fuels on National Forest System lands and provides our most progressive tool for preventing catastrophic wildfires in the South. For example, in fiscal year 2000 the Region burned under prescription 549,300 acres. This year we are burning under prescription more than 963,000 acres of National Forest System lands to reduce fire and restore fire-dependent ecosystems. We've already accomplished 98 percent of that total. Despite this accomplishment, we still have many areas that remain vulnerable to wildfires and diseases. We will be working to reverse these threats.

We're also stepping up efforts to thin and treat densely-wooded areas to reduce both risks of fires and diseases. We've have undertaken bold initiatives to treat areas at risk for pests and infestations. This region, for example, established a southern pine beetle prevention and restoration program totaling $15 million in fiscal years 2003 and 2004. The cooperative part of the funding--$10 million--is being used in 10 of 13 states to create state managed southern pine beetle prevention and restoration programs. The funds are being used to develop SPB hazard rating systems, encourage sound forest management on non-industrial private forests and State-owned lands, and educate landowners about the impacts of SPB and the need to maintain healthy forests to prevent SPB infestations. The Federal part of the prevention/restoration funding, $5 million, is being used to thin high risk pine stands on National Forest System lands.

In addition, we are assessing how best to employee other HFRA authorities to improve efforts in utilization of biomass and watershed protection.

Title II of HFRA, (Biomass) will be utilized to address the fuels build-up in southern forests (As a result, there is a need to consider new uses in the South for woody biomass from the small diameter trees in the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) plantations (e.g. combined heat and power generation by rural utilities, the production of ethanol and other transportation bio-fuels, and the development of bio-based products). The banning of the MTBE additive from gasoline will mean that the demand for ethanol in east coast gasoline markets will significantly increase. The current corn-based ethanol plants in the Midwest can't meet this demand. A logical source in the South for sustainable ethanol production is the abundant forest resource, especially the small diameter CRP stands in need of thinning and timber harvesting slash. There is a growing awareness on the part of forestry agencies, universities, agricultural producers and others in the South for the need to develop agricultural and forest based bio-industries to reduce hazardous fuels and help sustain the economic viability of rural communities in the region.

Title III of HFRA, the Watershed Forestry Assistance Program (WFAP), will be used to promote use of forest and forestry practices to sustain healthy watersheds through collaborative approaches. The Forest Service is working with state foresters and with tribes to develop separate guidelines for the State Watershed Forestry Assistance Program and the Tribal Watershed Forestry Assistance Program. Our goal is to have the guidelines in place by October. To implement the programs, State Foresters and Indian Tribes will work in partnership with communities, nonprofit organizations, local watershed councils, and landowners to encourage the use of forests and forestry practices in protecting and restoring watersheds. By focusing in priority watersheds, states and tribes can integrate forestry practices across mixed ownerships, provide cumulative water quality benefits, and offer low cost, long term solutions to many of the nation's non-point source pollution problems. When applied on a priority watershed basis, forests and forestry practices can protect drinking water sources, lowering cost of drinking water treatment, and help manage storm water runoff, impacting wastewater treatment requirements.

Another useful tool is the Stewardship Contracting authority. These contracts allow private companies, communities and others to offset the purchase price of forest and rangeland products with the cost for the services of hazardous fuels treatment including thinning trees and brush and removing vegetation. Long-term contracts foster a public/private partnership to restore forest and rangeland health by giving those who undertake the contract the ability to invest in equipment and infrastructure. To date, the southern region has awarded twenty of these stewardship contracts.

Conclusion

Mr. Chairman, these new efforts are just the beginning. We have much to do to address the serious risks and threats we face. With the South's productive soils and long growing seasons,

forest conditions can change dramatically in 5 years. Forest health conditions in the South demand consistent, active management. The Forest Service—working with other federal agencies, states, partners and citizens—is committed to providing that management and leadership to address the health challenges on forests. Moreover, the Forest Service is committed to working with Congress, State, local and tribal officials and the public to advance common-sense solutions to protect communities and people, and to restore forest and rangeland health. With the tools we now have available, we believe we have the legal framework to effect the future condition of southern forest both today and in the future.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on issues affecting the southern forests. I would be glad to answer any questions you may have.