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STATEMENT OF

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UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

BEFORE THE COMMITTEE ON RESOURCES

SUBCOMMITTEE ON FORESTS AND FOREST HEALTH

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ON THE FOREST HEALTH CONDITION OF THE

SAN BERNARDINO NATIONAL FOREST

LAKE ARROWHEAD, CA

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Chairman Pombo and members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to talk with you about the forest health crisis we face on the San Bernardino National Forest and the urgent need to treat our national forests to reduce the severe threat of catastrophic wildfire. I am also pleased that you chose Lake Arrowhead as the location for this hearing since this community and its residents are located at the heart of an environmental crisis. I have with me today Gene Zimmerman, Forest Supervisor for the San Bernardino National Forest.

As the Forest Service has testified before the House of Representatives and the Senate, the Department of Agriculture strongly supports the President's Healthy Forests Initiative and H.R. 1904, the Healthy Forests Restoration Act of 2003.

Background

At 672,000 acres, the San Bernardino National Forest is not one of the nation's largest national forests, but with 24 million people living within a two hour drive, it is certainly one of the nation's most heavily used forests. It provides some of southern California's most valuable recreational open space in an ever-expanding sea of urban development, and it also contains otherwise dwindling habitat for wildlife and plants, 40 of which are considered threatened or endangered species.

The San Bernardino National Forest is going through a significant cycle of drought-related, vegetation mortality. As of July 2003, approximately 474,000 acres in the San Bernardino and San Jacinto Mountains on both private and public lands were experiencing severe tree loss, ranging from ten percent of all the trees in a given area to 100 percent. The four-year drought has weakened trees and brush allowing bark beetles, root disease and dwarf mistletoe to reach epidemic proportions.

Historically, this forest was fairly open, with mostly larger trees. Today, a very different forest, one choked with mostly smaller trees—often hundreds per acre—all competing for limited moisture and nutrients. Much of the area is in the mixed conifer forest type in which frequent wild fire is a natural event. However, much of this forest has not burned in 90 to 120 years, an average of three to four skipped fire cycles. The result is a tremendous build-up of hazardous fuels. Using prescribed fire to reduce the fuels has been difficult because of the risk to communities within the national forest boundaries.

Mechanical removal of the fuels has not kept up with the fuel build-up for several reasons. Some community

covenants have restricted landowners since the 1920's from tree removal activities on private land within the National Forest. The Forest has not had an active timber harvest program for nearly 10 years. There are no lumber mills in southern California and now the current removal of dead and dying trees is difficult and expensive.

Approximately 100,000 people live within the Forest boundary. If a large fire occurs, it is likely to threaten the lives of many residents and forest visitors. The mountain communities have nearly 100,000 structures, assessed by the San Bernardino County Assessors Office at approximately \$8 billion. The dead trees and vegetation mortality lead to an increased risk of catastrophic wildfires that likely would threaten life and property and could damage public utilities and other infrastructure.

Two weeks ago, the 1,400 acre Bridge Fire at the foot of the mountain forced the evacuation of 1,500 people and closed one of three key mountain community evacuation routes for over a week. I am very proud of the hard work of the Forest Service staff and our partners during this fire and in the months before. Every single person evacuated from Running Springs during the Bridge Fire was able to return safely to their home. The pre-planning that went into fighting this fire was exceptional and was the deciding factor in bringing that fire to a safe end.

The President's Healthy Forest Initiative would play a key role in helping us avoid situations such as we see on the San Bernardino National Forest today. The initiative is based on a common-sense approach to reducing the threat of catastrophic wildfires by restoring forest and rangeland health and ensuring the long-term safety and health of communities and natural resources in our care.

Cooperation is Key

The forest health situation in the San Bernardino and San Jacinto mountains does not recognize ownership boundaries or agency responsibilities. That means a public and private partnership is critical in providing an integrated and coordinated approach to address the crisis Forest-wide.

The San Bernardino National Forest has forged such a partnership with State and local government agencies and private sector. There are two interagency organizations that evolved from that partnership, the Riverside County and the San Bernardino County Mountain Area Safety Task Forces or MASTs. Each MAST includes representatives from individual agencies and organizations such as the USDA Forest Service, California Department of Forestry (CDFFP) county fire, sheriff and solid waste management, CalTrans, air quality management districts, municipal fire and water districts, state and county offices of emergency services, Environmental Systems Research (ESRI) and Southern California Edison.

Working with stakeholders in local communities, the MASTs have developed a comprehensive strategy to address the public safety and forest health issues on both public and private land. The foundation of the strategy is to collaboratively develop one plan, and then implement the plan based on each agency's jurisdiction and resources. Implementing this strategy will significantly reduce the threat to people and communities as well as to the environment, and will restore the forest to more healthy conditions. This is one of the most extensive, pre-event planning efforts to ever take place for a national forest and its surrounding communities. I believe it is an excellent model of collaboration for other areas in the nation.

The MASTs strategy has three parts:

- v Emergency Preparedness Response – Develop and implement a coordinated plan with other emergency response agencies which provides for public and employee safety by identifying evacuation routes, staging areas, and safety zones.
- v Fuel Reduction Around Communities and Key Evacuation Routes – Remove extreme levels of fuel around community's public infrastructure and key evacuation routes.
- v Long Term Planning and Treatments – Actively manage national forest lands to improve stand vigor and restore forest health. Encourage and assist homeowners in clearing vegetation and removing excess trees on their property.

The contribution and dedication to the cause of all of the involved partners is noteworthy. The generosity of ESRI and Southern California Edison are notable examples. ESRI has provided essential technical assistance and Geographical Information Systems software. The company has assigned its best people to

assist the MASTs efforts and has provided computer mapping software and assistance so valuable its worth would be difficult to calculate.

In April 2003, the California Public Utilities Commission (CPUC) directed Southern California Edison and other utilities in the affected counties to take action to remove trees that could fall on power lines, recognizing the danger they pose. Southern California Edison's contribution to removing dead and dying trees in both public and private lands in the San Bernardino and San Jacinto mountains alone will be over \$300 million and includes reimbursing homeowners for doing this work.

The forest health partnerships on the San Bernardino National Forest go beyond financial commitments. Firesafe Councils are playing an essential role in relaying information to communities and thousands of interested citizens, and in developing community-based solutions and priorities. The MASTs rely heavily on their help. The San Bernardino National Forest Association's Fire Education Volunteers and Volunteer Fire Lookouts, and CDF's Volunteers in Prevention provide countless hours and effort dedicated to educating the public about fire prevention. All of these groups are vital to the public understanding and support necessary for the overall long-term success of the strategy.

Emergency Preparedness Response

Southern California wildland firefighting capability is already considered to be one of the highest in the country on a "normal" fire year. Since 2001, fire suppression resources on the San Bernardino have increased by nearly 50% as a result of the National Fire Plan, providing additional aircraft, engines and crews. Moreover, fire suppression resources from other national forests are rotated through San Bernardino National Forest as they are needed. The CDFFP has increased their fire fighting resources by 25 percent in southern California. CDFFP has also supplied a crew to assist making evacuation routes safer, and is providing direct assistance to private landowners.

This year the Forest Service to date has redirected \$3.2 million in State Fire Assistance and Community Protection/Community Assistance funding for wildfire prevention and hazardous fuels reduction for communities in the San Bernardino National Forest areas. In an attempt to reduce human-caused fire ignitions, the Forest has also increased the fire prevention workforce and supplemented that workforce with additional resources such as volunteers and grassroots organizations.

Fuel Reduction Around Communities and Key Evacuation Routes

The San Bernardino National Forest has also been approved for \$9 million in hazardous fuels treatment for the current fiscal year. The San Bernardino National Forest, in cooperation with its state and local partners, is moving forward with work to remove dead trees along evacuation routes and reduce fuel hazards. The San Bernardino National Forest has five projects underway or completed that will help make 111 miles of roads safer to use as evacuation routes. It has 13 fuel reduction projects underway or completed that treat 11,600 acres, and is in the planning stages for two more projects covering 1,200 acres. These projects will enhance protection of local communities and homes. Four projects are underway that provide added protection for critical communication sites.

The San Bernardino National Forest is expediting this critical work in several ways, requesting and receiving a special exemption to shorten the contracting process. The San Bernardino National Forest has worked with the US Fish and Wildlife Service to develop a Memorandum of Understanding to expedite the consultation process and has been using the emergency consultation process and timelines whenever possible.

The San Bernardino National Forest has used categorical exclusions contained in its National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) procedures for timber stand and wildlife habitat improvement to expedite environmental review on seven projects and decisions issued before March 10, 2003 that have avoided sensitive species, threatened and endangered species, and archaeological resources. In the future, the newly finalized categorical exclusions for fuels treatments provided by President's Healthy Forest Initiative will further increase the San Bernardino National Forest's capability to do urgently needed fuels treatments.

The San Bernardino National Forest has made good headway, but there is much more to do. In 2004 the Forest will continue these types of projects, treating additional acreage and maintaining work completed earlier to reduce the fuel load in the Wildland Urban Interface (WUI). The San Bernardino National Forest is working with the communities to design and implement demonstration projects to show what a healthy forest

really looks like.

Long Term Planning and Treatments

During the last year, the focus of work by the MASTs has been on meeting essential, immediate public safety needs. The San Bernardino National Forest is now beginning to plan for the long-term work that must be done. Active forest management is critical to improving stand vigor, minimizing vegetation mortality, and reducing the threat of large stand-replacement fires. That means thinning dense stands of trees. It took a long time for the San Bernardino National Forest to get into this unhealthy forest condition and it cannot be fixed overnight. It will take a lot of time and effort by the Forest Service and its partners to return the Forest to a healthier condition.

Looking Beyond the San Bernardino NF

I am very concerned that what we are seeing on the San Bernardino National Forest will happen again in many other forested areas in California. Forest conditions—dense and overgrown-- on other national forests in California are similar to those on the San Bernardino. Those ecological conditions, combined with the massive influx of people into California's wildlands and the rapid growth of communities in and around those wildlands, particularly in the Sierra Nevada, have created the potential for truly disastrous wildfires.

Many of California's national forest ecosystems have evolved with fire. However, as we have seen on the San Bernardino National Forest, in many areas we cannot rely on fire to restore them to healthy conditions. The risk is too great -- the forests are too dense, there is too much fuel, and too many people living too close to the forests. Under these conditions we must find other ways to actively manage the forests, thin the over-crowded stands and return the forests to health. When wildfires do occur, we need to continue to respond quickly and effectively.

We are making good progress throughout California:

- v Over the past two years, we have reduced fuels on almost a quarter of a million acres of California's national forests and expect to treat another 75,000 acres in 2003. Nearly 75 percent of those treatments are in the WUI.

- v We have significantly increased our wildland firefighting resources and provided 191 grants totaling over \$11 million to local communities and organizations, helping them reduce wildfire risk. For example, this year the San Bernardino National Forest awarded \$800,000 in grants to local counties and Fire Safe Councils.

- v We are proposing changes to the 2001 Sierra Nevada Forest Plan Amendment. I feel strongly that these proposed changes will improve our ability to reduce fuels and protect old forests, wildlife habitats, watersheds, and communities. We will continue to place priority on treatments in the WUI and treat sufficient area in the wildlands to ensure success in the urban interface.

- v The Pacific Southwest Region recently completed a review of the Northwest Forest Plan Forests in northern California. We found problems similar to those we found in the Sierra Nevada, and we are now working with local Tribes, counties, and interest groups to make changes that will help us reach our goal of healthy forests more quickly and efficiently.

- v We are looking forward to applying the tools provided by the Healthy Forest Initiative. These will improve our ability to actively manage forests and reduce dangerous accumulations of hazardous fuels with greater speed and efficiency and better protect watersheds and habitat.

- v We are working closely with our federal, state and local partners at the Forest level and, through the California Fire Alliance, at the state level to better coordinate our efforts. The number of Fire Safe Councils is growing across the state. These community-based organizations are doing excellent work in increasing awareness of the problem and helping local residents take action to reduce the wildfire risk to themselves and others.

Summary

The forest health situation on the San Bernardino and throughout the Pacific Southwest Region is very dynamic. The key to avoiding potential catastrophic wildfire is by taking a comprehensive, strategic approach with all involved organizations, and having all the necessary management tools available to use.

Long-term success will also require building and maintaining relationships and cooperative planning that draws on the strengths of everyone involved.

I am committed to doing everything I can to avert disaster in Southern California and restore the rest of California's national forests to healthy conditions. The San Bernardino National Forest is a wake-up call we must heed. This concludes my testimony. Both Forest Supervisor Zimmerman and I would be happy to answer any questions the Committee might have.