STATEMENT OF
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CA STATE ASSEMBLY NATURAL RESOURCES COMMITTEE
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JOINT HEARING
on

"TREE MORTALITY, FOREST HEALTH AND PRESCRIBED FIRE"

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Mr. Chairmen and Committee Members, thank you for the opportunity to present the views of the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), Forest Service regarding tree mortality, forest health and the use of prescribed and managed fire to maintain healthy forests and ecosystems in California. My name is Jeanne Wade Evans and I am the Deputy Regional Forester for the Pacific Southwest Region of the U.S. Forest Service.

Introduction: National Forests in California

The Forest Service manages 18 National Forests in the Pacific Southwest Region, which encompasses over 20 million acres across California, and assists State and Private forest landowners in California, Hawaii and the U.S. Affiliated Pacific Islands. National forests supply 50 percent of the water in California and form the watershed of most major aqueducts and more than 2,400 reservoirs throughout the state.

Fire & Forest Health

One of the most effective ways to mitigate wildfire risk is to restore and maintain resilient landscapes; resiliency includes functioning, natural fire regimes. California's forests have evolved with and have been shaped by fire for centuries. The landscape requires fire to maintain a healthy balance, removing dead and dying vegetation, recycling nutrients and creating space for new vegetation to grow. Due to a century of fire suppression combined with land development and loss of indigenous burning practices, many of California's forests have become uncharacteristically dense, making them subject to insect and disease outbreaks as well as larger, hotter wildfires.

Late in the Twentieth Century the concept of using fire as a tool to create and maintain healthy forests began to gain more social favor. The Forest Service is working to reduce the intensity of wildfires by conducting hazardous fuel treatments, such as mechanical thinning and prescribed fire, and by taking advantage of opportunities to manage wildfires to control fuel build-up and rejuvenate vegetation.

However, the wildland urban interface continues to grow in California and the rest of the country at a rapid pace, making it more difficult and costly to suppress wildfires and improve forest health. The risks to critical resources and infrastructure are also increasing, such as water and power supplies, communications sites, transportation corridors and clean air.

California Tree Mortality

2016 was the fifth consecutive year of drought and record-setting low fuel moistures in California. Since 2010, 102 million trees have died across all lands in the state due to drought, rising temperatures and growing bark beetle populations – between 2015 and 2016 alone, 91 million trees died.

Tree mortality on this scale is degrading overall forest health, adversely affecting local economies, and is posing risks to public health and safety. In light of this season's record rains and flooding, the Forest Service also has increased concerns about dead trees posing additional risks to people as well as falling on roads and infrastructure, and into critical rivers and streams.

The Forest Service is using the Incident Command System structure, similar to what is used to manage incidents such as wildfires, to address tree mortality in the Region. To date, the Forest Service has felled 278,000 hazard trees along 450 miles of roads, 81 miles of power lines, in 160 recreation sites, and around 45 communities. In addition to these treatments that total over 28,000 acres, we created or maintained approximately 1,375 acres of fuel breaks to protect communities.

Trees will continue to die throughout California despite the winter 2016/2017 precipitation. Typically, it takes one to three years after an above-normal precipitation year before trees regain their natural defenses against bark beetles.

Forest Service treatments will remain closely aligned with the actions and recommendations of Governor Brown's Tree Mortality Task Force. The need for funding and resources to address the unprecedented scale of this statewide event will continue. The Forest Service and the State share the goal of restoring the ecological resilience of forested lands in California to achieve sustainable ecosystems that provide a broad range of services to humans and other organisms.

The Rising Cost of Wildfire

The costs of fire suppression are rising rapidly every year as fire seasons have grown longer and fires have grown larger and more complex. The cost of fire suppression has gone from 15 percent in 1995 to over half of the Forest Service's national budget in 2015; the costs are expected to continue rising. As fire suppression grows as a percentage of the Forest Service's budget, funding has to shrink for non- fire programs like recreation, ecosystem restoration and infrastructure maintenance. This includes reducing the very programs that would protect watersheds and restore forests, making them more resilient to fire in the future.

In 2016, wildland fire agencies responded to 7,358 fires in California that burned over 576,000 acres. The Forest Service spent nearly $400 million in suppression efforts in California during the 2016 fire season. Most of the 2016 large fires burned in Southern California and in the urban interface where there are billions of dollars in developments and 22 million people in the Southern California general area. The landscapes in Southern California and other areas with significant improvements and communities make it more difficult to implement a management strategy with natural resource objectives. Because of these values that become threatened by wildfire, a full suppression strategy must be employed.

Prescribed & Managed Fire in Creating More Resilient Forests

The application of prescribed fire presents one of the best opportunities for addressing risk to firefighters and the public long-term while achieving our land management objectives on a meaningful scale. Studies have shown that prescribed fires and fires managed for a resource objective result in a fraction of the emissions that occur from large wildfires. Compared to wildfires that often occur under the worst air quality conditions, fire managers are able to capitalize on weather conditions when making decisions

on how to implement activities on prescribed and managed fires in order to reduce impacts to air quality. As more prescribed and managed fire is applied, creating a more resilient landscape, it will become easier to influence the effects of unwanted wildfire and its effects.

While the costs associated with fire suppression is at an all-time high, fires managed for resource objectives typically cost taxpayers less than half of what a fire with a full suppression strategy costs. Similarly, the use of prescribed fire is one of the least costly forest management tools available as compared to mechanical treatments such as thinning and mastication that can cost in excess of $1,000 per acre.

The intent laid out by the National Cohesive Wildland Fire Strategy of restoring fire on the landscape has been a big contributor to our successes to date. The vision of this Strategy is to safely and effectively extinguish fire when needed; use fire where allowable; manage our natural resources; and as a nation, to live with wildland fire.

Many agencies and organizations are aligned behind the visions and goals of the National Cohesive Wildland Fire Strategy, including other land management agencies like the National Park Service and the Bureau of Land Management, CAL FIRE, the California Air Resources Board, air districts and non-government agencies like Sierra Forest Legacy. The Pacific Southwest Region is proud of these accomplishments, but recognizes that nearly 600,000 acres of shovel-ready projects remain available for implementation pending funding – we will continue to align budgets, capacity and priorities in order to increase our accomplishments. These accomplishments, although a positive achievement, need to be applied across a wider landscape with many more acres treated to truly be successful.

Commitment to the Use of Prescribed Fire

The Forest Service is committed to reducing the risks posed by wildland fire by increasing the use of prescribed fire across our national forests in California. Risk management is critical – we must always balance the need to use fire with the ability to safely get the best results. The right fire, at the right place, at the right time will act to improve forest health and reduce the threat to firefighters and communities from wildfire while minimizing the spread of pest insects and disease and improving habitat for threatened and endangered species.

The majority of our regulatory partners and Forest staff have shown improving performance in collaborative management of natural ignitions to achieve fire and air quality objectives. One of these collaborative efforts is the “coordination and communication protocol for naturally ignited fire” developed by California land management agencies and California Air Resource Board.

Another helpful tool is the Prescribed Fire Incident Reporting System, an interface between air quality managers and individuals that conduct prescribed burning in California that is intended to facilitate communication and provide information pertaining to prescribed burning and emissions statewide.

Regulatory Tools

The Forest Service is using programs such as the Joint Chiefs Landscape Restoration Program and authorities in the 2014 Farm Bill to increase the effectiveness of our hazardous fuel mitigation work by coordinating work across ownership boundaries. Projects on federal, state and private lands include hazardous fuels removal, invasive species, fuelbreak development to protect communities, and habitat and water quality improvements.

The 2014 Farm Bill created a new Categorical Exclusion (CE) to be used on NFS lands for projects up to 3,000 acres in watersheds experiencing or at risk of insect and disease outbreaks. Designating watersheds using the Insect and Disease CEs will allow us to more efficiently implement treatments across the landscape. Projects in these designated areas must be developed in collaboration with a diverse group of stakeholders to both leverage funds and maintain transparency around our tree mortality response efforts. The Forest Service currently has 529 designated watersheds covering 6.8 million acres.

CAL FIRE’s Greenhouse Gas Reduction Fund provides an additional funding opportunity to increase the pace and scale of forest health projects across National Forest System lands. The Forest Service’s grant application will target key landscapes with projects that will ensure California's forests continue to sequester carbon and reduce or avoid greenhouse gas emissions due to pest damage and wildfires.

Impediments

While we have had many accomplishments working cooperatively with our partners in California, there are several impediments that, if addressed, could allow for additional work across larger portions of the landscape and lead to healthier, more resilient forests.

1. The lack of adequate wood and biomass processing infrastructure is a limiting factor to making California's forests more resilient. In particular, building a sustainable market for small diameter material to be utilized would help reduce the fuel loading that is at the heart of the forest health issue while enhancing the economy in the state.

2. Air quality regulations tied to the California Code of Regulations – Title 17 currently lump prescribed fire and managed fire efforts by government agencies and timber companies into the same category as agricultural burning. There is no independent category to account for the need to use more prescribed or managed fire to increase forest resilience.

3. Currently there is no standardized fee structure throughout California. A systematic fee process applied statewide would allow for transparency and clarity for air quality regulation charges applied to the use of prescribed fire and managed fire, especially for Forests that include multiple air districts.

4. Under the National Environmental Policy Act, federal agencies have reached programmatic agreements with State Historic Preservation Officers and other regulatory entities that recognize prescribed fire as a low severity occurrence, similar to a naturally occurring event. If state and private managers using the California Environmental Quality Act could take advantage of similar programmatic agreements, planning and analysis costs would be reduced and the time required to complete such analysis could be streamlined.

Conclusion

No one agency or organization can do this work alone. Private landowners and homeowners must create defensible space for us to be able to protect life and property on and around private lands. We need all agencies, all landowners, and the public to help us work across all jurisdictions using all funding sources available to us in order to be successful.

This concludes my remarks. I would be happy to answer any questions. Thank you for the opportunity to testify.