

Committee on Resources

Subcommittee on Forests & Forest Health

Statement

**STATEMENT OF
MS. ELEANOR S. TOWNS
REGIONAL FORESTER
SOUTHWESTERN REGION
FOREST SERVICE
UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE
FIELD OVERSIGHT HEARING
Albuquerque, New Mexico
Concerning
PREVENTING WILDFIRES THROUGH PROPER MANAGEMENT
OF NATIONAL FORESTS
Before the
SUBCOMMITTEE ON FORESTS AND FOREST HEALTH
COMMITTEE ON RESOURCES
UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
AUGUST 14, 2000**

Madam Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee:

Thank you for the opportunity to be here today to discuss recent fires and actions we are taking to reduce hazardous forest fuels conditions. I am Eleanor Towns, Regional Forester for the Southwestern Region of the Forest Service. With me today is Forest Supervisors Leonard Atencio, Santa Fe National Forest, and Jose Martinez, Lincoln National Forest. Our worst fires in New Mexico this year were on these two national forests.

Today I would like to discuss: the current fire situation, the current condition of our forests, our strategies for dealing with these conditions, and finally, some important partnerships we have formed to implement these strategies.

The Fire Situation

As you know, we have already experienced many major wildland fires across the nation this fire season. The catastrophic Cerro Grande Fire near Los Alamos, New Mexico filled the news and made headlines for several weeks. Florida, Colorado, Arizona, Idaho, California, Nevada, and Utah have also experienced large fires this year. Nearly 23,000 firefighters, including the 1st Expeditionary Marine Force from Camp

Pendleton, California and the 3rd Battalion, 16th Field Artillery from Fort Hood, Texas, as well as firefighters from Canada, Mexico, and Australia continue to battle blazes throughout the nation.

The wildfire situation in New Mexico and Arizona peaked in mid June and has since moderated due to the onset of the wet season. We expected an explosive fire season this year so we started our fire season with a strong fire prevention campaign by drawing upon the support of our interagency partners and local fire departments and communities. We further strengthened those efforts by mobilizing a National Fire Prevention Team. In addition we placed varying degrees of fire restrictions and closure orders on many of the forests in the Region. This helped to keep the number of person-caused fires to a minimum and as the pre-monsoonal weather patterns advanced, lightning replaced human causes, as the primary source of ignition.

While we have had a great deal of success with our fire prevention efforts in New Mexico, other parts of the West are still facing extremely dry and explosive conditions. For example, on July 31st, 377 new fires were reported. As of August 8th this year, we have had 64,000 fires that have burned over four million acres. This is almost double the ten year average for acres burned, while suppression costs are expected to be more than double the ten year average of \$292 million per year.

Fighting fires is an expensive and exhausting operation that receives a lot of attention, however, putting a fire out is only half the job. Over \$15 million was spent fighting the Cerro Grande fire, but after the firefighters have gone, we estimate it will cost over \$27 million to do the required rehabilitation work to reduce the risk of serious erosion and flooding. Up to \$15 million of this will be spent rehabilitating national forest system lands. The Cerro Grande Fire Assistance Act, part of P.L. 106-246, provided emergency funds to compensate victims of the fire as well as funding for federal agencies.

Current Forest Conditions

Decades of effective fire suppression have put many forests at higher risk from damaging wildfires. Large numbers of small diameter trees have grown into forest stands during the last century because of aggressive fire suppression and other management practices. These fuels, growing under larger trees, have created fuel ladders that allow fires to climb into the overstory and race through the tree crowns, defying control efforts.

This buildup of hazardous fuels in the national forests poses a significant threat to public safety and ecosystem health. We estimate that 56 million acres of national forest system lands are at moderate to high risk. Over 19 million of those acres lie within New Mexico and Arizona.

Current Fire Management Strategies

Federal agencies with wildland firefighting responsibilities are aware of the growing risk of catastrophic wildfires. The Forest Service has been steadily increasing its program to treat hazardous fuels and reduce these risks for the last decade. We use a variety of tools and techniques to treat hazardous fuels, including mechanical treatment and removal, prescribed burning, or a combination of the two.

In 1994, the Forest Service treated hazardous fuels on approximately 385,000 acres across the nation. Today, we have successfully increased annual treatment almost four-fold. Last year we treated approximately 1.4 million acres. In the Southwest, we have increased annual treatment of hazardous fuels about three-and-a-half times, from about 38,000 acres in 1994 to over 122,000 acres last year.

The Timber Program has historically been focused in areas with merchantable timber to assist in mitigating hazardous fuels buildups, especially in high-risk areas such as the wildland/urban interface. The Timber Program is not very useful because these areas tend to be dominated by non-commercial materials for which commercial timber contracts are infeasible. At the request of the New Mexico delegation, we recently provided information outlining our approach for reducing fire risks by treating small-diameter trees and non-merchantable hazardous fuels in the wildland/urban interface. I would like to submit for the record, Chief Dombeck's May 23, 2000 letter to the New Mexico delegation that outlines our approach.

In June 2000, we identified over 16,000 acres of national forest wildland/urban interface acres in New Mexico where the environmental analysis and public involvement work is complete and the projects are ready to be implemented at an estimated cost of about \$3.5 million. By December 31, 2000, we expect to have the environmental work completed on an additional 57,000 acres in New Mexico. We expect it take over \$19 million to do the work on these acres. A similar situation exists on national forests in Arizona where almost 50,000 acres are now ready to treat, at a cost of about \$7.5 million, while another 36,000 acres estimated to cost over \$8 million will be ready to treat by December 31, 2000.

Using Partnerships and New Tools in the Wildland Urban Interface

The threat wildland fires pose to our communities and businesses is real and continues to grow, especially in the West where more and more people are building homes and businesses in fire-sensitive ecosystems. For example, in a 1997 study in the Southwestern Region, we identified over 210,000 acres of national forest in New Mexico and nearly 385,000 acres in Arizona in need of treatment to reduce fuels in the wildland/urban interface.

Intermixing homes and forests can create dangerous situations and result in evacuations, damage and great loss of property, as happened this year in New Mexico. It is crucial that we continue to work with the states, communities, and other partners to reduce risks in the wildland/urban interface.

Firefighter safety and protecting the public and their property are the top priorities for Federal firefighting agencies. This is a huge undertaking and we know we cannot do the job alone. In 1985, in response to this growing risk we began working with the National Association of State Foresters, the National Fire Protection Association, and local firefighting organizations to educate homeowners in fire-sensitive ecosystems about the consequences of wildfires. We developed techniques in community planning, homebuilding, and landscaping so they can protect themselves and their property. Working with Federal, State, and private partners, the Forest Service has reached out to hundreds of communities adjacent to the national forests, including communities in Utah, Arizona, California, New Mexico, Colorado, Idaho, and other states across the nation.

An excellent example of this program is the Four-Corners Sustainable Forests Partnership, which is funded through the Forest Service Economic Action Program. Among this partnership's goals are ones to restore forest ecosystems that are at risk of catastrophic fire and to develop markets for manufacturing value-added wood products using small diameter trees.

Also New Mexico and Arizona have submitted Unified Proposals that call for strategic plans for reducing wildfire in the Southwestern Region. New Mexico has asked for \$2 million for a one year program covering 70,000 acres and is working on a long term program proposal for 3.4 million acres.

Through these partnerships, the Federal agencies and the National Fire Protection Association also

developed the concepts and practices of FIREWISE landscaping. Using appropriated funds, the Federal partners offer education, information, and sometimes even fire resistant vegetation to help communities in the wildland urban interface be prepared for the inevitable fire outbreaks that occur in these ecosystems. We are also working with the Insurance Standards Office, the body that sets standards and premiums for property and homeowners insurance, on the significant protection offered by FIREWISE concepts. We believe that these techniques will reduce insurance premiums and protect lives and property, as well. The Federal agencies are also leading workshops across the nation for developers, bankers, and insurance agents to ensure that future developments in fire-sensitive ecosystems will be planned and constructed to better withstand the inevitable outbreaks of wildfire.

Recent research on the Los Alamos fire by Jack Cohen, a Forest Service researcher from the Rocky Mountain Research Station, illustrates the importance of dealing with fuels in and around structures as well as the broader wildland/urban interface. His assessment indicated that for maximum efficiency and effectiveness, fire treatment activities should start with the private lands near structures and is most beneficial when conducted in conjunction with treatments on adjoining Federal and private lands. Proper building construction and vegetation management in a 200 foot area surrounding structures is the most effective method of preventing fire damage to homes.

His observations support important principles of defensible space. For example, homes are often damaged when fire spreads from structure to structure, not from the forest canopy. Also, homes with high ignitability factors such as heavy pine needle accumulations on their rooftops and in their yards as well as firewood piled next to their house often are at very high risk of complete destruction, while surrounding vegetation is often only moderately scorched or unburned. This highlights the need to have coordinated efforts in dealing with wildland/urban interface fire risk issues.

Also as part of the State Fire Assistance Program, the Wildland/Urban Interface Cooperative Fire Protection Component funds competitive grants to State and local entities to implement community fire risk reduction activities. This component supports coordination with States and localities to reduce long-term wildfire costs through prevention by hazardous fuels reductions and fire planning for the wildland/urban interface. The States have agreed to spend nearly \$10 million as matching funds for the \$10 million (above the fiscal year 1999 level) included in the President's fiscal year 2001 budget of \$30 million to implement special projects to improve protection of high risk wildland/urban interface areas. However, House and Senate action on H.R. 4578 has effectively reduced this amount to less than \$5 million available for vegetation modification and FIREWISE homeowner programs.

In addition to the FIREWISE effort and the Wildland/Urban Interface Cooperative Fire Protection Program, the Federal government supports State fire management programs through assistance to volunteer fire departments. This year New Mexico and Arizona received \$84,000 for this very popular and extremely valuable program.

Summary

The threat of wildland fires to our communities and businesses is real and continues to grow as we build homes and businesses in fire-adapted ecosystems. Fires occurring within the wildland/urban interface are inevitable, and when fires break out, our first priority is for the safety of the public and our firefighters. Although the property losses associated with catastrophic fires such as the recent Cerro Grande fire are staggering, we were successful in protecting the lives of both the public and our firefighters. This is a tribute to the excellent training of our firefighting workforce and our attention to safety.

The Forest Service is committed to avoiding future catastrophic fires like those in Los Alamos and to implementing a cohesive strategy to restore and maintain healthy ecosystems on National Forest System lands. That means reducing hazardous fuels that have built up over the better part of a century as a result of fire suppression and past land management practices, while ensuring cautious and consistent protocols in any use of prescribed fire.

We will continue to provide the national leadership and to work with our Federal, State, and local firefighting cooperators, and Congress to ensure that the Federal firefighting agencies have the resources we need to educate home and landowners about fire risks, fire risk reduction strategies, and to protect the public, property, and resources when fires occur.

As Chief Dombeck wrote in his May 23, 2000 letter to the New Mexico delegation, it is also essential to recognize that hazardous fuels buildups in the West occurred over many decades. Restoring the health and resiliency of these ecosystems while protecting nearby communities from the effects of fire in ecosystems that have unnatural fuels buildups will take many years. That reality, however, is no excuse for inaction. Our strategic approach is designed to treat areas that pose the highest risk to people, property, and natural resources, and to do so in the most expeditious manner possible. This will require partnerships, resources, and common sense approaches that avoid needless controversy.

This concludes my statement. I would be happy to answer any questions you or the members of your subcommittee might have.

#