

Testimony of Ranotta McNair
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The House Natural Resources Subcommittee on Federal Lands
“Examining the Challenges Facing Forest Management, Wildfire Suppression,
and Wildland Firefighters Ahead of the 2023 Wildfire Year.”

Chairman Tiffany, Ranking Member Neguse, and Members of the Committee, I appreciate the chance to testify today on the challenges facing us around forest management and our wildfire crisis.

I’m Ranotta McNair, retired after 33 years of federal service working for the Forest Service. Much of my career was spent in leadership working on National Forests in the Pacific Northwest, Northern Rockies and Southern regions. During my 12-year tenure as Forest Supervisor on the Idaho Panhandle National Forest (IPNF), I was fortunate to have had a talented and experienced fire organization and a solid bench of district rangers who had experience in dealing with prescribed and wildland fire. The IPNF hosted and was responsible for the supervision and operations of the regional air tanker base and a type 1 Hot Shot Crew. On the personal side, I also understand after being married for over 40 years to someone working on the front lines of fire the personal sacrifices that are made to do that job.

I am on the Board of Directors for the National Association of Forest Service Retirees (NAFSR). We are an organization dedicated to sustaining the Forest Service mission and adapting to today’s and tomorrow’s challenges. Our principal beliefs and values include protecting and managing diverse lands and valued resources while providing a wide array of uses and services to the public. This includes providing for clean water and quality aquatic and terrestrial habitat. Our values also include responding professionally and responsibly in support of the Agency’s efforts to protect public interest and ensure public safety.

The challenges we face today have not arisen overnight, and solving them will require time and bold action. The current situation is a result of the overall loss of workforce capacity, particularly the skilled workforce within the Agency, compounded by a century of fire exclusion, expanding development in the wildland-urban interface, a changing climate, and accumulating fuels across our landscapes.

Year-round wildfires have become more severe and frequent, posing grave risks to homes, communities, infrastructure, and natural resources, particularly in dry-site forests and Western communities. The level of death and destruction on these landscapes is difficult to comprehend, with irreplaceable natural resources lost, vital soil washed away, and untold floods causing further damage to communities and their water systems. The emotional and psychological trauma to citizens and firefighters from the loss of loved ones, homes, and communities is unimaginable.

To address the growing threat to the nation's natural resources and communities posed by extreme wildfires, we need to take bold and transformative action to change the trajectory of how

we manage, staff, and prepare for wildfire impacts. We must prioritize a paradigm shift in land management approaches across jurisdictional boundaries to reduce risk and restore fire-adapted landscapes.

The scale of fuel treatments needs to match the scale of the problem; for example, an area prone to high-risk large-scale fire demands large-scale strategically placed fuel treatments. What are these known effective treatments? The thinning of dense stands followed by prescribed burning, both on regular repeated treatment intervals. Past treatments on National Forests rarely matched the scale needed today to reduce our wildland fire risks. In part this was due to litigation, uncertain funding, and workforce capacity.

Today's wildfire crisis requires National Forests to increase both the pace and size of its landscape treatments. With the support of the passage of the Infrastructure Bill and the Inflation Reduction Act, funding and resources have been committed to a 10-year wildfire crisis strategy. These historic bills are essentially a down payment on the resources needed to do fuels work, forest restoration, community preparedness, and post-fire recovery and reforestation. It mandates that 50 million acres of at-risk forests be treated over the next 10 years, including 20 million acres of additional fuel treatment on Federal lands and 30 million acres of fuel treatment on state, private, and tribal lands.

Landscape scale treatment of fuels is not solely a federal lands issue. States, counties, communities, tribes, and federal governments share both the responsibilities and risk for accomplishing this work. Treating priority landscapes at the necessary scale and pace requires building a multi-jurisdictional coalition to work across land management jurisdictions and build broad public and community support for the work.

The catastrophic wildfire events of 2020 and 2021 exhausted resources at the height of wildfire season, while climate change exacerbated their behavior. Unfortunately, this was not an anomaly, but rather a far more troubling and long-standing trend. Wildfires have become larger, longer-lasting, more frequent, and more destructive in terms of lives lost and economic costs over the past two decades. A 2017 report by the National Institute of Standards and Technology (NIST) found that the annual economic burden of wildfires was between \$71 and \$348 billion, including local, state, and federal suppression costs, and that the prevalence of wildfire smoke has increased substantially since the mid-2000s, accounting for approximately 25 percent of Americans' total exposure to harmful fine particulate matter.

The science and on-the-ground experience indicate that we need to increase the pace and strategically pivot to larger scale fuel treatments. Random placement of fuel treatments along the wildland-urban interface boundary simply isn't enough. We know that when a fire moves into a treated area it alters fire behavior and reduces the risks to firefighters.

A recent scientific study by Dr. Jain, Research Forester at Rocky Mountain Research Station, in collaboration with other scientists, synthesized over 127 existing studies on landscape-scale fuel treatment effectiveness. The key findings were that landscape-scale fuel treatments reduce negative outcomes of wildfires and, in some cases, promote beneficial wildfire outcomes. Treating multiple fuel layers (canopy, ladder, and surface) reduces fire spread and severity, and

the degree of effectiveness is influenced by the extent, size, placement, timing, and prescription of fuel treatments. The case study indicates that the length of time needed before retreatment depends on site productivity, plant species traits, and initial fuel removal, which contribute to how a site might reburn in subsequent wildfires after treatment. Several case studies showed that as fire moved into treated areas, even if they were burning at high intensity, fire intensity lowered enough that spot fires were not common or far reaching from the main fire.

Fire researchers and experienced professionals agree that treating fuels is highly effective in mitigating the dangers of wildfires. In fact, scientific evidence shows that treating surface, ladder, and crown fuels can improve protection capabilities, reduce potential fire behavior, and increase the likelihood of successful fire suppression efforts. In a Sacramento Bee interview, fire researcher Scott Stephens confirmed that at least 99% of fire scientists believe that treated areas do moderate fire behavior. Furthermore, a 2018 USDA Forest Service Pacific Northwest Report found that of the 253 treatments sampled in which a wildfire met a fuel treatment, 153 altered fire behavior, and 127 assisted with fire control operations.

In his field observations, Joe Stutler, Commander of the Area Command Team - with over 1000 fire assignments - stated that it is urgent to increase the number and size of forest thinning, mechanical treatments, and prescribed burning across all landscapes, and in a geographically explicit and systematic way. He noted that modified fuel treatments simply work, especially when combined with prescribed fire. Stutler went on to say “Of course, there are exceptions that lead to the myth that fuels treatments don't make any difference, like wind/wildfire events in Oregon in 2020 is an example that's being used currently, and the numbers are staggering. Of the 1.2 million acres burned, 455,000 occurred on some of the most intensively managed forests in the Northwest. I would offer this personal observation: when we experience 80 mph winds for 72 hours, the Walmart parking lot may not be a safe place.” There is a growing recognition that the impacts of wildfires on communities have far outpaced the scale at which fuels have been treated.

To support this effort, it is important to rebuild the infrastructure necessary to process wood products coming from fuel reduction projects. The recent administration investment of \$34 million from the Bipartisan Infrastructure bill is a step in the right direction, but more is needed. The federal government and Congress can begin by incentivizing use of woody biomass from federal lands in new markets, as well as removing regulatory barriers, and encouraging market innovation. In doing so we can support a healthy forest products industry, create local jobs, reduce cost of treatments, along with restoring high-risk landscapes in the long run.

All of this is dependent on having skilled, trained wildland firefighters. The demands and expectations on our fire professionals and first responders are rapidly increasing while firefighter risks and suppression costs are reaching unprecedented levels. Many firefighters are struggling with pay, housing, work/life balance, and mental health issues. In 2020, for example, some Hot Shot Crews in CA were working over 1000 hours of overtime just to make a living wage. Other firefighters could be found living out of their vehicles because they could not find affordable housing. Others are struggling with mental health such as PTSD due to prolonged fire assignments and critical incidents that occurred on fire assignments. To take better care of these

firefighters, we need to provide them with better pay and benefits, housing, mental and physical health resources, and work-life balance. Two years ago, legislation was enacted that temporarily raised firefighter pay for 2 years and added support for mental and psychological health. That legislation is set to expire; a permanent solution needs to be enacted.

The fire season, which was once thought to be 4 to 6 months, has now become year-round. A temporary, seasonal workforce is no longer sufficient, and we are seeing a shift toward a more permanent workforce that can increase workforce capacities to conduct year-round wildland fire management. We need to train this permanent collective workforce in suppression and prescribed fire management and move from a "firefighter" to a fire manager mindset.

The Forest Service once had the ability to stopgap shortages in fire personnel by using personnel working outside of fire to perform fire duties. Starting in 2000, after an intense and costly fire season, that reliance and support from non-fire personnel began to change. By 2019, the number of fire personnel had risen 132 percent since 1992, while specialists who supported restoring landscape resiliency and fuel reduction projects decreased by 54 percent. The most dramatic reductions in personnel occurred in the disciplines of forestry and engineering.

In July 2019 NAFSR conducted its own workforce study titled "Sustaining the Forest Service - Increasing Workforce Capacity to increase the pace and scale of restoration on national forest system lands." We reached similar findings. This shift in the composition of a skilled labor force has affected the agency's capacity to fully support wildland fire and restore landscapes to be more fire resilient.

While the present surge in funding for hazardous fuels treatments through the IIJA and IRA has been supportive of additional staffing and progress is being made collectively on increasing workforce capacities, recruitment and retention of a skilled workforce continues to be an issue.

But there is some good news:

- A comprehensive National Cohesive Wildland Fire Management Strategy is in place that all firefighting agencies have agreed to.
- Keystone agreements with major partners are in place.
- 21 High-risk Fireheds have been identified to prioritize landscape treatments.
- The Collaborative Forest Landscape Restoration Program (CFLRP), the Joint Chiefs Landscape Restoration Partnership (Joint Chiefs), the Good Neighbor Authority (GNA) and initiatives like Shared Stewardship are in place.

And there are problems you can help solve:

- Support the proposed workforce reforms in the FY 2024 budget request. These reforms include a permanent pay increase for federal and tribal firefighters, investment in their mental and physical health and well-being, improving their housing options, and expanding the number of permanent firefighters.
- Support the proposed budget increases funding for wildfire preparedness, hiring additional personnel, and hazardous fuels reduction treatments.

- Authorize legislation to establish a special base rate salary table for all federal wildland firefighters, create a new premium pay category, and establish a pay cap with secretarial waiver authority.

Additional Support:

- Support passage of H.R. 1586, Forest Protection and Wildland Firefighter Safety Act of 2023 - allowing for the continued use of aerial retardant drops in support of wildland fire suppression efforts.
- Future legislation that would create an exception to U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) requirements - should the proposed rule be finalized for national ambient air quality standards (NAAQS) for fine particle pollution, also known as fine particulate matter, or PM2.5. This proposal as written will reduce the Nation's ability to implement strategies intended to reduce unwanted wildfire effects on communities and wildlands, including barriers to increasing the pace and scale of prescribed burning. Preliminary research suggests that some areas could see a reduction in available burn days of 70-80 percent.
- Encourage changes to the federal renewable fuel standard RFS that would allow fuel removals from federal lands to be considered renewable by wood innovation businesses in their supply chains.
- Recommend that Congress request the Forest Service to provide technical drafting assistance to amend problematic provisions within the Infrastructure Bill and the Inflation Reduction Act. These provisions currently contain language that significantly hinder the Forest Service's ability to successfully implement these programs, resulting in inadequate conservation outcomes as Congress intended.

In summary, the challenges posed by wildland fires are extensive and complex, but we have the knowledge and experience to address them. We have already taken meaningful steps towards building fire-resilient landscapes, but it will require a sustained effort across jurisdictions and a long-term commitment to see these changes through.

Congress has a critical role to play in providing the necessary resources, funding, and policy to mitigate the severity of wildfires, enhance community resilience, and protect our natural resources. We must work together to address this crisis and ensure a safer and more resilient future for our communities, firefighters, and forests & grasslands. Let us rise to this challenge and commit to a future where our landscapes are better equipped to withstand the threat of wildfire.

Thank you for the opportunity to be part of this hearing today. I welcome any questions that subcommittee members might have.