

**Remarks as Prepared for Delivery for the
Honorable Lynn Scarlett,
International Association of Fire Chiefs
Presentation at Annual Meeting
New Orleans, LA
*August 2004***

Good morning. I am delighted to be here amid this community of firefighters. The Nation's federal land managers have over 18,000 wildland firefighters. Our towns, cities, and rural communities have over 1 million firefighters. On behalf of Secretary of the Interior Gale Norton, I'd like to thank all this Nation's firefighters for their dedication and skill in protecting communities and resources across America.

The connections between our wildland firefighters and local firefighters have strengthened over the past several years. Changing conditions on the lands make this cooperation increasingly important.

The interface of wildlands and urban communities is growing dramatically, with some 8 million more homes located near public lands over the past decade. At the same time, over 190 million acres of public lands have high levels of vegetative fuels, with overly dense tree stands, underbrush, and diseased forests. In some places, we are seeing tree stand densities as much as twenty times greater than on this continent prior to European settlement. We are also experiencing prolonged drought in many areas, especially in the West.

Together, these features heighten the risk of catastrophic fires—unnatural fires that burn with such intensity that they virtually incinerate trees and pose significant risks to communities in the wildland-urban interface.

Our success in reducing the risks of catastrophic fires depends on building strong ties with America's local firefighters. The President's Healthy Forests Initiative and the National Fire Plan build upon a foundation of partnerships.

These partnerships are taking many forms. Nearby New Orleans, St. Tammany Parish is one of two parishes with the largest incidence of wildfire in the State of Louisiana. Our U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service provided Rural Fire Assistance grants to equip and train professional and volunteer firefighters in wildland firefighting techniques in St. Tammany Parish. Working together, the Fish and Wildlife Service and St. Tammany Parish Local Fire District #3 also have reduced underbrush and created defensible space adjacent to residences.

These efforts are making a tangible difference for the people of St. Tammany. As a result of this partnership, fire insurance ratings in the parish have dropped from a 5 to a 3—on a scale of 1 to 10. This reduction is saving homeowners and the community thousands of dollars in insurance premiums.

Other community partnerships are also achieving results. In Minnesota, at White Earth Reservation, a wildfire took off, moving at 10,000 feet per hour with 15 to 20-foot flame lengths. When the fire hit a fuels treatment area, it dropped to a speed of less than 1,000 feet per hour. As a result, fire crews were able to control it and protect numerous structures. Local fire departments were essential to the suppression effort. Two of these three responding fire departments had received Rural Fire Assistance grants.

The challenges presented by the wildland-urban interface demand our joint attention. The good news is that we are achieving notable successes.

With the President's Healthy Forests Initiative and the bipartisan Healthy Forest Restoration Act, signed by the President in December 2003, over the past four years federal agencies have reduced hazardous build up of vegetative fuels from nearly 11 million acres of public lands. This is an amount equivalent to what was accomplished over the previous eight years. We have also provided over \$300 million in grants to communities.

As firefighters, you are all acutely aware of the importance of training. We are working with local firefighters to train for wildland fire fighting—and have now trained thousands of local firefighters. In 2003, for example, we held two training sessions for the New York City Fire Department. Following the training, last August participants took part in Western wildland fire suppression.

Our Interagency Fire Training Group manages wildland fire training for municipal departments in California. And, under a memorandum of understanding with the International Association of Fire Chiefs, we've held three Local Area Leadership Workshops.

Above all, our efforts depend on building active and educated communities. Through the Firewise Communities Program, we have held over 30 workshops that have attracted thousands of people from over 2,000 communities.

As a result of these efforts—and through our partnerships with local firefighters—our agencies are succeeding in suppressing on initial attack over 98 percent of unwanted fires on public lands and reducing risks to communities. We could not succeed without the local firefighting community.

On August 10, federal agencies just released a report at a Wildland Fire Leadership Council meeting. The Council, comprising federal land management agencies and representatives from the Western Governors Association, the National Association of Counties, FEMA, the U.S. Geological Survey, and the Intertribal Timber Council reviewed this report, which summarizes our progress on implementing the President's Healthy Forests Initiative.

This year, 2004, has been our most successful year ever in accomplishing fuels treatment projects. We'd like to thank communities across the Nation—from Florida to Washington—for partnering with us to make our forests and rangelands healthier and to reduce the risks to communities and natural resources from catastrophic wildland fires.