

**Statement of Jeffery Rupert
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Before the
House Committee on Natural Resources, Subcommittee on Federal Lands
Oversight Hearing on Examining the Challenges Facing Forest Management, Wildfire
Suppression, and Wildland Firefighters Ahead of the 2023 Wildfire Year**

May 16, 2023

Chairman Tiffany, Ranking Member Neguse, and members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony on the challenges that the Department of the Interior (Interior) faces in wildland fire management, including wildfire suppression and the wildland firefighting workforce ahead of the 2023 wildfire year. Interior appreciates the opportunity to share with the Subcommittee its ongoing proactive steps to improve compensation and support for its wildland firefighting workforce, reduce wildfire risk, and effectively manage wildfire response. We appreciate the Subcommittee's interest in these areas, and we look forward to working with you in addressing priority wildland fire management issues.

Bipartisan Infrastructure Law

The Bipartisan Infrastructure Law (BIL) provided a once-in-a-generation investment in wildland fire management that is helping to combat the climate crisis and improve the wildfire resiliency of our nation's lands. Interior is receiving nearly \$1.5 billion in BIL funding over five years for wildland fire management programs. BIL funding supports Interior's core Wildland Fire Management program. Interior's Five-Year Monitoring, Maintenance, and Treatment Plan, required by BIL, lays out a roadmap to address wildfire risk and prepare communities and ecosystems for wildfire threats.

As you will see in our testimony, Interior bureaus—Bureau of Indian Affairs, Bureau of Land Management, National Park Service, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and the U.S. Geological Survey—are using BIL funding collaboratively with our partners to increase the pace and scale of fuels management treatments, rehabilitate lands damaged by wildfires, and fund research into priority wildland fire management issues, including the impacts of climate change on wildfire, fuels management, and firefighter mental health. . Through BIL, we are also increasing workforce capacity and wildland firefighter pay and supporting wildland firefighters' mental health and wellbeing. To date, Interior has allocated more than \$450 million in BIL funding and will allocate additional funds this year. We appreciate Congress' willingness to support these efforts and help Interior effectively address the wildfire crisis so that we can work in concert with our Federal, Tribal, state, and local partners to effectively protect communities, people, and resources from the increasing risks of wildfire.

2022 Fire Year

Climate change continues to play an oversized role in the extreme fire weather that we are experiencing across the nation. Drier and hotter weather results in low fuel moisture that frequently leads to extreme conditions that produce larger and more intense wildfires. In recent years, nearly every western state has experienced prolonged periods of high to extreme fire

danger over substantial areas affecting hundreds of millions of acres of land. Many of these areas are in the wildland urban interface where communities in the West are increasingly exposed to wildfire.

In 2022, 68,988 wildfires burned more than 7.5 million acres nationally. The reported number of wildfires nationwide was noticeably higher than the 10-year average of 61,285, and the number of acres burned was slightly more than the 10-year average of 7.4 million acres. A total of 2,717 structures were reported destroyed by wildfires in 2022, and sadly, 25 members of the wildland firefighting community lost their lives in wildfire incidents or wildland fire management related activities across the country.

What we observed in 2022 was a more gradual movement of wildfire that started in April in Alaska and the Southwest and progressed to the Pacific Northwest and Northern Rockies in August and September, as is the more typical pattern. Additionally, significant wildfires in California occurred in succession rather than concurrently. This allowed the National Multi-Agency Coordinating Group, tasked with national-level strategic coordination, to position and concentrate wildland firefighting resources throughout the year in those geographic areas that needed them the most.

2023 Fire Year Outlook

While drought conditions across much of the western U.S. have greatly improved since last year, drought did intensify slightly in portions of central Oregon. Drought also expanded, intensified, or continues in much of Texas, central Florida, western Oklahoma, southern and western Kansas, and in portions of Nebraska. Drought can lead to increased and more intense fire activity if weather and fuels factors align with human and natural wildfire ignitions.

Above normal wildfire potential is expected in far west Texas in May before returning to normal in June. Above normal potential is also forecast across portions of the Upper Midwest and western Great Lakes in June, with above normal potential across portions of northern Nevada, southwest Idaho, eastern Oregon, and central Washington in July and August. Normal or below normal significant fire potential is expected across the rest of the country, throughout May, June, July, and August. This does not mean that there will be no large wildfires, but rather that wildfire potential will be typical for each geographic region.

The “fire season” has become extended in many parts of the country, and what was once limited to certain months of the year now encompasses an entire “fire year.” While each fire year is different due to varied weather and fuel moisture factors, currently, the outlook for 2023 points to less fire activity from April through July compared to the above normal activity encountered over the same months last year. Managing a year-long season is increasingly challenging to Interior and the entire wildland fire management community.

The NMAC establishes Preparedness Levels throughout the calendar year to ensure suppression resource availability for emerging incidents across the country. The five Preparedness Levels range from the lowest (1) to the highest (5). Currently, the nation is at Preparedness Level (PL) 2, which is characterized by large wildfires occurring in several geographic areas—Eastern, Southern, Southwest, and Northern Rockies Areas—but no shortage in the availability of

resources. At this time, we are supporting our firefighting partners in Canada as that nation is at PL5 with large wildfire activity occurring in British Columbia and Alberta. Through an existing bilateral arrangement, DOI has mobilized approximately 250 wildland fire personnel to Canada where they will support ongoing wildfire suppression efforts in the western half of the country.

Interior Wildland Firefighting Preparedness

As always, the success of our wildland fire management program is predicated on the unparalleled coordination with our interagency, Tribal, and state partners. These partnerships are vital to the Interior's success in carrying out its stewardship responsibilities, particularly fuels management work and essential restoration efforts; they are also integral to the interoperable approach that is the hallmark of the nation's response to wildfires.

Currently, Interior is in a ready-state and all preparations are in place for the fire year, though as is typical some wildland fire management hiring will continue into June, due to the seasonal nature of hiring, training, and preparedness. This year, Interior plans to have 5,800 federal and 500 Tribal wildland firefighting and support personnel available for response efforts. This includes 162 smokejumpers, 20 interagency hotshot crews, and four Tribal hotshot crews. In combination with our partners in the Department of Agriculture Forest Service (USFS), approximately 17,000 Federal and Tribal wildland fire personnel will be ready for fire suppression activities in 2023. Additionally, we have a surge capacity of up to 32,000 personnel, which includes Administratively Determined emergency hires and other non-wildland fire management DOI and USFS employees who maintain wildland fire qualifications.

Interior will have over 870 pieces of specialized equipment available for wildfire suppression, including engines, water tenders, dozers, and other equipment. Aviation assets play a critical role in efforts to manage wildfires, including single engine air tankers, water scoopers, Type 1, 2, and 3 helicopters, and other contracted aviation resources. These assets complement other Federal, Tribal, state, and local resources, as well as those specifically made available by rural fire districts. Together, these assets form the foundation of an interoperable, collaborative approach to joint wildland firefighting.

Challenges Facing Wildland Fire Management

Interior faces unique wildland fire management challenges. Most Interior-managed public lands are comprised of non-forested shrub and grass ecosystems. Over the past two decades, 54 percent of wildfire acres burned in the continental U.S. occurred on shrublands and grasslands. On Interior-managed lands, more than 70 percent of wildfire acres occurred on non-forested vegetation types. More than 7 million acres of land administered by Interior are identified as having a very high or high likelihood of exposure to wildfire, according to the USFS wildfire hazard potential data.

Nevertheless, Interior manages large tracts of forest lands, particularly in western Oregon and some other western states. Many of these lands are of cultural importance to Tribes, so it is important that we address wildfire risk in these areas to benefit and support Tribal communities. Some of these forested lands include the iconic giant sequoias—which wildfires devastated in 2020 and 2021, killing more than 10 percent of giant sequoias larger than four feet in diameter on lands managed by the National Park Service and the Tule River Tribe.

Invasive plants, which can make landscapes more flammable, are present in many of these ecosystems. Cycles of invasion are intensifying wildfire occurrence and result in increasing invasive plants that are impacting vast areas of the western U.S. Because of the fire and invasives cycle, many western ecosystems are experiencing too much wildfire compared to historical fire regimes. Suppressing wildfires in these ecosystems is costly, and these fast-moving fires put communities, people, and wildland firefighters at risk. Interior is working to conserve ecosystems that are currently not impacted by invasive plants while restoring ecological balance in ecosystems where invasive plants are changing the landscape and increasing wildfire risk.

Fuels Management & Post Wildfire Recovery

BIL funding totaling \$878 million over five years along with base Fuels Management program funding has supported Interior's efforts to address wildfire risk across the nation in high priority areas. Interior is focused on managing landscapes to reduce wildfire risk, improve wildfire resiliency, and promote fire-adapted communities. Overall, Interior achieved a total of 1.9 million acres of priority wildfire risk reduction treatments in 2022, an increase of approximately 20 percent from 2021. Our treatment goal for this year is a combined 2 million acres of treatments.

By increasing fuels treatments, Interior is working to mitigate its wildfire management challenges and advance wildfire resiliency, improve firefighter and public safety, protect communities, and boost local economies. To address these challenges, Interior conducts a wide variety of fuels management projects, including mechanical, chemical, biological, and prescribed fire treatments. Fuels treatment options can often be limited in desert and rangeland landscapes where invasive plants are contributing to an increasing threat and more frequent wildfire.

BIL funding is also supporting Interior's advancement of cross-boundary collaboration with the USFS, Tribes, states, and private landowners. Interior is funding work that reduces wildfire risk on non-Federal lands while also restoring habitats by providing \$23.7 million to support fuels treatments through the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Partners for Fish and Wildlife and Coastal programs. This funding will enable 24 fuels management projects in 13 states, including Arizona, California, Florida, Idaho, Maine, Mississippi, Nebraska, New Mexico, Oregon, Texas, Utah, Washington, and Wyoming. Additionally, Interior is expanding support for Reserved Treaty Rights Lands (RTRL) projects. By treaty, Tribes retain ancestral rights for religious and cultural hunting, fishing, and gathering activities on these lands although they are commonly managed by Federal agencies. Through the RTRL program, Interior is providing additional BIL funding to conduct fuels management on these lands in support of Tribal cultural activities.

Interior is also using BIL investments to expand post-fire restoration activities in high priority areas working with partners across boundaries. This involves investing in critical infrastructure, post-fire monitoring and evaluation, and storing plant materials essential to restore native vegetation. Interior is also increasing post-fire debris flow emergency assessments. In 2022, Interior completed more than 360,000 acres of post-fire emergency stabilization and priority burned area rehabilitation actions using BIL funding, disaster relief funding, and regular appropriations. This includes more than 75,000 acres of emergency stabilization and 285,000

acres of burned area rehabilitation, including more than 169,000 acres to control invasive species and accelerate the recovery of forests and rangelands after a wildfire.

Wildland Firefighter Workforce Reforms

Longer, more intense fire years, and the need to actively manage and reduce fuels across a vast, more flammable landscape, have increased pressure on the wildland fire workforce. In the past, Interior has relied more heavily on a temporary workforce. Currently, wildland fire suppression and fuels management work require significantly more permanent employees to address the year-round nature of wildfire and the on-going need to increase the pace and scale of fuels treatments. This increasingly complex wildland fire environment requires a professional workforce that is positioned to meet these needs year-round.

The demands on the wildland fire workforce continue to grow as the complexity and need for more active management increases. Many wildland firefighters are currently challenged to take time off for family events and other life occurrences because the current workforce lacks enough qualified individuals to fill behind them. Concurrently, federal and Tribal wildland fire wages have not kept pace with some industry competitors, such as California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection or CAL FIRE. In many communities, entry to mid-level fire position wages at the federal, Tribal, and state levels are not competitive with private-sector opportunities. Housing costs have also risen rapidly across the West; in certain geographic areas many wildland fire personnel may find it difficult to afford rent or home purchases on their current wages. These issues are compounding wildland fire workforce challenges, including the ability to recruit new employees and retain qualified wildland fire personnel.

It is widely recognized in the wildland fire community and elsewhere that a new model is needed to provide employees with career stability and upward mobility, support a better work-life balance, and promote long-term wildland fire or resource management careers.

In FY 2021, the Administration implemented temporary pay supplements to ensure that no wildland firefighter makes less than \$15 per hour. With the passage of BIL in 2022, Interior and the USFS implemented temporary special pay supplements for federal wildland firefighters. These payments have had a significant positive impact on firefighters' morale and their abilities to achieve a reasonable wage for the arduous work that they perform. To continue to advance wildland firefighter pay reforms, and improve recruitment and retention rates, the President's FY 2024 Budget request includes an increase of \$72 million to raise the base pay of DOI and Tribal wildland firefighters. To implement the pay reform, the Administration transmitted legislation to Congress that:

- Establishes a special base rate salary table for all Federal wildland firefighters that will permanently increase their pay.
- Creates a new premium pay category that provides all incident responders with additional compensation for all hours they are mobilized on an incident.
- Proposes a new annual pay cap with additional authority for a Secretarial waiver if specific criteria are met in any given year.
- Allows periods of paid rest and recuperation leave following the completion of service during certain wildland fire activities.

The budget also includes funding to hire an additional 370 federal and 55 Tribal wildland firefighting personnel, which builds on a \$29 million increase that Interior received in FY 2021 to support Interior's Workforce Transformation Initiative. Since then, Interior has added more than 250 permanent wildland fire positions and continues to increase its firefighting workforce. Without the additional funding for firefighter pay that is requested in FY 2024 and the accompanying legislative proposals, we are facing a firefighter pay cliff as the BIL supplemental pay funding is estimated to run out at the end of this FY. We look forward to working with Congress on these proposals.

Additionally, the President's FY 2024 Budget requests an increase of \$22 million in the Facilities program to provide housing for wildland fire personnel. This increase will go to repair, renovate, and construct new housing for wildland fire personnel as they continue to encounter limited or unaffordable housing options in certain geographic locations.

Wildland Firefighter Mental Health and Wellbeing

Research indicates that firefighters are at an elevated risk for negative mental health impacts due to their work environment and the increased, year-round wildfire management and risk-reduction needs. Interior is committed to supporting our wildland firefighters, who work in arduous, stressful environments.

Using BIL funding, Interior and the USFS have initiated work to establish a program to address mental health needs, including post-traumatic stress disorder care, for permanent, temporary, seasonal, and year-round wildland firefighters. By streamlining and expanding existing mental health programs, Interior is working to better support firefighter resilience, improve mental preparedness, and address the effects from cumulative stress. This initiative will create a bridge between existing programs, consider additional prevention and training program needs, enhance Critical Incident Stress Management capacity, and further develop early intervention trauma support services.

In April, Interior and the USFS held a wildland firefighter mental health and wellbeing summit in Boise, Idaho. Currently, both agencies are assessing the needs and recommendations that were discussed at the summit to develop a mental health and wellbeing program framework. Work will continue with stakeholders, mental health professionals, and a variety of partners to further expand our mental health program and build an environment that focuses on wildland fire professionals' wellbeing.

The President's FY 2024 Budget request also includes an increase of \$10 million each for Interior and the USFS to establish a Joint Wildland Firefighter Behavioral Health Program. The program will further support firefighters by establishing year-round prevention and mental health support training, providing post-traumatic stress care, enhancing capacity for acute response, and creating a system of trauma support services with an emphasis on early intervention.

Conclusion

Thank you for this opportunity to share Interior's latest wildland fire management efforts with the Subcommittee. Wildland fire management is changing rapidly as a result of climate change,

increased fire activity, and vast landscape transformations. Interior continues to adapt to this changing environment. We appreciate the Congress' continued support and look forward to working with you as we address these critical program and workforce issues.

This concludes my statement. I welcome any questions you may have.