

**Testimony of Vicki Christiansen
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**Before the House Appropriations Subcommittee on Interior, Environment and
Related Agencies
Hearing on Options for Wildfire Suppression Funding
April 1, 2009**

On behalf of the National Association of State Foresters, I thank Chairman Dicks and Ranking Member Simpson for the opportunity to appear before the Committee today. The National Association of State Foresters (NASF) represents the directors of the state forestry agencies of all fifty states, eight territories, and the District of Columbia. State Foresters manage and protect state and private forests across the US, which encompass two-thirds of the nation's forests, as well as support our federal partners in their efforts. In today's testimony, I will be discussing the impacts of wildfire suppression funding on the USDA Forest Service and the Department of the Interior (DOI).

The nation's forests are a strategic national resource that provides a host of important benefits to the American people: clean and abundant water, clean air, fish and wildlife habitat, recreational opportunities, carbon sequestration and storage, renewable energy, and forest products. Our forests today face significant challenges to ecosystem health, regardless of ownership: tree mortality is on the rise due to disease and invasive pests; wildfire continues to increase in size and intensity; ecosystems struggle to adapt to climate change disturbances; and forests are being permanently converted to non-forest uses at a rate of one million acres per year.

Successful prevention, mitigation and restoration response to these forest threats requires coordination at all levels, amongst all stakeholders, and across all landscapes. State forestry agency leaders are unique in their ability to build partnerships with many different stakeholders, including land management agencies, landowners, local governments, non-profits, tribal groups, conservation organizations and industry. The State and Private Forestry program of the U.S. Forest Service leverages the capacity of state forestry agencies and their partners to manage state and private lands and produce ecological, social and economic benefits for the American people. Managed forests mean jobs and vibrant communities. State forestry agencies provide leadership focused on building community capacity to sustainably manage their forest resource, promoting accountability and efficiency, addressing threats to our forests, and securing their role in the environmental and economic health of our nation. At the forefront of those threats looms the topic of today's hearing: emergency wildland fire.

The Wildland Fire Problem

Wildfire protection and management has become an increasingly expensive endeavor, and is expected to continue to grow. More people in fire-prone landscapes, larger and more frequent wildland fires, climate change, and unhealthy landscapes have created a wildland fire situation that overwhelms traditional fire management efforts, frustrates fire

management entities, and results in billions of dollars in suppression costs each year. It is a national problem with the potential to impact every area of the country and requires a national solution that includes all stakeholders. Addressing wildland fire is a much larger, much more complex land management and societal issue that cannot be solved by one agency or piece of legislation. Solving the skyrocketing costs of fire suppression is only one piece of the puzzle, but it is one that is in our reach, and that is the focus of my testimony today.

Fire suppression costs for the Forest Service and Interior have exceeded \$1 billion every year since 2000. In 2008, the Forest Service spent more than 50% of its budget on wildland fire suppression. This increase has placed sustainable forest management efforts at risk on both public and private lands when the agency has been forced to divert funds away from sustainable forest management, fire prevention, community assistance, and forest health programs focused achieving resilient landscapes and improving forest conditions. When adequately funded, these activities could actually serve to drive down the cost of fire suppression over time by improving the health of our forested landscapes and helping to protect people and property from devastating fires. The fact is that only one percent of the wildfires account for 95% of all burned acres, and consume 85% of suppression costs. These catastrophic emergency fires should be treated the same way as other natural disasters, and should not come off the Forest Service or Interior baseline at the expense of all other agency priorities and programs.

The structure, organization and funding mechanisms for wildland fire utilized by the Forest Service and the Department of Agriculture directly impact state forestry agencies and our ability to focus resources, target priority landscapes, and sustainably manage the nation's forests. In the current system, when the budgeted suppression dollars have been spent the agency 'borrows' funds from the very programs that received reduced funding for that same fiscal year. This 'borrowing' has tremendous impacts on the agency's relationship with their partners.

For example, in 2008, the Forest Service 'borrowed' \$1.7 million intended for important fuels work that the State of Washington and its partners were undertaking. This loss of funding had a direct impact on communities that had received notice of grant money to build community responsibility through mitigation, preparation and prevention activities. Although the money was eventually paid back via an emergency supplemental bill, a degree of credibility and commitment to our communities – in Washington and in every state – is lost. The long term impacts of this money being pulled away are still being felt.

The *National Fire Plan* and the *10-year Comprehensive Wildfire Strategy*¹ set forth restoration/rehabilitation and community assistance goals that cannot be achieved with reduced investment levels resulting from fire borrowing. Moreover, the ability of the Forest Service to fulfill its mission to manage National Forest System lands, provide natural resource research, and work with state and private partners is dually impacted – first by the reduced levels of funding on the front end, and again once the agency has to borrow funds from those reduced funding sources to provide suppression dollars.

¹ <http://www.westgov.org/wga/initiatives/fire/index.htm>

SOLUTIONS

The problems created by the increasing costs of suppressing catastrophic wildfires and the need for a new way of budgeting for those costs has been an issue for some time and the trend of rising fire suppression costs is expected to continue. The burden on the Forest Service budget has become backbreaking. NASF and many interest groups have been providing testimony, crafting and advocating for potential solutions and weighing in on congressional/legislative solutions. We recognize that this large and comprehensive problem cannot be easily fixed and will require a suite of components that make up the final solution. The National Association of State Foresters supports components that include

- the **President's FY10 Budget Outline**,
- **the FLAME Act** as introduced in the 111th Congress,
- a funding **source for the FLAME Fund** outside of the Forest Service's or Interior's limited budget,
- **addressing fire 'borrowing' and reinvestment in the non-fire programs** that have been decimated by the rising fire suppression costs, and
- **full funding for the 10-year Strategy Implementation Plan** goals.

President's FY10 Budget

NASF was encouraged by President Obama's attention to this issue during his campaign and by the administration's recently released FY2010 budget outline which indicated support for lessening the impacts of funding suppression activities on catastrophic fires on the Forest Service and Interior. The President's proposal includes full funding of the 10-year average of fire suppression costs along with a discretionary contingent reserve fund. The outline states that "this proposal will ensure that fire management resources are sufficient to allow for other critical Forest Service activities."² The administration's support and appreciation of the need to solve this budgeting and appropriations issue is a key component to solving this problem.

FLAME Act

NASF strongly supports the FLAME Act as introduced in the 111th Congress and urges that it be approved by Congress and sent to President Obama for his signature. The FLAME Act provides the framework for how the Forest Service and the Department of the Interior would use funds for emergency wildland fire suppression activities. This legislation complements the President's proposal based on the few details we currently have on the parameters of the contingency reserve fund, both the FLAME Act and the President's commitment to provide adequate funding for fire suppression are important components of the solution.

The FLAME Act as introduced both in the House and the Senate (H.R. 1404 and S. 561) creates a fund for emergency wildland fire suppression activities above and beyond the Forest Service's normal fire suppression duties and will allow for investment in the

² <http://www.whitehouse.gov/omb/budget/>

Forest Service and Department of Interior's missions and programs. The FLAME Act partitions the emergency suppression costs from the Forest Service budget, reformulates the way the agency budgets for fire, as well as provides accountability assurances and fiscal support for the agency's other important programs. This legislation will bring a measure of fiscal sanity to fire suppression costs, and will allow the Forest Service budget to revert to a more traditional approach similar to other federal agencies. Discretionary appropriations were never intended to meet the needs for catastrophic, emergency events such as hurricanes or wildland fire events. The partitioning of emergency costs partnered with a new way of budgeting for expected and predictable non-emergency suppression activities and investment in programs aimed at addressing the threats facing forests will lead to a long-term reduction in fire suppression costs as the conditions on our nation's forests improve.

The need for non-emergency fire suppression funding will continue to be a necessary part of the Forest Service budget; no matter how well our forests are managed there will always be wildfire that requires the quick and well-trained response of our proficient wildland firefighters. Wildfire knows no political boundaries, and subsequently wildland firefighters work together on the interagency goal of stopping catastrophic wildfire independent of landownership patterns. Currently, federal, state and local firefighters work side by side to protect American lives, homes and natural resources, the very essence of cross-boundary coordination.

Separate Funding for the FLAME Fund

The FLAME Act lays the framework for how catastrophic emergency wildland fire suppression activities would be funded from a separate account (the FLAME Fund) created by the legislation. The intent of the bill is to avoid impacting the Forest Service and the Department of the Interior's budgets. Monies, including regularly appropriated dollars, emergency supplemental dollars, contingency reserve funds, etc., can be secured from many sources and the FLAME Act sets the parameters on how that money can be spent on emergency wildland fire events.

If the Forest Service and the Department of the Interior must budget for emergency events through the discretionary appropriations process, both agencies will eventually become fire agencies. As is already becoming a joke on Capitol Hill, the Forest Service is quickly becoming the Fire Service. This does not support or honor Gifford Pinchot's summary of the mission of the Forest Service – "to provide the greatest amount of good for the greatest amount of people in the long run." This trend must be reversed.

Fire 'Borrowing' and Reinvestment in Non-fire Programs

The Forest Service ability to 'borrow' funds set-aside for other programs after their appropriated fire suppression funds have been obligated weakens partnerships, delays or discontinues critical work and damages the credibility of the agency. The Forest Service can only 'borrow' funds within the agency, not from the rest of the U.S. Department of Agriculture. If and when Congress refunds the money that has been 'borrowed' via an emergency supplemental or some other type of dedicated funding, the impacts of the borrowing are still felt. The elimination of the agency's need and ability to borrow funds

from its non-fire suppression programs and a commitment to provide stable and full funding to keep critical non-fire programs and services is an integral part of this solution.

10-year Strategy Implementation Plan

Since 2000, the *10-year Comprehensive Wildfire Strategy* and its *Implementation Plan* have formed the basis for forest health efforts across the nation. Significant progress has been made on the ground in using locally-driven collaboration and in undertaking landscape-level planning and treatments. Congress adopted the collaborative approach developed in the Strategy through the Healthy Forests Restoration Act of 2003.

When fully implemented, the *10-Year Strategy* will use proactive measures to improve the health of our forests as a means to prevent catastrophic wildfires. These efforts require cross-boundary work, full involvement of states and stakeholders, and, most importantly, a long-term commitment of time, resources and manpower. Full implementation of all four goals of the *10-Year Strategy* (Improve Prevention and Suppression of Wildfires, Reduce Hazardous Fuels, Restore Fire-Adapted Ecosystems and Promote Community Assistance), with adequate funding, is a wise and economical cost-containment strategy. The funding proposed by the previous administration and subsequently funded via Congress has not reinforced all four goals of the 10-year Strategy. Much progress has been and continues to be made in implementing the tasks under the 10-year Implementation Plan, but the efforts to date have not lived up to expectations and needs.

If one looks at funding since the inception of the *10-year Strategy*, the vast majority has gone to Goal One: Suppression and Prevention. More investment needs to be made in fuels reduction, rehab and restoration and community assistance. It is more cost effective and efficient to thin forests and protect communities in advance than to put out fires and repair their damage after the fact. Without balanced and proportionate investment in the other three goals of the *10-year Strategy*, we will not make the on-the-ground progress the public expects, nor get ahead of the wildfire curve. The *10-year Strategy* represents a proactive and comprehensive approach to address wildfire and forest health issues. Funding needs to follow the same proactive, comprehensive philosophy.

A Vision for Addressing Wildland Fire

As mentioned earlier, addressing wildland fire is a complex land management and societal issue that goes beyond suppression alone and will not be solved by accepting “business as usual.” A small cadre of federal, state and local wildland fire agency leaders³ is working together to stimulate Presidential, congressional and gubernatorial leadership on what it will take to collectively fix our wildland fire problem. Our work builds on the vision that effective partnerships, with shared responsibility held by all stakeholders of the wildland fire problem, will create well-prepared, fire adapted communities and healthy, resilient landscapes at the most efficient cost. The group is recommending the crafting of a treatise on wildland fire similar to the “America Burning” report that solidified, and still continues to coalesce efforts around structural fire protection. A similar “America’s

³ *A Call to Action – A New Wildland Fire Accord: It is in your Hands* – <http://www.stateforesters.org/files/Call-to-Action-FINAL-012308.pdf>

Wildlands Burning” report is needed to set the stage for collaboratively developing an accord of principles, strategic direction, and a framework for roles and responsibilities for federal, state, tribal and local agencies and individuals that will help us better manage and live with wildland fire as a nation.

Conclusion

There are many pieces of the puzzle that must be put into place in order to position federal and state forestry agencies to best meet the needs of the land and the people. These pieces are comprehensive and deliberate; they involve guidance and legislation on the how, with whom, where and when. The collectively crafted and owned solutions outlined in this testimony are well-developed, clear, concise and supported by an overwhelming number of diverse stakeholder. The time for talk is in the past. NASF is urging Congress to continue your commitment to this issue and put these ideas into action. We ask for your proactive leadership on one of the most pressing natural resource issues of our time.