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Testimony

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Federal Fire Management: Evaluation
of Changes Made After Yellowstone

Statement of
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Before the
Environment, Energy, and
Natural Resources Subcommittee
Committee on Government Operations
House of Representatives



Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee:

We are pleased to appear before you today to discuss our ongoing work on the federal government's fire program for the nation's parks and wilderness areas. These hearings are particularly timely because the fire season in the West is just starting and federal fire officials are predicting that this could be another record fire year. Our work, which we are doing at your request, focuses on changes made to the government's fire program as a result of the 1988 fires in Yellowstone National Park.

We are presenting our observations in a video prepared especially for this hearing. We plan to follow up with a written report containing our specific recommendations. A transcript of the video is attached to this statement. While the use of a video to present testimony is unique to GAO, we believe that because of the subject matter, it is an effective way to communicate the results of our work.

The video, which lasts about 13 minutes, describes the government's prescribed fire program, the Yellowstone fires of 1988, changes that the government has made to the program since then, and our evaluation of the program as it stands today. We would now like to show you the video.

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Mr. Chairman, as our video depicts, the prescribed fire program has been reaffirmed as a valuable tool in the management of the nation's parks and wilderness areas. However, the program is an inherently high-risk activity that will require better coordination, adequate funding and resources, and changes in attitudes if it is to realize its full potential.

Mr. Chairman, this concludes my statement. We will be pleased to respond to questions you or other members of the Subcommittee may have.

FIRE VIDEO SCRIPT

Yellowstone National Park. Summer, 1988. The nation's oldest park was on fire. The nightly news showed terrifying scenes. Stands of pines were ablaze. Flames threatened to overrun Old Faithful Inn, as firefighters fought desperately to save it. The sky darkened with smoke as the fires advanced. Stark and blackened landscapes were left in their wake. Such scenes drew public outcry. What had gone wrong? Wasn't the government supposed to protect the parks?

About 20 years ago, the National Park Service, within the Department of the Interior, and the Forest Service, within the Department of Agriculture, began to change the fire program for the nation's parks and wildernesses. Any fires that threatened life or property--called wildfires--were to be suppressed, as before. But some fires started by lightning--called prescribed natural fires--would be allowed to burn so long as they posed no immediate danger. Because of this program, many charged, Yellowstone's scenic landscape had been destroyed--the government had "let it burn."

With no warning, then, the events in Yellowstone thrust the government's prescribed fire program into the national spotlight. Questions were raised by the Congress, the media, and the public. Should the government continue the practice of letting natural fires burn? What should be done to keep another Yellowstone from happening?

To answer these questions, a special task force composed of the Department of the Interior, the Department of Agriculture, and the National Association of State Foresters was charged with reexamining the program.

GAO was asked by the Chairman of the Environment, Energy, and Natural Resources Subcommittee of the House Committee on Government Operations to review the implementation of the task force's recommendations. GAO's work to date has shown that in the summer of 1988 both the fires that raged in Yellowstone and the government's fire program were out of control. While the task force made several recommendations to tighten the management of the program, GAO questions whether the new controls are as sound as they appear, and whether the program has the organizational structure required to coordinate firefighting efforts in times of national emergencies. Furthermore, because resources are constrained, an issue not addressed by the task force, and because some fire managers are resisting the program, GAO also questions whether the revamped fire program will evolve from a program on paper to one in practice.

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The story of fire management in the nation's wildlands begins in the late 1800s. The policy of the federal government was to fight all fires. It was a theme later captured by the Forest Service's mascot, Smokey Bear. Fires destroyed the scenic beauty of the land, its timber, and its wildlife, and fighting fires was viewed as the moral equivalent of war.

But in 1963, a federally sponsored report introduced what was then a radical idea. By suppressing all fires, the government had

interfered with nature. For fire can be beneficial--even essential--to wildlands. It returns valuable nutrients to the soil. It opens overgrown areas to sunlight. It allows new vegetation to thrive, providing food and habitat for diverse animal species. Fire also removes dead wood and other fuels from the forest floor that can kindle larger, more dangerous fires--as in fact happened at Yellowstone.

By 1972, both the Park Service and the Forest Service allowed prescribed fires to burn in certain parks and wildernesses providing: the fires did not threaten human life or property; they remained within their specified boundaries; and resources were available to control them.

Over the next 16 years, about 3,500 fires were allowed to burn in these areas. Since the fires were usually small, they aroused no controversy or concern.

This all changed in 1988, when events in Yellowstone severely tested the fire program. In June and July, lightning storms ignited fires, as they had in previous years. But in 1988, weather and fuel conditions converged to make the situation more dangerous. The forest floor was densely carpeted with dead trees. After several years of dry weather, this downed timber was drier than wood from a lumber yard. Counting on the usual July rains, the Park Service let 28 fires burn without attempting to suppress them. But the expected rains never came.

Recognizing the severity of the situation, the Park Service declared on July 21 that it would fight all fires. By this time, fires had burned through about 17,000 acres in Yellowstone--about one-half the acreage that had burned in all the previous 16 years.

At about the same time, two wildfires from adjacent forests spread into the park.

But in retrospect, the Park Service had waited too long. All available resources were brought to bear, but the fires grew. In August and September, gusts of up to 70 miles per hour fanned the flames and created dangerous firestorms. Firelines ranged for hundreds of miles, with as many as 10,000 firefighters battling the blazes. Neighboring towns had to be evacuated. They were saved although some buildings were lost or damaged. By November, when the snows finally quenched the last flames, the fires had burned about 700,000 acres, one-third of the park. The total cost to fight these fires: more than \$100 million.

While public attention focused on Yellowstone, other large fires were burning throughout the West. As a consequence, the nation's firefighting resources were stretched to the limit, forcing the federal government to call on the military and even on Canadian crews for assistance.

Because of the controversy over Yellowstone, the government halted the prescribed fire program, and the Secretaries of Interior and Agriculture appointed the interagency task force to determine what had gone wrong.

In its final report, the task force endorsed the practice of allowing fire to play its natural role in wildlands. But the task force warned that stricter controls were imperative because fire management is an inherently high-risk activity.

The task force made 15 recommendations. Among them:

- Park and wilderness managers were to tighten guidelines in their fire management plans to prevent the inappropriate use of prescribed fires.
- Line officers were to certify daily that sufficient resources were available to keep such fires under control.
- Agencies were to cooperatively develop regional and national plans to curtail prescribed fires when fire danger is high or resources to deal with them are low.

Although implementing these recommendations is taking longer than anticipated, both the Park Service and the Forest Service have revised their guidance and are developing the called-for plans. Both also now require daily certification by line officers for prescribed natural fires. However, in GAO's view, the management of the prescribed fire program may not be as well controlled as the interagency task force envisioned or the public has been led to expect.

While the new program is intended to tighten the conditions under which a prescribed fire is allowed to burn, there are no changes in how the fire is to be fought if it is declared wild. Now, as in 1988, if the cost of extinguishing the fire outweighs its potential damage, it can be allowed to burn under surveillance. Furthermore, resources may not even be available to fight the fire because crews and equipment may already be committed to higher-priority fires.

In such circumstances--when fire danger has escalated, and crews and equipment are scarce--the Boise Interagency Fire Center is responsible for coordinating the agencies' firefighting

efforts. But its leadership met with resistance in the field in 1988, when the Center attempted to shift resources among the hundreds of fires that raged that summer.

Coordination continues to be a problem. The task force recommended that agencies cooperatively develop national and regional preparedness plans. However, some regional offices have not involved other agencies in developing such plans. Furthermore, while the Center has developed 5 levels of preparedness--depending on the severity of burning conditions, the extent of fire activity, and the availability of resources--some regions have established plans with 3 or 4 levels instead. With different levels meaning different things to different people, confusion over the severity of fire conditions could prevail at precisely the time when cool heads and clear facts are needed most.

While stricter controls are required, several factors may constrain implementation of the program. First, because wildfires must receive priority, prescribed fires can be allowed to burn only if there are sufficient firefighters and equipment available to keep them under control. But over the last 10 years, these resources have declined substantially. Second, the money specifically allocated to the prescribed fire program is less than what many Park Service and Forest Service managers say they need. And third, regardless of funding availability, some managers still subscribe to the old philosophy of suppressing all fires.

For these reasons, officials of some forests with large wilderness areas as well as some national parks told GAO they are unlikely to adopt the prescribed fire program and will instead continue suppressing most fires. Yet according to the task force,

excluding the use of prescribed fires not only increases the risk of having more catastrophic fires like those in Yellowstone, but also interferes with nature's cycle.

Until the revamped fire program is tested, no one will know whether the task force's revisions will resolve the problems that occurred in Yellowstone. However, even with these revisions, GAO believes, the government may still lack the organizational structure essential to respond to national fire emergencies. In addition, increases in funding and firefighting resources, as well as changes in attitudes, are necessary to realize the program's full potential. For in the long term, the program offers the promise of restoring wildlands to their natural state and reducing the severity of future wildfires.