

# **Committee on Resources, Subcommittee on Forests & Forest Health**

[forests](#) - - Rep. Scott McInnis, Chairman

U.S. House of Representatives, Washington, D.C. 20515-6205 - - (202) 225-0691

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## **Witness Statement**

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**STATEMENT OF  
TIM HARTZELL  
OFFICE OF WILDLAND FIRE COORDINATION  
UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR  
CONCERNING  
IMPLEMENTATION OF THE NATIONAL FIRE PLAN  
BEFORE THE  
SUBCOMMITTEE ON FORESTS AND FOREST HEALTH  
COMMITTEE ON RESOURCES  
UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES  
July 31, 2001**

Good afternoon, Mr. Chairman and members of the Committee.

### **Introduction**

I appreciate the opportunity to address this committee concerning the Department of the Interior's progress on the implementation of the National Fire Plan. My name is Tim Hartzell and I oversee the Office of Wildland Fire Coordination for the Department of the Interior. I am pleased to report that the Department of the Interior firefighting agencies have made significant progress in implementing the National Fire Plan. We at the Department of the Interior are grateful for the opportunity and recognize that there is more work to do that will be done in order to lessen the dangers to communities at risk, restore ecosystems and the natural role of fire, protect our critical natural resources, and most importantly, keep our firefighters and the public safe.

### **General Overview And Progress To Date**

The National Fire Plan represents an unparalleled amount of work for the fire community at every level. It is a huge job, one that cannot be accomplished overnight, or in two months or in the first six months of the Administration. However, the Administration has made progress. That progress is reflected in our hiring, fuels treatment projects, collaboration with States, tribes and local communities, and in our efforts to make sure the Forest Service and the Department of the Interior are working together to protect lives and property and to care for our damaged ecosystems.

A few important statistics tell the progress we have made:

This year, as in previous years, more than 95% of fires are suppressed while they are still small.

We have already completed rehabilitation on more than 1 million of the 1.4 million acres that were severely damaged by fires last year.

A year ago, more than 60,081 fires burned 3.4 million acres. As of today, 49,708 fires have burned 1.5 million acres. This year's fire season is also below the 10 year average of 52,735 fires and 1.9 million acres burned.

A year ago at this time, we had 4,710 fire fighters and support staff. This year, we have 1,800 more people in the fire program, and of those, 1,400 are front-line fire fighters.

We have placed orders for almost all the necessary firefighting equipment and contracted for additional aircraft called for in the National Fire Plan to support wildland firefighting.

During last year's fire fighting season we experienced difficulty in hiring supervisors with fire experience. This year we are using financial incentives, waiving mandatory retirement ages for physically fit fire fighters and establishing cooperative agreements with other countries that allow us to use their supervisory personnel if the fire season demands.

Since February 1st, when Secretary Norton took office, more than 413,000 acres of fuels treatment have been done, as compared to 100,000 acres in the first four months of this fiscal year. Depending on weather conditions, an additional 250,000 acres will be treated before the end of the fiscal year. More acres would have been treated had it not been for severe drought conditions and moratoriums placed on prescribed burns. We will continue this vital fuels treatment work into the next fiscal year to complete the remaining 700,000 acres of projects that are ready to be treated. We have selected one person at each of the Department's four bureaus with fire fighting responsibilities to coordinate fuels treatment work. We are already working with the states to identify further fuels treatment projects, and to complete the environmental clearances necessary so that fuels treatment work can begin. One aspect of the fuels treatment work that needs and will get improvement is outsource contracting. We are not yet satisfied with our level of contracting activity. We are addressing this problem by hiring additional contracting personnel, sharing contractor lists among all agencies and posting on our websites the names and telephone numbers of Federal employees directly responsible for contracting. Many communities lack contracting infrastructure. This is a more difficult problem to solve. In these communities, we are conducting outreach for community leaders, businesses and chambers of commerce. One example of this was BLM's program to hire 80 unemployed farmers in Klamath Falls, Oregon, to do fuels treatment work.

The Department of the Interior is also addressing the need to establish even better implementation of the National Fire Plan and to work more closely with the U.S. Forest Service. In the first week after Deputy Secretary Steve Griles was confirmed by the Senate, Secretary Norton directed him to work with his counterpart at the Department of Agriculture to develop cabinet-level joint oversight of the fire program, and to develop one set of goals and performance measures. Deputy Secretary Griles has already met with Agriculture Deputy Secretary Jim Mosely to begin work, and even more important, to conclude it.

Even before Deputy Secretary Griles was confirmed, Secretary Norton has been working to improve Interior's fire suppression and fuels treatment programs, and to seek better cooperation with the U.S. Forest Service. Her first visit outside Washington was a working session with the fire directors at the National Interagency Fire Center in Boise. Her first official acts as Secretary were to exempt firefighters from the government-wide hiring freeze and to release more money to do more environmental clearances for fuels treatment projects. Her chief of staff holds weekly meetings to identify and review obstacles that are impeding progress in achieving hiring and fuels treatment goals. Secretary Norton has asked for a report on how Interior's four bureaus can work more cooperatively in both suppressing fires and doing fuels

treatment.

The Interior and Agriculture Departments have been working closer than ever before. I am in regular contact with my counterpart at the Department of Agriculture. Together with the Office of Management and Budget, the Interior Department and Forest Service will be reviewing the current model for determining the number of firefighting personnel and equipment needed for "normal fire seasons" with the objective of updating that model to reflect new information and data, revised policy and the strategic direction of the National Fire Plan. We will be conducting a full audit of dollars expended in the FY 2001 fire season. We will also be revising performance measures, along with the Forest Service, to assure accountability and consistent results of the National Fire Plan. We will be working with our land managers to update fire plans. Both of our departments are working cooperatively with the National Academy of Public Administration to develop a joint set of recommendations to improve the program. We are determined to work with NAPA, GAO, state foresters and others who make thoughtful and sound suggestions for improving the fire program.

The next few weeks will decide the scope and magnitude of the fire season. We have greatly benefitted by the good fortune of having fewer ignitions. However, it is also true that some of the success we have had so far can be attributed to having more fire fighters, more equipment, and having done more fuels treatment. We are grateful for the bipartisan support that the fire program has had in Congress.

Before further highlighting the work we have done and the work that remains to be done in implementing the National Fire Plan, I would like to talk about keeping our firefighters and the public safe in light of the recent loss of five firefighters.

### **Firefighter and Public Safety**

On the afternoon of July 10th, fourteen firefighters and two civilians took refuge in fire shelters in Washington State's northern Cascade Mountains. Four of the firefighters who deployed their shelters in a boulder field did not survive. On the same day, an air tanker crashed in northern Idaho, claiming the pilot's life.

When a firefighter dies, a genuine, deeply felt sorrow ripples through the fire community. No one is immune from the sense of grief. Everyone pauses and reflects on the risks that are a part of firefighting, and how things can be made safer next time. My hope is that, in the aftermath of tragedy, everyone in the fire community is again reminded that safety always comes first. Secretary Norton issued a reminder to everyone that safety is our primary responsibility. Firefighting is an inherently dangerous occupation, and we cannot mitigate every hazard. What we can do is recognize risk, manage it, and minimize it, whenever possible.

In getting ready for this fire season the emphasis has been on training and re-certification. Federal firefighters are appropriately trained for the type of assignment they are given. When they are dispatched to a fire, it is with full confidence that they have the training, knowledge and experience required for the task ahead. Firefighter training has been developed by fire experts over many decades. Safety is emphasized in every course, from basic training through the most advanced classes. Firefighters are trained to remain calm, think clearly, and act decisively in potentially dangerous situations. This training has prevented untold numbers of entrapments, injuries and fatalities.

### **Accomplishments Under The National Fire Plan**

The National Fire Plan directs that the Departments of Agriculture and the Interior carry out the following activities:

- Continue to make all necessary firefighting resources available
- Restore landscapes and rebuild communities
- Invest in projects to reduce fire risk
- Work directly with communities
- Be accountable

As outlined by the following summary of accomplishments, we have made significant progress on all fronts.

## **1. Continue to Make All Necessary Firefighting Resources Available**

Preparedness. This year marks the first year the Department of the Interior has been funded at the full readiness level. Thanks in large part to Congress, we are better prepared to fight fires this year than ever before. This funding has increased our ability to hire additional firefighters and purchase necessary equipment. As a result, we are better able to respond to initial attack incidents efficiently, effectively and safely. Because of the time lag between ordering and delivery of much of the specialized firefighting equipment, it will take up to one year to realize the full potential from this funding increase.

Hiring. The Department has made hiring a top priority. In April 2001, Secretary Norton recorded firefighter recruitment public service announcements (PSAs), which were distributed to 5,000 radio stations nationwide. This markedly increased interest in our firefighter program. As of July 25, 2001, the Department has hired approximately 80 percent of a total of 8,103 fire personnel -- approximately 1,800 more than last year. Of this increase, approximately 1,400 are frontline firefighters.

One important component of hiring was the conversion of a large number of positions from temporary to career status. This provides the Department with additional supervisory capabilities on large fires. The effort continues to be a work-in-progress and will not be completed until next year. When finished, it will significantly increase large fire suppression capabilities, as well as further improve our initial attack capabilities.

Purchase of additional fire equipment and contracting for additional aircraft. All or most of an additional 110 pieces of equipment have either been purchased or ordered. All or most of the contracts for an additional 24 aircraft, including helicopters, single and multi-engine airtankers, large air transport, air attack and smokejumper (jumpships) aircraft have been processed.

Re-evaluating normal year readiness calculation. The Department is jointly re-evaluating normal year readiness calculations with the Forest Service for consistency between the agencies, to use the most current science available in determining preparedness needs, and to factor in performance measures.

Agreements with Australia and New Zealand for firefighting support. The Departments of Agriculture and the Interior will soon sign agreements with Australia and New Zealand to formalize the exchange of fire suppression assistance. Both Australia and New Zealand assisted the Departments last year, during the worst fire season in 50 years. This could provide up to 200 additional supervisory firefighters as the fire season warrants.

## **2. Restore damaged landscapes and rebuild communities**

Burned Area Rehabilitation. The Department of the Interior targeted approximately 1.4 million acres that were severely damaged from last year's fires. As of July 25, 2001, we have completed 80 percent of the rehabilitation work. Much of this work is multi-year projects, with immediate site stabilization followed by restoration of native vegetation. Successful restoration, especially on public rangelands devastated by the annual weeds and wildland-fire cycle, is critical to the long-term health of these ecosystems and an eventual return to a more natural fire regime and reduction of catastrophic blazes. The Department recently revised its Departmental Manual on Burned Area Emergency Stabilization and Rehabilitation. To implement the manual, a draft handbook was distributed for use during the 2001 fire season. After this fire season, it will be revised in light of what worked and what did not.

Native Plant Materials Development Program. To protect areas severely damaged by wildfire and unlikely to recover naturally, an interagency team of Department of the Interior and Department of Agriculture employees has been formed to develop a long-term strategy to supply native plant materials to meet this need. This team is developing a strategy to increase the supply of native seed, with the help of our non-Federal partners.

### **3. Invest in projects to reduce fire risk**

Hazardous fuels treatments. For Fiscal Year 2001, the Department planned to treat hazardous fuels on an estimated 1.4 million acres. Much of this was to be accomplished through the use of prescribed fire. The Department may not achieve this acreage due to drought conditions in the Southeast, Pacific Northwest, Northern Great Basin, and Northern Rockies. A severe fire season may also hamper fuels treatment efforts, as many of the same personnel involved in fire suppression are also responsible for prescribed fire project planning and implementation. As of July 23, 2001, we have treated 515,348 acres.

Secretary Norton issued a memorandum to bureau directors to ensure that coordinated, efficient and effective fuels treatment occurs on all Interior lands. This memo established a fuels management team to provide guidance for fuels treatment project selection and to coordinate with the Forest Service and State agencies.

Wildland Urban Interface (WUI) interagency collaborative working groups. The Department of the Interior has worked with the Forest Service, the National Association of State Foresters, the Western Governors' Association, and other State organizations to establish locally led interagency teams that will prioritize hazardous fuels treatment projects in the wildland urban interface. Instruction memoranda have been provided to these groups to help them select projects for treatment. This process will guide implementation of the national fuels reduction program in the WUI for FY 2002 and provide a preliminary project list for FY 2003.

#### Utilizing small diameter material and other biomass.

- Joint Fire Science Program (JFSP) research. A large, 5-year project begun in 1999 includes 11 sites nationwide where scientists will study the fuels "treatment costs and utilization economics" of biomass, including small diameter fuels. Research is planned on evaluating factors affecting the feasibility of economically viable utilization of biomass material removed to reduce fire hazard and fuel loading.
- Buncom Landscape Project, in the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) Medford (OR) District, utilized small diameter trees. This forest health project focused on the restoration of oak and pine

savanna habitat for the benefit of wildlife and fire prevention. Landowners coordinated thinning, burning, planting, and noxious weed control treatments with their neighbors and the BLM to create wildlife habitat that reaches across numerous ownership boundaries and connects watershed uplands with aquatic lowlands. Small diameter trees were thinned to reduce the effects of years of fire suppression. Approximately 95,000 trees yielded more than 18 million board feet, and provided jobs for numerous local contractors.

- Eastern Nevada Landscape Restoration Coalition project, Ely, NV, producing biomass material. The BLM Ely District in eastern Nevada has committed to produce 50,000 to 100,000 tons per year of pinyon-juniper biomass to restore and improve habitat for sage grouse and Rocky Mountain elk. The project will treat over 100,000 acres in FY 2001. The coalition involves 75 Federal, State, and local governments, private foundations and environmental groups, and local community and industry leaders. The coalition is exploring markets for the biomass material, including fuel for wood-stove pellets, bioenergy or co-generation, fiber or flakeboard and a variety of other nontraditional forest products.

#### Allocating necessary project funds.

- Transfer of funds for environmental consultations. In addition to the allocation of project funds to appropriate field units, funds were transferred to the Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) and National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) to hire personnel to facilitate threatened and endangered species consultations. The FWS and NMFS have added staff to accommodate the increased workload, and are working cooperatively with the Fire agencies to plan projects for FY02 and beyond. This will expedite FY 2002 and 2003 clearances for fuels treatment projects designed to reduce risks to communities and priority watersheds.

#### **4. Work directly with local communities**

Contracting with local businesses and organizations. In January 2001, the Department of the Interior, along with the Forest Service, developed policy guidance to implement a streamlined approach to awarding contracts to local businesses and organizations for hazardous fuels treatment projects and landscape restoration. This policy will be implemented on an interagency basis in each of the 11 Geographic Areas currently used for firefighting coordination across the country. In each Geographic Area, one of the Federal agencies has taken the lead for contracting. In some cases, the geographic area has been subdivided and agency leadership designated to facilitate work. The policy requires an organized approach for community outreach and coordination to locate and develop firms with which we can contract and assist communities developing local fuels reduction and restoration capability.

Increasing employment and contracting opportunities in Idaho. The Department, along with the Forest Service and the State of Idaho are working together to increase opportunities for local contracting and recruiting in support of the National Fire Plan, particularly for unemployed natural resource workers, including ranchers, farmers, loggers, and forest product workers.

Increasing employment and contracting opportunities in Oregon. The BLM Klamath Falls Office, OR, has started a 3,000 acre wildland urban interface fuels reduction project that includes tree thinning, brush removal, and slash piling in and around Bly Mountain. The project is providing temporary jobs for up to 80 displaced farm workers in the drought-devastated Klamath Basin. The BLM has hired four contractors who have begun recruiting workers in the local area. The Oregon Department of Forestry and local elected

officials are assisting the BLM in planning, support, and community relations.

Improving local fire protection capabilities through financial and technical assistance to State, local, and volunteer firefighting efforts.

- Rural Fire Assistance. In 2001, Congress established a new \$10 million Rural Fire Assistance program. The Department developed policy to guide implementation of this pilot program. The program is providing rural fire departments with needed assistance in training, equipment purchase, and prevention activities to increase firefighter safety, enhance fire protection capabilities, enhance protection in the wildland urban interface, and increase the coordination among local, State, Tribal, and Federal firefighting resources. The Department estimated that approximately 820 of the 3,223 rural/volunteer fire departments adjacent to Interior lands and within the wildland urban interface would receive funds and benefit from the pilot program this fiscal year. As of June 2001, 944 awards have been given to rural and volunteer fire departments, totaling \$5.1 million.

Expanding outreach and education to homeowners and communities about fire prevention through use of programs such as FIREWISE.

The FIREWISE program, developed by the National Wildfire Coordination Group in 1986, provides information to homeowners, county officials, building contractors, firefighters and others about practices that can lessen the risk of wildfires to communities. Through the National Fire Plan, \$5,000,000 is targeted in FY 2001-3 for development and delivery of a series of national FIREWISE workshops. Participants at the State-level workshops might include representatives from the construction industry, homeowners associations, insurance industries, local governments, and rural fire departments. The workshops are presented as a "Training-of-Trainers" experience, with the expectation that participants will return to their host organizations or communities and, in turn, conduct similar workshops at the local level. The Secretaries of Agriculture and the Interior will soon record interagency public service announcements to increase awareness of the FIREWISE program.

## **5. Be accountable**

Interagency coordination. The Departments of Agriculture and the Interior coordinate with each other on an ongoing basis. Representatives in each Secretary's office work together to ensure consistency of policy and messages. Individuals at both the Forest Service and Department of the Interior responsible for implementing the National Fire Plan work closely together.

Monitoring of implementation. The Department is monitoring fire management programs. The Rural Fire Assistance pilot program will be evaluated at the end of this fiscal year to determine effectiveness. The Council on Environmental Quality has made several site visits to determine how the environmental review process occurs (NEPA/ESA consultation) on hazardous fuels treatment projects. In addition, we have taken other steps to be more accountable:

- Recommending staffing for a Department of the Interior wildland fire policy office. The objective of the office is to ensure the implementation of the National Fire Plan and the Federal Wildland Fire Policy, coordinate budget formulation and fire policy, provide program oversight, measure program performance, and ensure accountability.
- Development of a National Fire Plan Data Reporting System. A contract has been awarded to develop

an automated database to track progress in meeting the goals set out in the National Fire Plan, related documents, and associated performance measures. The target is to have a pilot system operational by the end of 2001.

- National Academy of Public Administration (NAPA) Report. The Department has commissioned a report by NAPA, which will concentrate on six areas from the 2001 Review and Update of the 1995 Federal Wildland Fire Management Policy:
- Management accountability
- Interagency coordination
- Intergovernmental coordination
- Improving risk management
- Workforce management
- Institutionalizing lessons learned

NAPA expects to complete the report by mid-November, 2001. Results of this study, along with internal reviews, will be used to review oversight and coordination mechanisms of the National Fire Plan and to assure that an effective strategy is in place to institutionalize the 2001 Federal Wildland Fire Policy.

- DOI Cohesive Strategy - The Department of the Interior is developing a cohesive strategy to provide the Interior agencies with a framework for reducing the risk and consequences of unwanted wildland fire by protecting, maintaining, and restoring land health and desired fire cycles. This strategy has been coordinated with the Forest Service.
- 10-Year Comprehensive Strategy. Developed by the Department and the Forest Service in partnership with the Western Governors' Association, this strategy will be a template for how the Departments of Agriculture and the Interior will collaborate on the National, State, and local level to implement the National Fire Plan.
- Interagency National Fire Plan website. The Department of Interior and the USDA Forest Service, with feedback from the National Association of State Foresters, developed a joint National Fire Plan interagency website ([www.fireplan.gov](http://www.fireplan.gov)). The goals for the website are to:
  - Provide an interagency information clearing house
  - Provide one place for the public to get information on a variety of topics
  - Provide mechanisms for public involvement in implementing the National Fire Plan
  - Demonstrate that Federal and State wildland fire agencies are taking a cohesive and carefully planned approach to implementing the 2001 appropriation
- The Southwest Strategy. The Southwest Strategy is a community development and natural resources conservation and management effort among Federal, State, Tribal and local governments working in collaboration to restore and maintain the cultural, economic and environmental quality of life in the states of Arizona and New Mexico. A Fire Plan Implementation Coordination Group under the Southwest Strategy integrates local interagency and inter-Tribal planning and implementation of the



National Fire Plan among the States of Arizona and New Mexico.

- Interagency Fire Management Cooperation in the Pacific Northwest. The Oregon/Washington BLM Branch of Fire and Aviation Management, and the Forest Service Pacific Northwest Region, Directorate of Fire and Aviation Management, have been officially integrated at the State Office and Regional Office level since 1995. Employees work on an issues basis, rather than on an agency basis. The National Fire Plan is implemented on an interagency basis. The interagency office works with all of its State, local and Federal partners in all aspects of fire management.
- Wyoming Governor's Wildland Fire Action Team. All Department of the Interior bureaus participate in this intergovernmental fire steering group. The team was established to coordinate all fire suppression and fuels reduction activities in Wyoming.
- National Fire Plan Collaboration Coordinators Conference Denver, Colorado. A cornerstone of the National Fire Plan has been enhancing the communication among all partners in the wildland fire management arena. To this end, all of the National Fire Plan coordinators from the Department of the Interior and the Forest Service, and representatives from the Environmental Protection Agency, Council on Environmental Quality and others, assembled in Denver on February 21 and 22, 2001, to share concerns and issues, clarify roles and expectations, validate the importance of success, and define a management structure for collaboration at the geographic area level throughout the country. This meeting provided a springboard to unify State, Tribal and Federal efforts to cooperate across jurisdictions, coordinate plans and activities, and collaborate with local governments to implement efficiently and effectively the goals and commitments outlined in the National Fire Plan.

### Conclusion

I appreciate the opportunity to testify at this hearing. We believe that we have made good progress in reversing the trend of deteriorating health for our forest and rangeland ecosystems. We view the National Fire Plan as an investment that will, in the future, help protect communities and natural resources, and most importantly, the lives of firefighters and the public.

The Department has made real gains in working with all of its partners to implement the National Fire Plan, but it has required a shift in the way we have traditionally conducted business, and a shift in the way we implement nearly every fire management program. Just as we need time to acquire all the new, specialized fire equipment, we will need time to continue to make fire management seamless across the Federal, Tribal, State and local agencies, so that we may better protect lives and resources, and restore ecosystems to a functioning condition.

We are committed to these goals, and look forward to your continued support.

Thank you, again. I will be happy to answer any questions from the committee.

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