

**STATEMENT OF  
MARK REY  
UNDER SECRETARY FOR NATURAL RESOURCES AND ENVIRONMENT  
UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE  
BEFORE  
DOMESTIC POLICY SUBCOMMITTEE  
OVERSIGHT AND GOVERNMENT REFORM COMMITTEE**

**“WHAT THE OCTOBER WILDFIRES REVEAL ABOUT PREPAREDNESS IN  
SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA”**

**Fallbrook Public Utilities District  
MONDAY, DECEMBER 10, 2007  
9:00 A. M.**

Chairman Kucinich, Ranking Member, and Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today. This is my first opportunity to testify on behalf of the Administration on our response to those events. We are proud of our response and grateful for the opportunity to address our efforts.

The 2007 California fires directly affected nearly one million people and caused impacts to hundreds of thousands more. In addition, 271 fire starts resulted in 20 large fires which burned over 500,000 acres, destroyed 3,000 structures, and killed ten people. Each of these benchmarks has been surpassed only once in the history of California, during the fires of 2003. The 2007 California fires were truly an historic event, but we believe that investments and actions made by the Forest Service, state and local governments, non-governments, and private landowners combined with improvements in coordination with others resulted in lower loss of life and overall damage to property.

Since these two catastrophic natural disasters occurred within four years of each other, they provide two logical reference points to review size and scope of the events, compare the Federal, State and local response, and determine the effectiveness of investments made since 2003. Our analysis shows that Federal investments and organizational improvements in the aftermath of the 2003 fires contributed to better safety, better coordination, and less severe outcomes in the 2007 fires.

**BIG PICTURE: FIRE MANAGEMENT CHALLENGES FACED BY THE  
WILDLAND FIRE COMMUNITY**

Wildland fire and wildland firefighting are influenced by a complex myriad of factors. These factors include weather, fuel type, terrain, proximity to the wildland urban interface (WUI) and other highly valued landscapes, population density, multiple jurisdictions on the landscape, current weather conditions, and managerial decisions made before and during fire incidents. The Forest Service and other first responders have spent significant time and resources over the past several years to coordinate response actions, improve inter-governmental communication, clarify roles and responsibilities, and other actions to ensure effective response in these complex environments.

The late October conditions in Southern California reflect three key components of fire activity that contribute to larger and, coupled with agency management responses, more expensive, fires—historic drought, build up of fuels on the ground, and the ever increasing reach of development into the wildland urban interface. More specifically, the National Weather Service documented rainfall during the 2006-2007 Southwest California rain season at only 21 percent of normal in downtown Los Angeles, officially the lowest since record keeping began in 1877. Exacerbating these conditions, hot, dry Santa Ana winds came across Southern California, downing power lines and setting off sparks that ignited the 2007 fires. During the first days of the fires, 70 mile per hour winds with gusts of over 100 miles per hour were reported, blowing embers over a mile, causing unsafe conditions for aviation resources, and limiting on-the-ground suppression tactics. Much of the forested land where weather conditions occurred was densely stocked with highly flammable chapparal understory. The growth and spread of chapparal in the area had been promoted by wet conditions two years ago; yet the subsequent drought ostensibly created a tinderbox of dried flammable wood. The large number of residences in the WUI of Southern California further complicated response to the fires. According to the 2005 Quadrennial Fire and Fuels Review by the Department of the Interior (DOI) and United States Department of Agriculture, sixty percent of new homes constructed in the United States in the 1990s were built in the WUI, a trend evident near the Southern California national forests. Conservative estimates by Forest Service researchers show that almost 200,000 new homes were built in the WUI between 2003 and 2007 within the seven Southern California counties.

### **HISTORY REPEATING?**

The 2003 fires demonstrated that the major fire behavior influences of wood, WUI, and weather could converge with catastrophic results. Over 10 days, 14 large fires burned over 730,000 acres, destroyed 5,000 structures, forced several hundred thousand evacuations, and caused 22 fatalities. In the aftermath of the fires, federal, state and local governmental representatives and elected officials came together to review the events and identify ways to improve coordination and response in the future. The Governor's Blue Ribbon Fire Commission documented their findings and presented recommendations to make California less vulnerable to similar catastrophic fire activity in the future.

The Blue Ribbon Fire Commission report was released in April 2004, and included 33 findings and 58 recommendations relating to Federal, State and local entities. The 19 recommendations pertaining to the Forest Service span a broad range of issues including aviation use, interagency cooperation, fire suppression and preparedness funding, improved community preparedness, and enhanced communication. Progress has been made on all 19 recommendations, resulting in enhanced cooperation and vital firefighting resources, training and intelligence. The Blue Ribbon Commission Stakeholders Ad Hoc Committee met twice in the fall of 2007 to update the status of the original recommendations and establish priorities to complete any outstanding recommendations.

Consistent with the Blue Ribbon Fire Commission recommendations, the Forest Service has invested considerable resources to mitigate the risks of catastrophic wildfires through vegetation treatments, partnership with communities, and education of homeowners.

Forest Service actions in partnership and cooperation with other Federal, state, and local entities after 2003 contributed to improved performance in the following areas during the 2007 Siege, including:

- Better advanced deployment
- Fewer homes and other structures destroyed
- Fewer fatalities
- No firefighter fatalities
- Fuel treatment areas where, “wildfire laid down”
- More efficient evacuations
- Responsive burned area emergency stabilization
- Effective initial attack on 251 of 271 fire starts

### **IMPROVEMENTS IN READINESS**

The Forest Service served two critical roles during the catastrophic fires in Southern California. The task of suppressing fires on and adjacent to National Forest System land was made safer and more successful by investments in hazardous fuels treatments since 2003. Coordination with other Federal, State, and local agencies to respond to fires on private, State and tribal lands was also improved due to implementation of recommendations from the Blue Ribbon Commission.

In the days before the 2007 fires, preparedness resources were prepositioned to respond to the threat identified by predictive services, and a severity request was granted to increase initial attack capability. Prepositioning efforts were coordinated with CAL FIRE to maximize capacity. Specifically, the Forest Service increased initial attack engine capability by 30 percent, implemented 24 hour staffing plans on several forests, assigned nine Incident Management Teams (4 Type 1 and 5 Type 2), doubled the number of available helitankers and helicopters, and increased the number of available airtankers from two to eight.

### **INVESTMENTS IN COMMUNITIES SINCE 2003: HAZARDOUS FUELS AND COMMUNITY PLANNING**

Under the President’s Healthy Forest Initiative and using the authorities provided through the Healthy Forest Restoration Act, the Forest Service and our partners have reduced the risk of catastrophic wildfires to communities and the environment. In 2006, the Administration treated many overstocked Federal forests. Hazardous fuels treatments resulted in qualitative improvements of at least 994,000 acres in fire regimes classes 1, 2, or 3 that moved to a better condition class.

To improve the focus of our fuels treatments, the Forest Service and its partners are using data products such as LANDFIRE to inform decision-making and identify areas across the nation at risk due to accumulation of wildland fuel; prioritize hazardous fuel reduction projects; and improve collaboration between agencies with regard to fire and

other natural resource management. Regional modeling of potential fire behavior and effects allow resource managers to strategically plan projects for hazardous fuel reduction and restoration of ecosystem integrity on fire-adapted landscapes.

Let's look in more detail at fuels treatments that affected the 2007 fires. Between 2003 and 2007, the Forest Service, Department of the Interior and Natural Resources Conservation Service jointly spent \$300 million on roughly 275,000 acres of fuel reduction in Southern California, including about \$17 million worth of treatments on 16,000 acres where fuels was a secondary benefit of some other management action. Moreover, 75,000 acres have been treated on high priority State and privately owned lands as a result of grants from the Forest Service, DOI and NRCS. These fuel treatments are designed to decrease fire severity, provide evacuation routes, improve effectiveness and expand tactical firefighting options, and ultimately make communities safer.

The 2007 fires demonstrated the success of recent federal investments in hazardous fuels treatments. Over 40,000 acres of fuel treatment were accomplished on the San Bernardino NF between October 2003 and October 2007. These treatments significantly reduced potential consequences from the fires of October 2007 by:

- providing safe ingress for firefighters and enabling safe evacuation of the public
- slowing fire spread allowing firefighters to contain fire edges more readily
- significantly reducing potential damage to utilities and other infrastructure
- reducing potential ember shower intensity and spotting distance which decreased the number of houses impacted by firebrands
- reducing fire intensity allowing firefighters to more closely engage the fire and protect structures

Specifically, the Forest Service Tunnel 2 fuel treatment covered almost 250 acres along a ridge southwest of the Grass Valley Fire origin. The fire moved into this treatment area at high intensity but fell to mostly a surface fire within the treated area. Although most of the Tunnel 2 treatment area burned, the reduced intensity within it enabled firefighters to contain the fire along roads at its southern perimeter, saving 8,000-10,000 homes in the nearby Crestline area. Materials describing success stories like this one are included with this testimony for the record (Enclosures 1-3).

Through our State and Volunteer Fire Assistance programs, the Forest Service has provided significant support to California communities to build wildland firefighting capacity. From 2003 to 2007, community grants have totaled over \$8.5 million for equipment, \$3.2 million for Preparedness activities, \$1.8 million for training, and \$1.7 million for suppression operations and support.

State Fire Assistance funds also go to communities for hazardous fuels planning as well as direct, on-the-ground fuels reduction projects. California has identified 1,264 communities-at-risk from wildfire, and 99 percent of these have completed Community Wildfire Protection Plans (CWPPs), or the equivalent. The CWPPs are administered by over 150 Fire Safe Councils in California. Since 2003, the Forest Service has supported

these Fire Safe Councils in creating and implementing Community Wildfire Protection Plans with \$31 million in grants.

The Fire Safe Council formed near the Cleveland National Forest after the 2003 fires illustrates a variety of ways communities can access funds. Assisted by State Fire Assistance grants, the Council developed the Palomar Mountain Community Wildfire Protection Plan, identified needed hazardous fuels treatments, and purchased fire gel for application by homeowners in the event of approaching fire. Some homeowners in the area credit the Forest Service support through State Fire Assistance grants and suppression efforts with saving their homes during the 2007 fires.

Efforts to stabilize lands burned during the 2007 fires were organized immediately with the goal of protecting life, property and critical natural and cultural resources. In addition, the Natural Resources Conservation Service is providing \$4.6 million to farmers and ranchers in Southern California through the Environmental Quality Incentives Program. Funds will be available at a 75 percent cost share to protect newly exposed soil from severe erosion and to install agriculture infrastructure necessary to maintain vegetative covers essential to protecting hillsides.

### **A LOOK AHEAD**

The President's Healthy Forest Initiative provides key tools to make communities safer from the threat of wildfire, and will serve as a framework for future fuels reduction activity in Southern California. In September 2006, the USDA Office of Inspector General, Southeast Region, audited Forest Service implementation of the Healthy Forests Initiative. The OIG audit report recommended that the Forest Service implement a consistent analytical process for assessing the level of risk that communities face from wildfire, strengthen its prioritization of projects, and improve performance measures and reporting standards in order to better communicate the outcome of treatments. The Forest Service concurred with the five recommendations of the report and developed an action response and estimated completion date for each. To date the Forest Service has:

- Developed a Hazardous Fuels Prioritization and Allocation Process - a national methodology to assess the risk and consequence of wildfire that prioritizes the allocation of hazardous fuels funds to the Regional level. This system will be continually refined with updated data sources.
- Completed work with the Department of the Interior and other partners in the Wildland Fire Leadership Council to update the 10-Year Implementation Plan which sets national performance measures.
- Completed accomplishment reporting in the FY 2007 Performance Accountability Report incorporating new outcome measures from the 10-Year Implementation Plan and report accomplishments by Region.
- All accomplishment and budget documents for FY 2008 and beyond will reflect new performance measures that demonstrate agency performance by focusing on risk reduction and restoration outcomes.

## CONCLUSION

The repositioning efforts, investments in hazardous fuels treatments and community capacity, and coordination between FEMA, CAL FIRE, the California Army National Guard, United State Marine Corps and tribal entities paid off during the 2007 fires. The 2007 fires had more fire starts than the 2003 fires (271 compared to 213) and more large fires that escaped initial attack (20 compared to 14). However, the resulting damage was much less in 2007. Even though the large fires burned one day longer in 2007, the fires resulted in only 65 percent as many acres burned, 60 percent as many structures destroyed, 60 percent as many firefighter injuries, and 40 percent as many civilian fatalities. Nearly 13,000 personnel responded to the 2007 fires, and there was not one firefighter fatality.

Many lessons were learned from the 2003 California fires. Between 2003 and 2007, coordination was improved between federal, state and local entities; millions of dollars were strategically invested in WUI hazardous fuels treatments; and countless hours were invested in development of Community Wildland Fire Plans. As a result, we were better prepared for the events of 2007 in Southern California to deploy resources strategically, successfully and most important, safely. In the midst of a monumental natural disaster, homes and lives were saved as a result of federal investments, improved coordination with local and State entities, and the efforts of the interagency firefighting community.