

STATEMENT

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Before the
House Committee on Natural Resources
Concerning

HR 5541 – Federal Land Assistance, Management and Enhancement Act (FLAME ACT)
April 10, 2008

In late March 2008, the five living former Chiefs of the Forest Service wrote the Committee to express our unanimous support for HR 5541 (the Federal Land Assistance, Management and Enhancement Act or FLAME ACT). I am here to reiterate that support. That letter is included as part of my testimony.

Anything I say today - beyond what is expressed in that letter - is my opinion. I.e., I do not presume to speak for the other former Chiefs.

It was not until our letter was sent to the Committee that we became aware of a similar ongoing effort in the Agriculture Committee. In reading the two bills, I see much similarity in terms of purpose, intent, and approach. In the technical sense, it seems to me that collaboration is feasible to address the critical problem of the funding of fire suppression activities in a manner that has sorely eroded abilities of the Forest Service to carry out its Multiple Use mission.

The current means of funding fire suppression has resulted in significant and accumulating diminution of the overall effectiveness of the Forest Service is ill-advised - and even tragic in its results. The passage of FLAME, with consistent full funding, can help restore the Forest Service to a more effective agency – though that will take some time.

Forest Service personnel are, by and large, capable professionals dedicated to achieving the missions to which they are assigned by law as efficiently as possible. However, striving, year after year, to “do more with less” has now stretched the agency beyond rational limits. Clarity of the mission has become more and more cloudy. Ongoing cuts to agency programs, inadvertent or not, resulting from current methods of funding surging costs of fire suppression are increasingly crippling recreation, wildlife and fish, watershed, capital improvement, and maintenance programs. In addition, the growing coast of fire suppression has adversely affected funding of important State and Private programs and Research. This situation will continue to worsen unless and until the current, and increasingly irrational, approach to funding fire suppression activities is forcefully addressed.

The Forest Service Fire organization has aggressively responded to the pressures of growing costs within an essentially level funded budget by implementing cost containment measures and management controls. But, while commendable, such is not enough to address emerging problems. Some \$200 million was “saved” in the last year using such approaches.

Declining funding combined with shifting priorities from other programs to fire suppression has eaten away at the agency’s abilities to carrying out other assigned missions. The Forest Service has struggled to respond to dwindling budgets for multiple-use activities. Now, whatever slack that may have existed is out of the system. A cascade of ever more drastic management actions has ensued - including ongoing combinations of administrative units, reductions in personnel, massive reassignments of personnel, closing offices, and so on aimed at squeezing out every ounce of efficiency. At some point, such efforts become counter productive in terms of efficiency, effectiveness, and impacts on personnel leading to losses of experienced employees, and depressed morale.

The Forest Service, justifiably, prides itself on being a science-based organization. The agency has, for over a century, been in the forefront of research efforts and in the synthesis of information emanating from science applied to the support of natural resources management around the world. In addition, the agency’s efforts to extend such knowledge and experience to the world’s natural resources professionals is ever more important as the specter of global warming seems ever more real. Assistance to State and private efforts in the overall management of our nation’s forests continues to pay significant dividends. In addition to the declining management efforts on the national forests, these other programs have steadily declined in recent years with much of that erosion resulting from increasing diversion of funds to wildfire suppression which now approaches 50% of the agency’s budget.

This situation is steadily exacerbated by the construction of more and more homes in the wildland-urban interface. Locations adjacent to National Forests are deemed especially desirable for home building. Whether by accident or intent, the federal government (especially the Forest Service) is becoming the fire department for those who build homes in the interface adjacent to the National Forests and outside of State and/or local organized fire districts and adjacent to the national forests. That seems likely to continue unless zoning regulations are instituted – a course of action outside the purview of the Forest Service. Current policy relative to fire suppression in the federal land/private land interface is for incident commanders to give priority to human safety followed by protection of structures, and, then, to federal forests and rangelands. Costs of protecting those who build in such circumstances can be expected to steadily increase as building of homes and associated infrastructure in the interface continues.

Wildfire seasons are increasing in length, fuel loads are building, mortality of trees due to insect outbreaks are increasing in some areas, and more frequent wildfires are burning with increased intensity. Active forest management has been and is being steadily reduced and what does occur is more and more concentrated in the wildland/urban forest interface.

The current budgeting process puts the Forest Service into an increasingly irrational and untenable position. The season for wildfire suppression can now run well past the end of the fiscal year (September 30th) – and that is apt to get worse. As a result, the current budgeting process not only shifts money from other programs during significant fire years but dramatically effects year-long budget management for all programs. I.e., all Forest Service programs exist at the mercy of increasing severe, but still unpredictable, wildfire.

Without significant alteration in the existing situation, costs of wildfire suppression seems likely to inexorably increase - year by year, decade by decade, while depleting the discretionary budget of the Forest Service earlier and earlier in the fiscal year. The FLAME ACT has the potential to provide some sorely needed relief and is a good start at addressing the problem. But, those corrections will occur only if FLAME is fully funded and if it is coupled with adequate budget to carry out the Agency's entire mission as set forth in law(s).

It seems to me that there is a logical split between ordinary fire suppression activities that are somewhat predictable given today's decision support tools and technology and large-scale fire events that rise to the level of emergencies. FLAME, and the similar bill offered by the Committee on Agriculture, appears to create a sensible break between these two types of suppression efforts and hold the Departments of Agriculture and Interior accountable by calling for Secretarial declarations based on spelled out criteria and for reports on the use of funds.

I am pleased that this discussion is underway and in a bipartisan manner. The FLAME Act focuses well on the central issue of suppression funding and the bill put forward by the Agriculture Committee has some interesting elements related to incentives for cost containment and encouragement of producing "Fire-Ready Communities." I strongly encourage the two Committees to work together to merge the best aspects of both bills. Superficially, that does not appear difficult.

To reiterate, over the past several years, the Forest Service's capabilities to carry out all aspects of its assigned missions has been steadily eroded largely, though not entirely, by current methods of funding fire suppression activities. Enactment of the FLAME Act or, perhaps, even an improved version that might result from some melding of ideas from the Act proposed by the Agriculture Committee, would significantly help in correcting the ongoing worsening problems with funding of Forest Service activities.

Therefore, I hope that you will seriously consider the attached letter from the five living former Chiefs of the Forest Service expressing unanimous support for HR 5541 (FLAME ACT).