

Testimony of
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Before The
House Committee on Natural Resources
On The
Indian Forest Management Assessment Team Report:
“Tribal Forest Management: A Model for Promoting
Healthy Forests and Rural Jobs”

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Good morning Chairman Hastings, Ranking Member DeFazio, and members of the Committee. Thank you for inviting the Department of the Interior (Department) to provide testimony on the Indian Forest Management Assessment Team (IFMAT) Report: “Tribal Forest Management: A Model for Promoting Healthy Forests and Rural Jobs.”

In relation to this important report, the Administration continues to emphasize three priority goals, applicable to Indian forest management. These include safety in Indian communities through wildland fire suppression, the adaptation of forest management activities to a changing climate, and the development of our workforce in both Bureau of Indian Affairs and Tribal forest management occupations.

Overview

In 1991, the Department strongly supported enactment of the National Indian Forest Resources Management Act (NIFRMA), whereby Congress declared that the United States has a trust responsibility toward Indian forest lands, noting that a review of our federal Indian Forestry investment should be conducted and compared to other land management agencies (25 USC Sec. 3111). This Act directed the Secretary of the Interior, in consultation with affected Indian Tribes, to obtain an independent assessment of the status of Indian forest resources and their management. To meet this mandate, the Secretary contracted the preparation of a periodic report (IFMAT Report) every ten years to address eight required NIFRMA tasks including forest management practices and funding level comparisons, forest health and productivity, staffing patterns, timber sale administration procedures, streamlining and reducing regulatory requirements, forest management planning, minimum standards for the BIA’s fiduciary trust responsibility, and recommendations of reforms. The third IFMAT report was completed in 2013.

Indian Forestry

There are over 18 million acres of Indian forests in the U.S. held in trust by the federal government. There are 310 forested Indian reservations located in 24 states. The Secretary of the Interior is the principal designated federal trustee. Six million acres are considered commercial timberlands, nearly four million acres are commercial woodlands, and more than eight million acres are a mixture of noncommercial timberlands and woodlands. Diverse forest types provide irreplaceable economic and cultural benefits to Indian people. Forests encompass about a third of the total Indian trust lands, and sustain tribal economies, cultures, religions, and spiritual practices.

Forests are closely linked to community and cultural vitality of Indian people. Forests store and filter the water and purify the air. They sustain habitats for the fish and wildlife that provide sustenance for the people. They produce foods, medicines, fuel, and materials for shelter, transportation, and artistic expression. Forests provide revenues for many tribal governments, sometimes the principal source of revenue, and sorely-needed employment for Indian people and rural communities.

Tribal forests and communities continue to face serious threats from wildfire, insects, disease, and climate. Fire suppression (wildland firefighting) is a source of tribal jobs while fuels management activities restore and maintain forest health. Through the Wildland Fire appropriation, the BIA is responsible for providing resources for fire management programs that reduce the risk of fires, and protect valuable natural resources, including timber, once a fire starts. On average, BIA obligates around \$75 million per year for fire suppression alone, employing approximately 7,000 employees annually, many of whom are Native Americans and Alaska Natives.

Investments in thinning and hazardous fuels reductions keep forests healthy and resilient, helping to avoid stand-replacing crown fires and accompanying environmental and economic consequences, including pollution to the atmosphere. In 2011, Indian tribes and the BIA performed fuel hazard reduction treatments on 232,368 acres, creating nearly 700 reservation jobs and \$28.4 million in economic outputs, while helping to avoid the economic and environmental costs of severe wildfires.

The IFMAT Report

The 2013 IFMAT Report included findings and recommendations specific to each of the NIFRMA-mandated tasks. These findings and recommendations encompass three overarching themes:

- Our changing climatic conditions and associated wildland fire, insect epidemics, and disease problems that are reshaping tribal forests;
- the need to emphasize strategic planning and investments to sustain tribal forests, tribal visions, and our trust responsibility; and
- the emergence of Indian forestry as a national model for sustainable landscape management.

The report found that tribes are assuming an ever-increasing leadership role in forest management activities through self-determination and self-governance. Currently, 38 percent of the 310 Indian forestry programs nation-wide are managed through self-determination contracts or self-governance compacts. I am proud to say that the report found that both Bureau of Indian Affairs and tribal forest managers rank as some of the most dedicated, hardworking individuals in the forest management profession. Their innovation and influence on the science of integrated forestry practices and sustained yield management is widely recognized, providing a solution for ecosystem health and productivity and a framework for cross jurisdictional management of federal and state lands through the Anchor Forest concept pursuant to the Tribal Forest Protection Act.

The IFMAT team visited 20 Indian reservations and received input from Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) and tribal foresters and resource managers, forestry students, tribal leaders, and tribal elders. The reservations, forests, and people visited were highly diverse, each with their own set of local

challenges. It was broadly noted by respondents that Indian forests are increasingly threatened by external forces, such as wildfire, insects, disease, development, climate change, declining access to markets, and urbanization.

The Report showed many positive examples of people caring deeply about the land and their management decisions. Indian forests represent a unique window into the interaction between forests and people. The management of Indian forests must be directed toward achieving a dynamic set of tribal objectives, making the management of Indian forestlands particularly unique. Tribal leaders have recently begun extending their influence beyond reservation boundaries to build interagency partnerships for a sustainable future. Tribes with permanent land bases and a demonstrated history of long-term stewardship play a pivotal role to achieve cross-boundary, landscape-level resource management and restoration.

Although there are many opportunities to build on the findings and recommendations of the IFMAT Report, the groundwork has already been laid through FY14 Forestry program initiatives that include support to tribes to maintain productive levels of forest management. In addition, as part of the Administration's commitment to advance science-based collaborative efforts, we have provided for climate change research and the development of a youth program in forestry.

We are particularly pleased with our Youth Initiative which supports the development of tribal youth engaged in projects that promote climate change awareness. This program, in partnership with a tribal college, will provide opportunities for youth to gain hands-on classroom and field experience in the field of forestry and study the relationship to climate change and the long term implications to tribal forestry.

Conclusion

Thank you for the opportunity to provide the Department's views on the Indian Forest Management Assessment Team (IFMAT) Report: "Tribal Forest Management: A Model for Promoting Healthy Forests and Rural Jobs." The Department continues to work with Tribes to promote healthy forests and will continue to work closely with this Committee as well as our federal and state partners to address forestry and fire management issues

Thank you for focusing attention on this important report. I am available to answer any questions the Committee may have.