

**Testimony of Kirk Rowdabaugh
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**Before the House of Representatives Appropriations Subcommittee on Interior,
Environment and Related Agencies**

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On behalf of the National Association of State Foresters (NASF), I would like to thank Chairman Dicks and Ranking Member Tiahrt for the opportunity to appear before the Committee today. The National Association of State Foresters represents the directors of the state forestry agencies of all fifty states, eight territories, and the District of Columbia. State Foresters manage and protect state and private forests across the US, which encompass two-thirds of the nation's forests. In this testimony, I will address:

- the importance of investment in the National Fire Plan,
- the 10-year Comprehensive Strategy Implementation goals,
- the need for a fire suppression budget fix, and
- fire-fighter liability issues.

All of these impact the potential for successful cross-boundary work, and more importantly, the health and sustainability of our nation's forests.

It is no secret to the members of this Committee that forests are under a constant and ever-evolving barrage of threats, including diseases, invasive pests, catastrophic wildfire, global warming and development. Each of these threats, and a variety of others, pay no heed to ownership boundaries or state lines, and successful prevention, mitigation and restoration requires coordination at all levels and amongst all stakeholders.

The impact of these threats on the sustainability of our forests is of great concern to those who enjoy the benefits of our forests, benefits that include clean water, wildlife habitat, the opportunity for recreation, and a host of forest products that support local economies. In order for forests to continue to provide these important social, economic and environmental benefits, work on community planning, hazardous fuels reduction and other forest health projects must be done across ownership boundaries as well as county and state boundaries.

National Fire Plan

The National Fire Plan and the revised 10-year Comprehensive Strategy and Implementation Plan (TYIP) set the course for our nation's investment in prevention activities to improve the health of our forests. The goals of the TYIP are preparedness, hazardous fuels reduction, restoration and rehabilitation, and community assistance. Prior funding allocations have emphasized suppression, preparedness and hazardous fuels

reduction. This emphasis has resulted in less funding for the equally important goals of pre-fire restoration needs, post-fire rehabilitation and community assistance. Lack of funding for these programs in turn directly leads to an increase in the cost of fire suppression.

NASF recently examined the funding levels necessary to achieve full investment in the National Fire Plan and TYIP goals. The significant funding needs serve to raise the awareness of the TYIP and highlight the positive effects that appropriators could have on future wildland fire events through rehabilitation and restoration of fire adapted ecosystems and community assistance. Investment in community assistance programs such as State Fire Assistance (SFA) and Volunteer Fire Assistance, as well as rehabilitation and restoration of impacted lands, will lead to reduced wildland fire threats and eventually reduced suppression costs. These investments build on the collaborative partnerships that are necessary to successfully attack and lower the risks posed by wildland fire and help keep America's forestland forested.

Good Neighbor Authority

The Good Neighbor Program (GNP) is an example of a collaborative program that builds on the goals of the TYIP. The GNP is a pilot project authorized in both Colorado and Utah that facilitates work across state and federal boundaries. The Colorado State Forest Service (CSFS) has the authorization to act as the "agent" for the USDA Forest Service (USFS), or the Bureau of Land Management (BLM), when work is occurring or will occur on adjacent lands. The original legislation states that CSFS can "provide all services necessary to facilitate the performance by CSFS of watershed restoration and protection services across ownership boundaries". The USFS retains NEPA requirements and the project costs and receipts are split between the two agencies based on the contract. Programs that blur the boundaries in order to provide increased results for limited investment, such as the Good Neighbor Program and stewardship contracting, result in an increase of successful projects on the ground and should be expanded.

State Fire Assistance

The State Fire Assistance program is the primary federal program utilized by states to enhance their response capabilities to wildland fire. Improved response capability helps not only to keep property and people safe, but to reduce the overall cost of fire suppression as well, an important consideration as suppression costs are continuing to increase. Since fiscal year 2002, nearly 200,000 wildland firefighters have received training through SFA and many communities have increased their local suppression capacity through upgraded fire suppression equipment purchased using SFA monies. This additional capacity has directly improved cross-boundary wildland fire management on federal, state, and private lands.

To maintain and increase efficiencies, particularly important during times of anemic budgets, funds that are expended must be done so in a prioritized fashion. One of the ways SFA funds help to achieve meaningful prioritization is through the program's focus on

funding hazardous fuels reductions on high-priority wildland urban interface lands. SFAs are also used to fund the development of Community Wildfire Protection Plans (CWPP). CWPPs are powerful tools that enable communities to prioritize their preparedness and mitigation efforts across boundaries, on federal, state, and private lands.

In 2007 the number of communities covered by CWPPs increased from 3264 to 4762, a 46 percent increase from 2006. However, due to the increase of development in the wildland urban interface (WUI) and improved risk assessment capability, the number of communities identified to be at risk is increasing. 2007 also saw more than 12,000 communities increase their capacity for wildfire protection by training firefighters and upgrading equipment, as well as nearly 4,000 communities that reduced their fire risk via fuel treatments and Firewise outreach.

One example of improved risk assessment capability funded by the State Fire Assistance program is the Southern Wildfire Risk Assessment, a cross-boundary look at southern forests to identify at-risk communities in order to address threats on a priority basis. Increasing the ability of the State Fire Assistance program to do more of this promising work would be a great step in improving cross-boundary coordination and prioritization, protecting property, and saving lives.

As is evident, state forestry agencies allocate considerable resources to wildfire preparedness and suppression. In fact, according to the National Interagency Coordination Center, in 2007 states were responsible for battling 81 percent of the wildfires, fires that burned only 39 percent of the total acres burned in the country. Only 613 of those fires were reported at 100 acres or larger, making the initial attack success rate for state fires greater than 99 percent. State forestry agencies also provide significant fire fighting resources to our federal partners. The Resource Order Status System (ROSS) indicates that 23 state incident management teams were assigned to federal fires, including 3180 pieces of equipment, 1239 aircraft, 2374 crew personnel and 6300 overhead personnel. Indeed, these numbers are incredibly conservative in that they only cover extended attack, and do not fully account for state forestry agency contributions to initial attack on federal fires.

NASF is interested in exploring new ways of working with federal agencies in regards to cross-boundary protection. Currently, an estimated 45 million acres are covered by a mutual-aid agreement between a federal agency and local or volunteer fire departments. These local firefighting operations are supported through cooperative fire programs, including State Fire Assistance. In those situations where state agencies prove more efficient and effective at managing fires, it may be appropriate for federal agencies to develop new protection agreements with state agencies, if state partners are willing. Funds to support these agreements should be from federal preparedness funding rather than from SFA funding, as states will be assuming greater responsibility for a federal resource. In doing so, states would maintain capacity through SFA funding to address state responsibilities on private and state lands, while expanding capacity through federal preparedness funds. Placing greater requirements on SFA funds could result in state and local firefighting agencies not being able to support federal agencies to the extent that they

are doing so currently. Federal agencies must remain responsible for suppression costs incurred by state agencies on behalf of federal lands.

Some examples of how successful these protection agreements can be include agreements between the National Forest System in Alabama and the Alabama Forestry Commission, whereby the Forestry Commission provides all initial attack on wildfires for the Tuskegee National Forest. Through similar agreements, the Kentucky Division of Forestry provides initial attack for the Lands Between the Lakes National Recreation Area. Agreements such as these are funded through federal suppression and preparedness accounts, a better fit than State Fire Assistance.

Now is certainly not the time to cut important programs like State Fire Assistance. However, the current Administration budget proposal does just that by proposing to cut a host of programs, like SFA, Cooperative Forest Health, Forest Stewardship, Rehab and Restoration, and Hazardous Fuels Treatment. Cutting these programs that have a demonstrable track record of reducing the risk of catastrophic wildfire not only undermines the overall goal of sustaining healthy and productive forests, but also leads directly to increased wildfire suppression costs. The most effective method for reducing wildfire suppression costs is the funding of these proven programs.

Suppression Costs

Of course, NASF recognizes that one of the key barriers to increased funding for State Fire Assistance and other important State and Private Forestry programs is the increasing cost of wildfire suppression itself. As suppression costs skyrocket and billion plus dollar fire seasons become the norm the burden on the US Forest Service budget becomes backbreaking. Fire suppression now represents more than half of the Forest Service budget, in turn reducing the monies spent on State Fire Assistance, Forest Health or any of a host of the State and Private Forestry programs. If properly funded, these program areas would serve to drive down the cost of fire suppression over time and help to protect people and property from devastating fire.

The negative impact of Agency funds being diverted to fund suppression activities is increasing. The goals of restoration/rehabilitation and community assistance in the 10-yr strategy implementation plan cannot be achieved with these reduced investment levels. As the 10-year average of suppression costs continues to be deducted from the static USFS budget, the funds available for other USFS programs are exponentially reduced. The President's FY09 budget proposal includes devastating cuts throughout the State & Private Forestry programs. In some cases, entire programs will cease to be relevant if Congress approves the President's proposal.

NASF has proposed one potential method for remedying this dire fiscal situation. Our proposal creates a fund for emergency wildland fire suppression activities, along with a reinvestment in the Agency programs. This account would be used to fund emergency fire suppression activities above and beyond the Forest Service's normal fire suppression duties. The fact is that only one percent of the wildfires destroy 95% of all burned acres,

and consume 85% of suppression costs. These emergency fires should be treated the same way as other natural disasters, and should not come off the Forest Service baseline at the expense of all other Forest Service priorities and programs.

Partitioning the emergency suppression costs from the USFS budget, reformulating the way the USFS budgets for fire, as well as providing for cost containment incentives, accountability assurances and fiscal support for the Agency's other important programs, will bring a measure of fiscal sanity to fire suppression costs, and will allow the USFS budget to revert to a more traditional approach similar to other federal agencies. The partitioning of emergency costs partnered with reinvestment in programs aimed at addressing the threats facing forests, including the State Fire Assistance program, will lead to a long-term reduction in fire suppression costs as the conditions on our nation's forests improve.

The need for non-emergency fire suppression funding will continue to be a necessary part of the USFS budget; no matter how well our forests are managed there will always be wildfire that requires the quick and well-trained response of our proficient wildland firefighters. Wildland fire knows no political boundaries, and subsequently wildland firefighters work together on the interagency goal of stopping catastrophic wildfire independent of landownership patterns. Currently, federal, state and local firefighters work side by side to protect American lives, homes and natural resources, the very essence of cross-boundary coordination.

Firefighter Liability

Yet not all firefighters have the same level of liability protection in case something goes wrong on the fire line. Federal firefighters are covered under the federal liability umbrella that extends to all federal employees. However, state and local firefighters do not have access to this liability protection even as they fight fire side by side with their federal agency compatriots. This fundamental gap in protection has discouraged state and local firefighters from taking assignments they deem too risky in an effort to protect themselves and their families. NASF supports the extension of this type of comprehensive coverage to all firefighters regardless of their agency affiliation and regardless of where they are fighting.

Conclusion

State Forestry agencies have a long history of providing wildfire suppression and preparedness capacity across all ownerships. Our agencies are often the first responders, battling fire effectively, saving lives and property. It is in the federal interest to help ensure that state forestry agencies can continue to protect our communities, and we look forward to working with the Committee and Congress in the near future to enhance our ability to collectively address all aspects of keeping our nation's forests healthy and our people safe. Thank you again for the opportunity to share the thoughts of the National Association of State Foresters today, and I am happy to take any questions Committee members may have.