

# Committee on Resources

## Subcommittee on Forests & Forest Health

---

### Statement

---

**STATEMENT OF KAREN WADE, REGIONAL DIRECTOR, INTERMOUNTAIN REGION,  
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE, DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR, BEFORE THE  
SUBCOMMITTEE ON FORESTS AND FOREST HEALTH OF THE HOUSE RESOURCES  
COMMITTEE, CONCERNING LESSONS LEARNED FROM RECENT FIRES AND ON ACTIONS  
NEEDED TO MITIGATE THE CURRENT HAZARDOUS FUEL SITUATION COMMON TO  
MOST PUBLIC FORESTS IN THE WEST.  
AUGUST 14, 2000**

Madam Chairman, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today to discuss both the lessons learned from the Cerro Grande Fire, and the National Park Service's program to reduce hazardous fuel situations on public lands in the western United States.

First, let me reiterate my deepest regrets to the people of Los Alamos and the Pueblos of Santa Clara and San Ildefonso for the personal pain and property losses caused by the Cerro Grande Fire. We will continue to do everything in our power to help the people of Los Alamos, other surrounding communities, and the Pueblos recover from their losses. At this time we are continuing to focus on rehabilitating the burned areas to help prevent any further threats to life and property from floods and landslides. In addition, we are ready to assist FEMA in processing the claims of all those who suffered property losses.

The National Park Service is committed to a thorough investigation of the circumstances leading to the escaped prescribed fire, and I assure you that we will learn from the mistakes we made. We are anxious to work with Congress and our interagency partners to strengthen efforts to protect towns and cities by reducing hazardous fuels and wildfire risk.

Let me summarize the steps that the Department and the National Park Service have taken to identify the problems that led to the Cerro Grande tragedy and to learn the lessons that will assist us in preventing these problems from recurring. On May 12, 2000, Secretaries Babbitt and Glickman suspended for 30 days all prescribed burning west of the 100<sup>th</sup> meridian. That suspension has been lifted for other Interior and Agriculture bureaus, but is still in effect for the National Park Service.

During this moratorium several reviews of our wildland fire fighting policies have been completed or will be completed by the end of this year. The National Park Service, as well as the Department, will be examining the results of these studies and incorporating them into our overall fire policies. Director Stanton has identified a three-phase process for reinstating the National Park Service prescribed fire program. During the next year, as we incorporate action items from the investigations and reviews into our policies, we will begin to gradually implement this process.

On May 11<sup>th</sup> Secretary Babbitt established an interagency investigation team to document the circumstances surrounding the planning and implementation of the prescribed fire that escaped. That report was issued on

May 18, 2000.

On May 18<sup>th</sup> a four person Independent Review Board was established by the Secretary to review the findings of the interagency investigation. This board concluded that the findings and recommendations made by the interagency team are logical and valid with the exception of the recommendation regarding the 3-5 day weather forecast. The Review Board stated that applying fire to the landscape is an essential tool for good resource management and at the same time is one of the most significant decisions resource managers make. To be successful it must be planned and implemented in an open, collaborative manner and approached with the seriousness this type of inherently dangerous situation deserves.

On May 26<sup>th</sup> the two Secretaries jointly reconvened the team that initially developed the Federal wildland fire policy in 1995. This team includes representatives from all the federal land management agencies and their mission is to look for ways to strengthen overall federal wildland fire policy. We expect this team to present its findings and any recommended policy changes to the Secretaries by the end of this year.

On July 27<sup>th</sup>, at a Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee hearing, the General Accounting Office (GAO) released the results of its review of the circumstances surrounding the Cerro Grande fire. We have reviewed the GAO report and the recommendations presented. In general, the Department agrees with the report and we will be looking at ways we can incorporate the findings into our revised wildland fire policies.

The Secretary also requested that the National Academy of Public Administration (NAPA) examine how the National Park Service implements its prescribed fire program, and make recommendations for improvement. The phase 1 report, which will present interim findings and conclusions, is due on November 30<sup>th</sup> of this year and the final report is due to the Secretary by September 30, 2001. This study will focus on:

- The process and procedures used to assess the risk presented by proposed prescribed fires;
- The decision-making processes, coordination processes, and information and other tools essential during the period covering initial planning, ignition, and management of a prescribed fire;
- The fire management and decision-making skills, knowledge, and related training needed for wildland fire implementation and management; and
- The personnel and budget resources needed to support effective wildland fire implementation and management.

We are confident that the end result of these reviews will give the National Park Service and all federal agencies improved methods for planning and implementing prescribed fires.

Two other projects are also underway. A Department of the Interior interagency team is working to complete a report that will identify strategies to reduce the risks and consequences of catastrophic wildfires on Department of the Interior lands and neighboring urban interface areas. Also, the National Park Service is working to complete an assessment of the ecosystem goals we will use in managing the wildland urban interface.

Hazardous fuels continue to present a wildfire threat to many communities as well as natural and cultural resources. The recent fire at Mesa Verde National Park shows how serious these threats are to priceless

cultural resources, historic structures, and public safety. This is also true of many wildland urban interface areas adjacent to national parks. We are committed to using all the tools at our disposal, including mechanical removal, to reduce hazardous fuels and to protect our visitors, neighbors, park developments, and America's irreplaceable natural and cultural resources.

Prescribed fire will remain a component of our program because wildland fire is more than just a tool for reducing fuels. It is an ecological process that we must restore if we are to achieve our mission for managing natural areas.

The National Park Service understands that there are some areas in which mechanical fuel treatments, either alone or followed by prescribed fire, are the best tool for reducing overcrowded forest conditions and hazardous fuel accumulations. This is especially true in urban interface parks.

However, studies and research have confirmed that in certain forested areas only the use of prescribed fire is sufficient to restore natural forest successional patterns and to reduce successfully hazardous fuels. In many natural areas, utilizing wildland fire including natural ignitions and carefully implemented prescribed fires can provide ecological benefits that are impossible to obtain through the use of mechanical treatment.

Once we have in place an improved decision-making process and, with our fire management partners, an improved interagency coordination process for prescribed fire, and have completed comprehensive risk assessments, we will be able to move forward to set systematically national priorities for protecting wildland urban interface areas, consistent with each agency's mission. We can work at restoring a more natural ecosystem process and ecological integrity across a large portion of our federal lands. We believe that a comprehensive, systematic approach to this problem will provide the most cost-effective use of funds, and ensure that our efforts are focused on the highest priority areas.

It took more than one hundred years to create the fuels problem in the west, largely due to aggressive fire suppression. The problem will not be solved in a few years. The federal agencies will have to focus their efforts for many years, perhaps decades, on restoring a more natural role for fire where feasible, and on creating and sustaining buffer zones around wildland urban areas with mechanical treatments where prescribed fire is infeasible. During this time it is imperative that all the federal land management agencies and states maintain a strong suppression capability.

We must face the likelihood that there will be many more catastrophic wildfires in the years ahead before we can significantly mitigate the fuels problem. An efficient level of firefighting resources including adequate levels of firefighting personnel, comprehensive prescribed burning, and mechanical fuels reduction programs will be essential components of managing fire on public lands in the years to come.

This concludes my statement. I will be happy to respond to any questions that you or any members of the subcommittee may have.

###