

Testimony

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Committee on Resources, House of Representatives

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Status of Forest Service's
Efforts to Reduce
Catastrophic Wildfire
Threats

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Madam Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee: We are here today to discuss the status of efforts by the Department of Agriculture's Forest Service to develop a cohesive strategy to reduce the threat of catastrophic wildfires on national forests in the interior West. Our comments are based primarily on the report and two testimonies that we prepared for this Subcommittee over the last year¹ and the agency's actions to date in response to our findings and recommendation.

In summary, the Forest Service has begun to develop a strategy to address the growing threat that catastrophic wildfires pose to forest resources and nearby communities. Developing and implementing such a strategy presents a difficult challenge to the agency because the wildfire issue transcends the boundaries of both its regions and forests and its resource-specific programs. Confronted with other issues that transcend these boundaries—such as protecting the habitat of the threatened northern spotted owl—the Forest Service has, on occasion, shown that it can develop and implement a cohesive strategy expeditiously and at a relatively low cost. At other times, it has begun to develop a strategy but has either studied and restudied the issue without ever doing so or developed a strategy but left its implementation to the discretion of its independent and highly autonomous field offices with mixed results. A key factor that separates the strategies that are effectively implemented from those that are not is whether the agency treats the issue as an agencywide priority. Those issues that are treated as priorities (1) benefit from a sense of urgency and strong leadership by top-level management in developing and implementing a strategy, (2) are addressed through a strategy that provides the agency's managers with adequate direction and sets standards for holding them accountable, and (3) are allocated the resources necessary to implement the strategy. To date, we have not seen the strong leadership or the marshalling of funds and resources within the agency that would indicate to us that the Forest Service feels a sense of urgency and assigns a high priority to reducing the threat of catastrophic wildfires.

¹Western National Forests: Catastrophic Wildfires Threaten Resources and Communities (GAO/T-RCED-98-273, Sept. 28, 1998); Western National Forests: Nearby Communities Are Increasingly Threatened by Catastrophic Wildfires (GAO/T-RCED-99-79, Feb. 9, 1999); and Western National Forests: A Cohesive Strategy Is Needed to Address Catastrophic Wildfire Threats (GAO/RCED-99-65, Apr. 2, 1999).

The Forest Service Has Agreed to Develop a Cohesive Strategy to Reduce the Threat of Catastrophic Wildfires

In April 1999, we reported that many national forests in the interior West, as well as nearby communities, are increasingly threatened by large, catastrophic wildfires caused by the excessive accumulation of vegetation that forms fuels for such fires. Fuels are accumulating, in large part, because for decades the agency has suppressed fire in forests where frequent, low-intensity fires historically removed such accumulations. We observed that the actions taken by the agency to date to deal with this problem may be too little, too late. Moreover, the Forest Service faces several barriers, including (1) difficulties in reconciling different fuel reduction methods with other stewardship objectives, such as clean air and clean water; (2) programmatic incentives that tend to focus efforts on areas that may not present the highest fire hazards; (3) statutorily defined contracting procedures that impede efforts to reduce fuels; and (4) the high costs associated with implementing the different fuel reduction methods. We also found that the agency lacks the data required to overcome these barriers and to establish meaningful goals and measures for fuel reduction.

The Forest Service agreed with our findings and recommendation that it develop a cohesive strategy for addressing these barriers and reducing fuels and formally communicate the strategy to the Congress, together with estimates of the costs to implement it. According to the Forest Service, it intends to develop a strategy by December 31, 1999.

Developing a Strategy Presents a Difficult Challenge to the Forest Service

Developing and implementing a strategy to address the growing threat of catastrophic wildfires in the interior West presents a difficult challenge to the Forest Service. We estimate that the cost to the agency to reduce fuels on the 39 million acres of national forestland in the interior West that are at high risk could be as much as \$725 million annually, or more than 10 times the current level of funding for reducing fuels.

Such a strategy also transcends the boundaries of both the Forest Service's field and program structures. For example, the 155 national forests are the agency's basic planning units, and each forest has considerable autonomy and discretion in interpreting and applying the agency's policies and directions. However, a strategy to reduce the risk of catastrophic fire in the region will need to transcend the boundaries of individual forests and involve most, if not all, of the 91 national forests located in the interior West.

Similarly, a strategy to reduce fuels must include all three of the Forest Service's major organizational areas—the National Forest System, which includes the national forests; State and Private Forestry programs, which include those for hazardous fuel reduction; and the Research and Development arm of the agency, which conducts fire-related research. Within the National Forest System, such a strategy will need to draw funds and staff from many of the agency's nine resource-specific programs, including those responsible for timber, wildlife and fish, recreation, and water and air quality. These programs often have separate staffs in the agency's headquarters and field offices. Forest Service field staff told us that it is often difficult to undertake needed fuel reduction efforts because the agency's areas and programs often have different goals, objectives, and funding sources; use different criteria to allocate funds to the field offices; and are not adequately coordinated to focus on overarching priorities, such as fuel reduction.

The Forest Service Has Adequately Addressed Some Issues That Transcend Its Boundaries, but Not Others

Confronted with other issues that transcend the boundaries of its field and program structures, the Forest Service has, on occasion, shown that it can develop and implement a cohesive strategy. For example, together with the Department of the Interior's Bureau of Land Management (BLM), the Forest Service developed and is implementing a regional land management strategy in the Pacific Northwest called the Northwest Forest Plan. The plan provides management direction for 22.3 million acres of land managed by the two agencies—including 19 national forests and 7 BLM districts—in the range of the threatened northern spotted owl.² The agencies completed the plan expeditiously and at a relatively low cost compared with past national forest planning efforts. The plan not only resulted in the federal courts' lifting the injunctions that had brought timber sales on federal lands in the Pacific Northwest to a virtual halt, but also provided guidance on protecting the environment across the ecosystem.

Key factors that contributed to the timely and cost-effective development of the Northwest Forest Plan included the (1) sense of urgency created by the court injunctions and (2) strong leadership displayed by top-level officials in developing the plan. Moreover, the plan provides the agencies' land managers with adequate direction for implementation and sets standards for holding them accountable. In addition, the plan has been identified as a special project for funding in the Forest Service's fiscal year

²Ecosystem Planning: Northwest Forest and Interior Columbia River Basin Plans Demonstrate Improvements in Land-Use Planning (GAO/RCED-99-64, May 26, 1999).

budget justifications, and funds are withheld from the regions' and forests' budgets to develop and implement the plan before they are allocated to resource-specific programs.

Other agencywide issues, however, have languished for years as the Forest Service has undertaken study after study without ever developing a strategy or has developed a strategy but left its implementation to the discretion of its independent and highly autonomous regional offices and forests with mixed results. In fiscal year 1991, for example, the Congress asked the Forest Service to develop a multiyear strategy to reduce the escalating costs of its timber program by not less than 5 percent per year. The agency responded by undertaking a cost-reduction study and issuing a report in April 1993. However, the Forest Service left the implementation of the field-level actions to the discretion of each of its nine regional offices, and while some regions rapidly pursued the goal of becoming cost-efficient, others did not. In April 1997, the agency was preparing to undertake the third major examination of its timber program in the last 4 years.

Similarly, the House Committee on the Budget has an ongoing interest in the Forest Service's efforts to be more cost-effective and businesslike in its operations. In October 1998, the agency agreed to revise the strategic plan that it has developed to comply with the requirements of the Government Performance and Results Act of 1993 (the Results Act) to include goals and performance measures for obtaining fair market value for goods, recovering costs for services, and containing expenses. However, to date the agency has not done so.

Reducing the Threat of Catastrophic Wildfires Does Not Appear to Be a High Priority for the Forest Service

At the Forest Service, a key factor that separates the strategies that are effectively implemented from those that are not is whether the agency treats the issue as an agencywide priority. For example, improving the condition of the road system in the national forests is clearly a high priority within the agency and is one of only four areas emphasized in the Forest Service's natural resource agenda. This agenda sets the agency's priorities and gives strategic focus to its programs. Under the agenda, and at the direction of the Chief of the Forest Service, the agency is developing a long-term forest road policy that will guide (1) the building of new roads; (2) the elimination of old, unneeded ones; (3) the upgrade and maintenance of roads that are important to public access; and (4) the development of new and dependable funding for road management. To accomplish these objectives, the Forest Service has (1) identified the issue

as a funding priority in its fiscal year 2000 budget justification, (2) requested an additional \$22.6 million for maintaining and decommissioning roads during fiscal year 2000, (3) proposed a new appropriation for fiscal year 2000 that includes moneys for reconstructing and maintaining roads, and (4) linked the issue to the goals and objectives in its strategic plan.

In comparison, reducing the growing threat of catastrophic wildfires is not emphasized in the agency's natural resource agenda or in its strategic plan, and top-level management has not been involved in developing a fuel reduction strategy. In addition, only one of the Forest Service's three major organizational areas with responsibility for reducing fuels—State and Private Forestry programs—has been tasked with developing such a strategy. A team from various disciplines within the agency is to advise staff from State and Private Forestry. The strategy is to be developed by the end of the year, but the team has not yet been formed and a leader has not yet been appointed. In addition, even though the Forest Service said that it would need an additional \$37 million in fiscal year 2000 to increase the number of acres treated, the agency did not request any additional funds and will therefore treat about 60,000 fewer acres next year than it will treat this year.

Madam Chairman, we recognize that the Forest Service has just begun to develop a fuel reduction strategy and that priorities can, and do, change. If reducing the threat of catastrophic wildfires does become a priority, then we would expect it to be reflected in three documents that the agency will issue over the next 8 months. The first will be the Forest Service's updated strategic plan that is scheduled for release this fall. If fuel reduction has become a high priority for the agency, then we would expect it to appear in the strategic plan as an objective or outcome, or at least to be linked to the plan's goals and objectives. The second document will be the strategy itself. A good indicator of the priority given to fuel reduction will be whether the strategy provides the agency's land managers with adequate direction for implementation and sets standards for holding them accountable or whether it merely provides broad, general objectives and direction that cannot be quantified or measured. Finally, and probably most telling of all, will be the Forest Service's fiscal year 2001 budget request. If fuel reduction is accorded a high priority, then we would expect the agency to identify the strategy as a special project for funding and to withhold funds from the regions' and forests' budgets to develop and implement the strategy before funds are allocated to resource-specific programs.

Madam Chairman, this concludes my formal statement. If you or the other Members of the Subcommittee have any questions, we will be pleased to answer them.

Contact and Acknowledgment

For future contacts regarding this testimony, please contact Barry T. Hill at (202) 512-8021. Individuals making key contributions to this testimony included Charles S. Cotton, Chester M. Joy, and Michael J. Daulton.

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