



**Testimony of Janet Napolitano
Governor of Arizona**

Submitted to the House Natural Resources Committee

**Full Committee Legislative Hearing on the Federal
Land Assistance, Management and Enhancement Act**

April 10, 2008

Chairman Rahall, Ranking Member Young, and Members of the Committee, thank you for this opportunity to testify on the Federal Land Assistance, Management and Enhancement Act, also known as the “FLAME” Act.

Before I begin, I would like to commend Chairman Rahall, Congressman Grijalva and Congressman Dicks for introducing this important piece of legislation to provide a separate funding source for catastrophic emergency wildland fire suppression.

I testify today on behalf of the Western Governors Association, a group that has led the development of the 10-Year Comprehensive Wildfire Strategy, which aims to reduce the risks of wildfire. I also offer my experiences as Governor of a state that has – like many western states – experienced its share of catastrophic wildfires.

Today I will share with you examples of significant wildfires in my state and discuss some of the risks I believe we face if we do not ensure a distinct funding stream for mega-fire suppression.

The Arizona Experience

Arizona’s largest wildfires have occurred within the last six years. In 2002, the Rodeo-Chediski Fire burned 467,000 acres of east-central Arizona woodland over the course of a month, requiring the evacuation of more than 30,000 people.

In June 2003, the Aspen Fire began in the Coronado National Forest, in southern Arizona, and it continued to burn for nearly a month. In spite of a Herculean firefighting effort, the fire ravaged 84,000 acres, including the popular tourist town of Summerhaven, destroying the lives and businesses connected to the 340 homes and buildings that burned. The 2005 Cave Creek Fire, ignited by a lightening strike, destroyed a quarter of a million acres and caused \$17 million in damages a few miles beyond Phoenix's city limits.

Growing Trends of Mega-Fires in the West

Arizona's experiences are not unique. Last year, Nevada, Utah, Wyoming, Texas, and other states across the West saw fires burn hundreds of thousands of acres of wildlands. These fires all have one thing in common – an unhealthy landscape due to poor or insufficient prevention efforts and the lack of adequate manpower and resources to fight the fires.

The West in particular is in a brutal cycle. Large fires that used to burn hundreds of acres have been supplanted with mega-fires that burn tens of thousands of acres – sometimes in just a single afternoon. These mega-fires put a massive drain on resources. One percent of wildfires account for 95 percent of the burned acres and consume 85 percent of the suppression costs.

All available data indicate that the potential for mega-fires will only increase. Fire potential indices have set new record highs each year and the “worst case” scenarios have often been exceeded. Arizona’s forests – and forests throughout the West – are now in the midst of a “perfect storm.” Decades of fuel accumulations and acres of beetle-killed timber, the rapid expansion of the wildland/urban interface, and the overarching presence of drought and climate change have now combined to dramatically increase the number and size of mega-fires. Consequently, if expenditures for fire prevention are not to be supplanted, separate and additional funds for fire suppression must be identified.

Why Dedicated Funding is Needed

Despite the increase in catastrophic mega-fires and these “perfect storm” elements, the Forest Service’s budget has remained flat. This overall flat budget means that Forest Service funding for putting out these larger and more frequent fires comes at the expense of funding for fire prevention programs such as Hazardous Fuels treatment and State and Volunteer Fire Assistance.

In the 1990s, suppression costs comprised 20 percent of the overall Forest Service budget. Today, suppression efforts consume more than half of the already tight Forest Service budget. Recent fire seasons have cost upwards of one billion dollars, compared to \$200 million seasons in the 1990s.

It is time to face reality and address the funding requirements to suppress these mega-fires so that fire suppression does not come from the funds set aside for fire

prevention. As suppression costs eat up more of the Forest Service budget (and the budget of related agencies like the Bureau of Land Management), the ability for these agencies to combat wildfires at their current success rates will be curtailed.

We cannot afford to let this dangerous trend continue. The FLAME Act will provide dedicated funding for catastrophic fire suppression, separate from the Forest Service's base funding. In turn, this will help ensure that funding is not swept from vital restoration and prevention activities.

I would like to provide you with one example that emphasizes the importance of fire prevention work. The 2006 Woody Fire near the city of Flagstaff had the potential to be as devastating as the fires I described a few moments ago, but for one key factor: significant preventative forest thinning had been done in the area under the State Cooperative Forestry Program. As a result, the Woody Fire was halted before it reached 100 acres, dramatically minimizing its devastation. Programs like the State Cooperative Forestry Program that reduce the risk of catastrophic wildfire and protect our communities are the ones most threatened by stagnation in the Forest Service budget.

I ask you to help relieve the burden on the Forest Service's budget and the drain on wildfire prevention funding by creating a permanent fund for fighting the most catastrophic blazes while simultaneously ending the practice of re-directing prevention and restoration funds to pay for fire suppression.

The FLAME Act will address the need for distinct funding while protecting the discretionary budget of the Forest Service so they can manage and protect our precious lands from fire. In the long run, this legislation will actually reduce overall firefighting costs. Freeing funds for preventative measures mean healthier forests that are less at risk for catastrophic fires. The same applies to treatments around communities – more funds freed for those activities means fewer structures will be put in danger by fire. Preventative steps in the long run are cost-saving measures.

Cohesive Wildland Fire Management Strategy

Before I close, I would like to commend the FLAME Act's call for a cohesive wildland fire management strategy to be set forth in a report one year from the legislation's enactment. Strategic planning is essential to properly address preparedness. In Arizona, we engage in extensive wildfire preparedness efforts, including Community Wildlife Protection Plans that prepare a community for wildfire response and our newly completed Statewide Strategy for Restoring Arizona's Forests.

In recognition that the House is considering two different pieces of legislation that address catastrophic suppression funding, I urge a bipartisan effort that recognizes catastrophic fire suppression is an emergency function and must be addressed as one. This new emergency funding should not come at the expense of the Forest Service's base budget.

As I speak to you today, my state is entering its wildfire season, and while we can hope for the best, we all know that we have to act. If we are successfully to protect our citizens and our precious natural resources, then Congress must allocate sufficient funding to this effort. This is an urgent issue for Arizona and the West, where we have seen increased catastrophic wildland fire activity over the last decade and where most forests are on federal land. There is no time to waste.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify. I would be happy to take your questions.