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Oversight, Nutrition, and Forestry, Committee on
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WILDLAND FIRE MANAGEMENT

Reducing the Threat of Wildland Fires Requires Sustained and Coordinated Effort

Statement of Barry T. Hill
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Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee:

Thank you for the opportunity to be here today to discuss wildland fires and our work to identify actions necessary to improve our nation's response to this significant threat. The most extensive and serious problem related to the health of forested lands—particularly in the interior West—is the over accumulation of vegetation, which is causing an increasing number of large, intense, uncontrollable, and destructive wildfires. In 1999, the Department of Agriculture's Forest Service estimated that 39 million acres of national forested lands in the interior West were at high risk of catastrophic wildfire. This figure later grew to over 125 million acres as the Department of the Interior agencies and states identified additional land that they considered to be high risk. To a large degree, these forest health problems contributed to the 2000 wildfires—which were some of the worst in the last 50 years. The policy response to these problems was the development of the National Fire Plan—a long-term multibillion dollar effort to address the wildland fires threats we are now facing. Currently, wildland fires are blazing in 10 states, with numerous fires in Colorado, and the potential exists for another catastrophic wildfire season. Already, the number of acres burnt this year totals about 1.4 million—which is almost 200,000 more acres than were burned by this time in 2000.

Mr. Chairman, before proceeding with the specifics of my testimony today, I think it is important to set the proper tone and context for the points we will be making. As we sit here with suburban Denver in flames and citizens there and in other parts of the country in harm's way as the result of on-going wildland fires, it is tempting and understandable to seek immediate short-term solutions to these immediate dangers. However, the problems at hand took decades to develop; unfortunately there are no quick fixes. Solving these problems will require a long-term commitment and sustained effort.

Since 1997, we have issued a series of reports that discuss the extent and seriousness of the wildland fire problem; federal efforts to prepare for, mitigate, and suppress wildfire threats and risks; and actions needed to improve the effectiveness of these efforts. We are here today to highlight what our work has shown.

In summary, our work on wildland fire has stressed the need for three things: (1) a cohesive strategy to address growing threats to national forest resources and nearby communities from catastrophic wildfires, (2) clearly defined and effective leadership to carry out that strategy in a coordinated manner; and (3) accountability to ensure that progress is being made toward accomplishing the goals of the National Fire Plan. Two years ago, the Forest Service and the Department of the Interior began developing strategies to address these problems, and recently established a leadership entity—the Wildland Fire Leadership Council—that is intended to respond to the need for greater interagency coordination. Whether the strategy and the council will serve as the framework and mechanism to effectively deal with the threat of catastrophic wildland fire remains to be seen and will depend upon how well the National Fire Plan is implemented. To determine the effectiveness of this implementation effort, we continue to believe that a sound performance accountability framework is needed; one that provides for specific performance measures and data that can be used to assess implementation progress and problems.

Need for a More Cohesive Strategy to Address Growing Threats

In April 1999, we reported that the Forest Service had begun, during the 1990s, to address the unintended consequences of its decades-old policy of putting out naturally occurring wildfires, which had weakened the health of national forests.¹ It announced its goal to improve forest health and the resulting consequences of uncontrollable, catastrophic wildfires on national forests by the end of fiscal year 2015. To accomplish this goal, it (1) initiated a program to monitor forest health; (2) refocused its wildland fire management program to increase the number of acres on which it reduces the accumulated vegetation that forms excessive fuel; and (3) restructured its budget to better ensure that funds are available for reducing these fuels. However, we noted that it lacked much needed data to accurately assess risks and plan fuel reduction activities. For example, the Forest Service had not sufficiently mapped the extent and locations of

¹U.S. General Accounting Office, *Western National Forests: A Cohesive Strategy is Needed to Address Catastrophic Wildfire Threats*, GAO/RCED-99-65 (Washington, D.C., Apr. 2, 1999).

hazardous conditions, and the agency said that, even when the initial mapping was completed, the data would not be precise enough to provide a basis for identifying, setting priorities for, and designing site-specific projects. Without these data, it is uncertain whether the Forest Service could meet its goal of improving forest health by the end of fiscal year 2015. We therefore recommended that the Secretary of Agriculture direct the Chief of the Forest Service to develop a comprehensive strategy to acquire the needed data.

In response to our report, the Forest Service developed a strategy to restore and maintain ecosystem health for priority areas across the interior West. The priorities it identified for maintaining ecosystem health included (1) wildland-urban interface areas where wildland fuels are adjacent to homes and communities, (2) readily accessible municipal watersheds that could be affected by wildland fire effects, (3) threatened and endangered species habitat, and (4) areas that are currently at low risk and that should be maintained as low risk. As part of that strategy, the Forest Service also identified strategic actions for immediate resolution, including the development of more precise mapping data for identifying and setting priorities for wildland fuel risks, and developing regional implementation plans that integrate status and risk information.

Following the issuance of our report, the large-scale wildfires of 2000 made it apparent that the problems we identified on Forest Service lands also existed on many lands managed by the Department of the Interior, as well as on many state and privately owned lands across the nation. As a consequence, the Forest Service and the Department of the Interior have worked with states and other parties to develop common comprehensive strategies. These strategies—collectively termed the National Fire Plan—address not only the need to reduce fuels, but also the need for more effective approaches for wildland fire preparedness. The Congress, in turn, has substantially increased funding for these two specific activities—by up to \$2.5 billion over the fiscal year 2001 and 2002 time period.

Need for Clearly Defined and Effective Leadership

In January and in March 2002, we reported that, over a year after the Congress substantially increased funds to reduce hazardous fuels and for wildland fire preparedness, the Forest Service and the Department of the Interior have not established clearly defined and effective leadership for addressing these problems and implementing the National Fire Plan.^{2,3} With respect to reducing hazardous fuels accumulations, we noted that the departments did not use the same method for identifying and setting priorities for wildland-urban interface communities at high risk for wildland fire. The departments did not coordinate these activities, but instead did them separately. As a result, there was no assurance that the increased funding appropriated by the Congress for reducing hazardous forest fuel build-ups was being allocated to the most seriously threatened communities. Similarly, with respect to preparedness, we found the departments did not use the same models for identifying fire-fighting equipment or personnel needs, or for accounting for personnel costs. As a result of this lack of coordination, there was no assurance that the increased funding appropriated by the Congress for suppressing fires when they do occur was being allocated in a manner that provides the necessary capacity to respond where it is most needed.

We recommended that the Congress consider directing the Secretaries of Agriculture and of the Interior to establish an interagency national council recommended by the National Academy of Public Administration.⁴ In April of this year, the Secretaries of Agriculture and of the Interior established a Wildland Fire Leadership Council composed of the Undersecretary of Agriculture for Natural Resources and the Environment; the Chief of

²U.S. General Accounting Office, *Severe Wildland Fires: Leadership and Accountability Needed to Reduce Risks to Communities and Resources*, GAO-02-259 (Washington, D.C., Jan. 31, 2002).

³U.S. General Accounting Office, *Wildland Fire Management: Improved Planning Will Help Agencies Better Identify Fire-Fighting Preparedness Needs*, GAO-02-158 (Washington, D.C., Mar. 29, 2002).

⁴*Managing Wildland Fire: Enhancing Capacity to Implement the Federal Interagency Policy*. A Report by a Panel of the National Academy of Public Administration for the United States Department of Interior (Dec. 2001).

the Forest Service; Directors of the Bureau of Land Management, National Park Service, and Fish and Wildlife Service; the Assistant Secretary for Indian Affairs; and the Chief of the Staff to the Secretary of the Interior. The council is to work to achieve consistent and coordinated efforts, through its members, to implement the National Fire Plan. It is too early to determine whether this approach to leadership will succeed in overcoming the coordination problems we identified. However, we note that the agreement between the departments of Agriculture and the Interior calls for them to manage their own activities and resources in pursuing objectives and that disagreements between the departments are to be resolved by elevating any disagreements separately within each department rather than to a single decisionmaker. Accordingly, there appears to be no single decision-making mechanism for resolving disputes between the departments. This approach could potentially allow for a continued separate, and not necessarily coordinated, effort.

Need for Improved Accountability for Managing Wildland Fire

In January and March 2002, we also reported that the Forest Service and the Department of the Interior have not established performance measures to account for the departments' accomplishments in such areas as hazardous fuels reduction and wildland fire preparedness. Concerning hazardous fuels reduction, we pointed out that a sound performance measurement framework is needed to ensure that funds appropriated to reduce hazardous fuels are spent in an efficient, effective, and timely manner. Because the departments have been unable to develop performance measures for their hazardous fuels reduction efforts, and because the implementation of a performance accountability framework is also fragmented, (1) high-risk communities have not been identified and numbered in order of priority, (2) multiple strategies have been developed with different goals and objectives, (3) quantifiable indicators of performance have not been developed to measure progress in reducing risks, and (4) annual plans and reports that have been developed do not describe what will be accomplished with appropriated funds.

We recommended that the Secretaries of the Interior and of Agriculture jointly direct the heads of the departments to collect the accurate, complete, and comparable data needed to (1) better identify and set priorities for wildland-urban interface communities that are at high risk from wildland fire on federal lands; (2) determine if changes are needed to expedite the project-planning process; and (3) measure the effectiveness of efforts to dispose of the large amount of brush, small trees, and other vegetation that must be removed to reduce the risk of severe wildland fire. The departments are now in the process of developing performance measures, such as the number of acres treated that are in the wildland-urban interface, and are in the process of determining whether the data are available that could support its performance measurement needs.

With regard to our report on wildland fire preparedness, we noted that the departments have not yet identified the results they expect to achieve with the additional resources they received under the National Fire Plan. It therefore will be difficult to determine the extent to which these additional personnel, and the additional equipment that has been purchased, have increased the level of fire-fighting preparedness. We recommended that the departments develop performance measures identifying the results to be achieved with the personnel and equipment obtained with the additional funding provided under the National Fire Plan. While the departments report that they have developed specific performance measures for wildland fire preparedness, more work needs to be done. For example, the departments still need to develop common definitions of outputs and measures, validate new performance measures with baseline data, and refine information collection systems to ensure the right data are collected to measure results. The departments expect to have these new performance measures fully implemented in time for use in the formulation of the fiscal year 2004 budget.

In conclusion, Mr. Chairman, the difficult task of effectively addressing wildland fire—a problem that has taken decades to develop—will require a sustained and coordinated effort to address. As our reports point out, a single, unified approach is necessary—not each department separately planning for and addressing wildland fire issues. To this end and to the departments' credit, they have developed a cohesive strategy to address the

problem and put in place an entity to provide for more clearly defined leadership. However, to reduce the number and size of catastrophic destructive fires—such as those currently occurring in Colorado and other western states—in the long term will depend, to a large degree, on how effective the federal government is in implementing this strategy and approach.

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Mr. Chairman, this concludes my prepared remarks. I will be happy to answer any question that you or the other Members of the Subcommittee may have.

Contacts and Acknowledgement

For future contacts regarding this statement, please contact me on (202) 512-3841. Individuals making key contributions to this testimony were Paul Bollea, Cliff Fowler, Chester Janik, Chester Joy, and Marcia McWreath.

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