

**Statement of Tom Schultz, Chief of the USDA Forest Service
Before the Senate Committee on Appropriations, Subcommittee on Interior, Environment
and Related Agencies
Concerning President’s Fiscal Year 2026 Proposed Budget
For the USDA Forest Service
June 11, 2025 10:30 a.m.**

Chair Murkowski, Ranking Merkley, and members of the Subcommittee, thank you for inviting me here today to testify on the President’s fiscal year (FY) 2026 Budget request for the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), Forest Service.

The fiscal year 2026 President’s Budget for the USDA Forest Service requests \$2.1 billion in discretionary appropriations for base programs. The 2026 Forest Service Budget is focused and strategic, making trade-offs for efficiency and alignment around the highest priorities for National Forest System lands. The Budget proposes the elimination of multiple programs and significant funding reductions in programs that remain, with the objective of better allocating federal resources and addressing the federal deficit and debt while delivering on our core mission to sustain the health and productivity of our nation’s forests and grasslands. These critical changes will put the agency on a sustainable path while ensuring our National Forests and Grasslands provide the goods and services expected by the American people.

The FY 2026 budget request focuses on crucial investments that will help the Forest Service conserve and manage national forests and grasslands sustainably. It will also support local economies through jobs, trade, timber production, recreation access, energy development, and livestock grazing.

The production of various forest products, such as timber, lumber, paper, bioenergy, and other wood products (timber production) is vital for the country’s well-being. Executive Order 14225, *Immediate Expansion of American Timber Production*, emphasizes the importance of timber production and how forest management and wildfire risk reduction projects can protect American lives and communities. The FY 2026 budget request supports Executive Order 14225 by sustaining the forest products program at FY 2025 levels.

To ensure domestic production of critical minerals and to contribute to a stable supply of energy for current and future generations while continuing to sustain long-term ecosystem health and productivity, the Forest Service works together with the DOI’s Bureau of Land Management to manage leasable minerals on National Forest System lands. The FY 2026 budget continues to support the Forest Service Minerals and Geology Management program.

Livestock grazing on federal lands is crucial for ranchers across the United States, especially in the West. This practice has been part of land management for generations, providing food for the American public, and preserving working landscapes, conserving natural resources, and the communities that depend on them. The FY 2026 budget ensures that livestock grazing continues to meet many of the Forest Service’s multiple-use objectives.

To improve efficiency and federal response, the FY 2026 budget removes duplicate

efforts in Federal Wildland Fire Management by consolidating the federal suppression response apparatus into a new DOI bureau. The new U.S. Wildland Fire Service will unify logistical and support functions such as dispatching, training, information technology, reporting, financial management, and contracting. This organization will provide initial attack, large fire response, and facilitate hazardous fuels mitigation operations (both mechanical and prescribed fire) for all federal land management agencies enhancing the efficiency and effectiveness of the Federal wildfire response capacity.

The President's FY 2026 Budget Request for Specific Priorities

The following investments align with and enhance the agency's efforts to modernize the wildland fire management system:

- **Forest Service Operations:** Requested amount reduces support services salaries and facility leases to streamline Agency's management structure and right size the real property footprint. Some funding and associated capacity will shift to the new U.S. Wildland Fire Service in DOI to meet business support requirements associated with the combined fire organization.
- **Forest and Rangeland Research:** The account was eliminated, except for Forest Inventory and Analysis (FIA) which was moved to the National Forest System account and the Joint Fire Science program which would be moved to the DOI as part of the new U.S. Wildland Fire Service. The shift of the FIA program will ensure that it is aligned with the practical needs of forest management for timber production, continuing to sustain its longstanding census of forest resources and conditions to the National Forest System.
- **State, Private, and Tribal Forestry:** The discretionary account was eliminated to ensure fiscal responsibility with American taxpayer dollars and to better balance the appropriate roles of federal and state governments. In alignment with restoring federalism, we encourage increasing State authority to fund the management of State and privately-owned forests, community preparedness, and public risk mitigation activities.
- **National Forest System:** The 2026 Budget proposes \$1.297 billion to fund the National Forest System focusing support on field-based operations, which are essential for meeting high-priority agency objectives. With this level of funding the Forest Service will prioritize activities related to timber sales, recreation, environmental analyses, law enforcement, critical minerals permitting, and grazing allotment management. This prioritization will ensure public safety on National Forest System (NFS) lands, timber production and range management activities critical for rural economic development and restoration of NFS lands and increased domestic production of critical minerals to support national defense and electrification needs. The \$175 million previously within the NFS account for hazardous fuels mitigation will be requested by DOI in support of the new U.S. Wildland Fire Service to perform and or facilitate mechanical and prescribed fire operations on NFS lands.

- **Capital Improvement and Maintenance:** The 2026 request necessitates a significant rightsizing of Forest Service facilities (both administrative and recreation), roads, and trails. Prioritization will be made in alignment with the Administration's priorities, with funding going towards infrastructure that facilitates timber production, hazardous fuels removal, mineral extraction, and emergency response.
- **Wildland Fire Management:** The 2026 request will transfer the Forest Service Wildland Fire Management appropriations to DOI for the creation of the new U.S. Wildland Fire Service. This new DOI bureau will absorb the Forest Service Wildland Fire Management response program, including over 11,000 firefighters, 3,000 operational fire support personnel and leadership, and over 400 business support personnel.

Through Great American Outdoors Act (GAOA) (P.L. 116-152) funding, the Forest Service continues to repair and upgrade vital infrastructure and facilities in the national forests and grasslands through the National Parks and Public Land Legacy Restoration Fund and the FY 2026 budget requests its reauthorization for another five years.

The GAOA also permanently funds the Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF), with which the Forest Service invests in conservation and recreation opportunities in public and private lands through the Forest Legacy Program and Federal Land Acquisition. The FY 2026 request proposes an amendment to the Land and Water Conservation Fund Act expanding it to include a new Priority Deferred Maintenance program to address priority deferred maintenance projects at DOI bureaus and the Forest Service. For the Forest Service, this LWCF Priority Deferred Maintenance program will prioritize deferred maintenance projects that support and facilitate high-priority objectives associated with timber production, emergency response, and recreation activities. The funding would be spent predominantly on roads, bridges, and facilities, including those critical to housing employees and ensuring visitor safety.

In closing, the President's FY 2026 Budget request proposes a landmark restructuring in Federal wildland fire to ensure an efficient and effective combined response apparatus managed by the DOI for all Federal lands. The FY 2026 Budget request underscores our commitment to focusing on investments that prioritize the products from and access to the American public wants from their national forests. We are getting back to the basics of managing our national forests for their intended purposes of producing timber, clean water, recreation, and other necessities for the American taxpayers.

We look forward to working with this Subcommittee to fulfill the President's economic goals and our key responsibilities for the long-term benefit of the Nation's forests and grasslands, and for all Americans. I will be glad to answer your questions.