

**Statement of Randy Moore, Chief of the USDA Forest Service
Before the Senate Committee on Appropriations, Subcommittee on Interior, Environment
and Related Agencies
Concerning President’s Fiscal Year 2024 Proposed Budget
For the USDA Forest Service
March 22, 2023 10:00 a.m.**

Chair Merkley, Ranking Member Murkowski, and members of the Subcommittee, thank you for inviting me here today to testify on the President’s fiscal year (FY) 2024 Budget request for the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), Forest Service.

The fiscal year 2024 President’s Budget for the USDA Forest Service discretionary appropriations totals \$7.4 billion for base programs and \$2.3 billion for the wildfire suppression cap adjustment (in the Wildfire Suppression Operations Reserve Fund). The fiscal year 2024 request focuses on three primary areas: modernizing the wildland fire management system; confronting the wildfire crisis; and ensuring equitable access to and benefits from the National Forest System.

The investments highlighted below reflect services the Forest Service delivers through work on National Forests, partnerships with State, Private, and Tribal landowners, and our Research and Development mission area. These investments enable the Forest Service to restore long-term forest health and resiliency across landscapes the American people rely-on while ensuring equitable access to the resources on National Forest lands. Alongside our partners, the Forest Service will continue to reduce the risk of catastrophic wildfires to communities in FY 2024 through investments in the highest priority landscapes identified within the Wildfire Crisis Strategy. The Forest Service will maximize every dollar invested into our agency, making every dollar work for the American people. The people we serve deserve nothing less than to see the value of their money at work for their benefit.

The President’s FY 2024 Budget Request for Specific Priorities to Support Focal Areas

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

- **\$1.4 billion for Wildland Fire Management Salaries and Expenses:** Investing in our wildland firefighting workforce is a matter of national security as critical infrastructure, homes, communities, structures, and natural resources are at grave and growing risk of catastrophic wildfire. The FY 2024 budget funds a permanent increase in pay for the wildland firefighter workforce, providing a more livable wage, enhancing recruitment, and supporting retention. Specifically, this request includes:
 - \$180 million for increasing base pay for federal wildland firefighters to ensure that this crucial workforce does not face a pay cliff at the end of this year
 - \$69 million to support cost of living increases for FY 2024
 - \$259 million for increasing federal firefighting capacity (an estimated 970 additional federal firefighters and personnel) to expand our ability to address the wildfire crisis and reduce the strain on our current workforce

- \$10 million for vital health and well-being assistance to more comprehensively support our wildfire firefighter workforce;
- \$50 million to address the urgent need for wildland firefighter housing through necessary maintenance and repairs of Forest Service housing units that will support our recruitment, hiring, and retention efforts.
- **\$323 million for Hazardous Fuels Reduction:** To mitigate wildfire risk on 4.2 million acres in high priority and high-risk fireheds, building on hazardous fuels funding from the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law and Inflation Reduction Act and aligned with the agency's 10-Year Wildfire Crisis Strategy.

The following investments ensure that national forests and grasslands continue to provide experiences, services, and products to the American public by focusing on the restoration, enhancement, and resilience of the Nation's forests and grasslands:

- **\$56 million for the Burned Area Rehabilitation:** to build on capacity created with the \$65 million per year seed money from the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law to rehabilitate burned areas and free up existing funding for more proactive forest health work.
- **\$94 million for Recreation, Heritage, and Wilderness:** to increase support of critical recreation operations, planning, services, and improvements, with particular emphasis on creating welcoming, sustainable, and equitable recreation opportunities for all Americans with a focus towards underserved and Tribal communities.
- **\$50.5 million for Vegetation and Watershed Management:** to support healthy and resilient watersheds and landscapes, sustain the production of clean and abundant air and water, assist with meeting the Administration's climate goals, and contribute to healthy and productive communities and Tribal Nations.
- **\$45 million for Minerals and Geology Management:** to locate and prioritize orphaned oil and gas wells for remediation and the inventory, environmental analysis, and clean-up of mine reclamation sites.
- **\$7.8 million for Grazing Management:** to support post-fire restoration, provide for strategic incentives to grazing permittees, and build vibrant rural economies.
- **\$55 million for Forest Health Management:** to ensure healthy forests and functional landscapes on federal and non-federal lands in support of the conservation priorities of the Administration.
- **\$80 million for Collaborative Forest Landscape Restoration Program:** to invest in communities and regions with a collaborative, common purpose in reducing wildfire risk and improving forest health and resiliency.
- **\$1.7 billion for National Forest System Salaries and Expenses:** to support the agency's 10-Year Wildfire Crisis Strategy as well as critical non-fire programs, which have decreased in funding over time as wildland fire response needs escalated.

Further investments ensure that the Forest Service relies on the latest science and technology to deliver results on the ground and for the people:

- **\$502 million for Information Technology Capabilities:** to continue

modernization of our Information Technology systems that allow the public to better access our services, sustain emergency communication systems, and provide our workforce the tools they need to carry out our conservation mission safely and efficiently.

- **\$72 million for Zero Emissions Vehicles:** included across several program funding requests to invest in replacing vehicles within the agency fleet and to provide for employees and visitors with charging infrastructure.
- **\$349 million for Forest and Rangeland Research:** to continue investments in research priorities, with a focus on climate change-related research including reforestation, carbon accounting, and fire and fuels research.
- **\$6 million for USDA Climate Hubs:** to accelerate science production and technology transfer that will aid management agencies, private landowners, and agricultural producers adopt scientifically sound climate adaptation practices.

Confronting the Wildfire Crisis

The Forest Service's paramount focus continues to be combatting the threat and impact of destructive wildfire to our nation's communities, critical infrastructure, forests, rangelands, water supplies, and wildlife. Changing environmental conditions have lengthened fire seasons into fire years and worsened wildfires across the West. Expanding development into the wildland/urban interface (WUI) increasingly puts more homes into fire-prone landscapes and increases the challenge and complexity of wildfire suppression and fuels reduction work. Most wildfires that cause significant damage to a large number of homes and other structures are human caused; 97% of wildfires threaten homes; and almost one-third of American homes are within the WUI.

The Forest Service has a historic opportunity now, between the investments from the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law, the Inflation Reduction Act, and our annual appropriations, to implement solutions at a large scale. We are now entering our second year of carrying out our 10-Year Wildfire Crisis Strategy. The Wildfire Crisis Strategy aims to increase science-based fuels treatments by up to four times previous treatment levels, especially in those areas at highest risk. By working in the right places at the right scale, our treatments can reduce wildfire risk and better protect communities, infrastructure, and natural resources while helping wildland firefighters respond to wildfires safely and effectively.

The Forest Service cannot succeed in this alone. The highest risk firesheds are typically in multiple land ownerships. The Forest Service will continue to strengthen our long-standing work and relationships with Tribes, States, local communities, private landowners, and other stakeholders to adapt lessons learned into a coordinated and effective program of work as outlined in the 10-Year Wildfire Crisis Strategy. Through government-to-government consultation with Tribes, expanded partnerships and co-stewardship, and broader community support, the Forest Service will increase the use of prescribed fire, fuel treatments, and the management of unplanned ignitions to reduce long-term wildfire risks. Fortunately, we have decades of experience working through collaborative partnerships based on common values and shared goals across shared landscapes as set out in the National Cohesive Wildland Fire

Management Strategy.

Ensuring Equitable Access to and Benefits from the National Forest System

The Forest Service will continue to invest in actions that create broad and efficient access to the vital resources our forests and grasslands provide. This effort is twofold. First, we must ensure that those who rely on these services and benefits can access those benefits safely. Therefore, we are committed to improving the operation and maintenance of our extensive infrastructure portfolio that includes buildings, dams, communication sites, recreation sites, roads, trails, and bridges. Second, to carry out this work effectively, the Forest Service is committed to continued intentional internal and external engagement with Tribal Nations whose ancestral homelands are within or adjacent to federally managed public lands, and communities that live by, visit, and depend on national forests. The Forest Service is committed to identifying and removing barriers to access Forest Service programs and services for historically underserved communities. This will be done by integrating equity-centered criteria in the design, funding, and prioritization of all policies, programs, and activities to center equity considerations as part of the decision process. The Forest Service will also work to advance mission critical work, remove barriers and boost economic opportunities through improved access to contracts, grants and agreements, and permits.

Leveraging Additional Funding Authorities

Along with the tools and investments proposed in the FY 2024 Presidents Budget, the Forest Service will leverage funding within the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law (BIL) and the Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) to confront the wildfire crisis, create new markets and technology for wood products, promote economic development, and restore forest health and resiliency through partnerships and collaboration across landscapes.

Through the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law (BIL), Congress provided a \$1.4 billion down payment that greatly assists in putting our Wildfire Crisis Strategy into action with investments on ten landscapes in eight Western States (Arizona, California, Colorado, Idaho, Montana, New Mexico, Oregon, and Washington). Through work on these landscapes and others, we completed treatments on 3.2 million acres nationally in 2022. We also accomplished these treatments in 118 of the 250 high-risk firesheds identified in the Wildfire Crisis Strategy. This work was accomplished despite numerous challenges including workforce capacity and high post-fire workloads from historic wildfire activity across the country the past several years. The work on these acres directly reduced risk to communities, infrastructure, and critical watersheds.

The Inflation Reduction Act provides the Forest Service an additional \$1.8 billion for hazardous fuels funding in the WUI. With IRA funding, we recently selected 11 additional landscapes for treatment in seven Western States (Arizona, California, Idaho, Nevada, Oregon, Utah, and Washington). Combined with the initial BIL investment landscapes, our actions will span nearly 45 million acres across 134 of the 250 high-risk firesheds in the western U.S., with a total investment to date of \$930 million on 21 landscapes in 2023. These investments will help reduce the risk of wildfire to at-risk communities, Tribal lands, critical infrastructure, utility corridors, and public water sources. We listened to our partners, the public we serve, Tribes and many others regarding what mattered most to them, where opportunity is, and where

challenges remain. Their feedback and our experience on these landscapes helped us identify both challenges to implementation and enabling conditions for future success.

Through Great American Outdoors Act (GAOA) (P.L. 116-152) funding for the National Parks and Public Land Legacy Restoration Fund, the Forest Service continues to repair and upgrade vital infrastructure and facilities in the national forests and grasslands. 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.

According to the agency's 2020 economic analysis, Forest Service GAOA deferred maintenance projects are projected to support approximately 4,400 jobs and contribute \$420 million to the Gross Domestic Product on an average annual basis over the 5-year authorization of the National Parks and Public Land Legacy Restoration Fund. In FY 2024, the Forest Service proposes \$94.3 million for the Forest Legacy Program, \$123.9 million for Federal Land Acquisition, and \$285 million for the National Parks and Public Land Legacy Restoration Fund. The FY 2024 project lists are included in the FY 2024 Budget request.

In closing, the President's FY 2024 Budget request for the Forest Service proposes a landmark investment in wildland fire, establishes funding priorities for risk-based wildfire reduction, and improves overall access and utilization of our National Forests System. The FY 2024 Budget request underscores our commitment to long-overdue investments in our wildland firefighter workforce to provide them with the compensation that they deserve, along with critical investments to support health and wellbeing, and expanded options for housing. The FY 2024 Budget also highlights the importance of restoring and creating resilient landscapes, improving infrastructure, and removing barriers to access. We look forward to working with this Subcommittee to fulfill the President's 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.