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FOR THE UTAH DIVISION OF FORESTRY, FIRE AND STATE LANDS
BEFORE THE COMMITTEE OF HOMELAND SECURITY AND GOVERNMENTAL AFFAIRS

“A Nation on Fire: Responding to the Increasing Wildfire Threat”

March 14, 2024

Good morning Chairman Peters, Ranking Member Paul and members of the Committee. I am Jamie Barnes, Director/State Forester for the Utah Division of Forestry, Fire and State Lands. Thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today and discuss wildfire and the increasing threat of wildfire across the nation. My testimony today will focus on the increasing threat of wildfire to communities, with the increased severity of wildfires, the true cost of wildfire, the importance of interagency collaboration and necessary actions to improve disaster response, recovery and mitigation.

Increasing Threat of Wildfire to Communities and Increased Severity of Wildfires

We are no stranger to the development occurring in our Wildland Urban Interface communities, the area where communities meet and intersperse with wildlands. With urban growth comes an increased risk of devastating wildfire. Many of these areas contain an overgrowth of fuels, creating conditions where a seemingly insignificant ignition source could lead to a wildfire. We are seeing fires burn hotter and more severely, due to the excess fuels and lack of active management on the landscape. Many states across the Western US now refer to the fire season as a fire year due to the increased number and severity of fires outside of the traditional fire season. Increased fire occurrence and severity also lead to more days of wildfire smoke in communities. The increased severity and intensity of fires outside of the typical fire season is demonstrated by recent destructive wildfires experienced in places like Colorado, Maui and most recently Texas. The unexpected is no longer unexpected; it is the new normal.

In addition to states being faced with the increasing suppression costs of altered fire regimes, private landowners are now being pressured to reduce the amount of fuels on their property. While this may reduce the individual risk of wildfires, communities have little control over wildfires beyond their property boundary. We do have tools in the toolbox that we can use to help mitigate hazardous fuels and actively manage our lands. Practicing prescribed fire as a management tool could prevent fires



from getting out of control and ultimately reduce smoke pollution. However, it becomes complex when dealing with air quality standards for prescribed burning and permitting challenges with mechanical treatments and cross-boundary landscapes, including adherence to NEPA. The majority of the focus around air quality has focused around vehicle and industrial emissions, which is out of proportion to the frequency and ferocity of wildfire events. Wildfires can negate any improvement of air quality in a single incident. Air quality implications, much the same as wildfire, impact communities regardless of jurisdictional boundaries. Utah spends the majority of summer months inundated with smoke from fires in other states. With this in mind we must remember the true costs of wildfire.

The True Cost of Wildfire

Each year, wildfire suppression dollars are reported and used widely to bring context to the severity of the fire season. In reality, suppression is only a fraction of the cost. When assessing the full cost of wildfires we must consider the long-term and complex costs including, but not limited to, impacts to: public & firefighter safety, loss of life, loss of property including but not limited to homes and infrastructure, infrastructure shutdowns (e.g., highways & airports), lost revenues to business (e.g., tourism), air and water quality impacts, wildlife and habitat loss, post-fire rehabilitation costs, flooding and erosion, healthcare costs (e.g., respiratory) and evacuation costs. In addition, ecosystem services must be considered, as they could have unknown and everlasting future impacts.

The Importance of Interagency Collaboration

Utah's collaborative relationships lead to our successes. We believe in strong interagency collaboration, along with shared decision making and leveraging respective agency mandates and projects. Shared Stewardship and Fire Sense are examples of how the "Utah Way" achieves goals/work across the landscape on the State's public and private lands and allows for advancement of landscape scale efforts and state-wide prevention campaigns.

Shared Stewardship:

The Shared Stewardship approach brings partners and stakeholders together to focus on doing the right work, in the right place at the right scale. Utah is leading the way in many areas on the Shared Stewardship platform, creating a partnership with USDA Forest Service, Utah Division of Forestry, Fire and State Lands, Utah Public Lands Policy and Coordinating Office (PLPCO) and Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS). Through Shared Stewardship projects areas are identified in watersheds that are at risk for wildfire, impacting Utah's communities and drinking water. Most recently, the priority areas have been updated to account for new data, and an expanded analysis to



encompass all lands in the state. This is a new approach as we learn how to navigate Shared Stewardship with the wildfire crisis priority areas and the constant threat of wildfires with ongoing drought and one of the fastest-growing populations in the nation. Since 2019 the Shared Stewardship program in Utah has invested \$30 million dollars in active forest management, treating over 80,000 acres with methods such as mastication, cut and pile and prescribed fire. This initiative has improved Utah's watershed through a collaborative approach.

Fire Sense:

Fire Sense is a state-sponsored campaign with interagency collaboration to educate Utah citizens and visitors on wildfire prevention. The mission of the fire sense campaign is to get Utahns to take personal responsibility for wildfire. Through this initiative Utahns have successfully reduced human-caused wildfires by over 60% over the last three years. The use of billboards, social media, media, public service announcements, partnerships, and various other methods have helped us achieve this. In the future, we aim to further educate through a more surgical distribution of our message and using new behavior change techniques to help people take personal responsibility for fire safety. Fire Sense was honored with the Bronze Smokey the Bear award this year from US Forest Service, the Ad Council and National Association of State Foresters.

Necessary Actions to Improve Disaster Response, Recovery and Mitigation

The Wildfire Mitigation and Management and Commission Act report presented key findings that are important to Utah with regard to mitigating and managing wildfires.

In the last decade, Utah has seen large wildfires and escaped prescribed burn projects impact watersheds. These significant events have caused severe long-term issues and have had costly impacts. (i.e., Brian Head Fire, Dollar Ridge Fire, Trail Mountain RX). Finding ways to make planning more effective and efficient, such as improved information gathering, training, staffing, collaboration, and programmatic analyses for restoration and hazardous fuels reduction activities could potentially reduce the risk to watersheds and landscapes across the state. This is one approach that Utah has been very proactive in with the Shared Stewardship program, but with limited funding. There are still limitations to achieving large landscape scale projects due to NEPA's litigation challenges, the need for permitting reform and the lack of mechanisms for forest management. Utah has two jointly funded positions with the NRCS to implement IRA money on the ground through general forestry work. Similar positions dedicated to watershed protection would benefit the state and allow for more cross-boundary assessment and collaboration.



Limited funding is available for post-wildfire restoration at the state level. Providing additional funding would help in the recovery from a significant wildfire event. In addition, supporting multi-year funding for federal programs would significantly enhance their efficiency and provide agencies with more reliable funding, aiding states in fire mitigation and management work. Boosting funding for watershed rehabilitation programs after disasters and endorsing new and effective approaches and agency efforts to enhance planning, response, and collaboration in the aftermath of fires would significantly improve the recovery program.

Forestry, Fire and State Lands evaluates the State of Utah wildfire risk by considering the resources and values at risk in an area to determine high, moderate or low fire risk. These same metrics should be used to prioritize and gauge the success of mitigation work and not just the amount of acres treated. Current federal performance metrics focus solely on metrics around acres treated or burned to measure success. Success should be gauged by outcomes such as safeguarded assets, values, and resources and the effectiveness in returning and maintaining forests and rangelands in a more resilient state. Achieving success depends on avoiding data isolation, ensuring compatibility with existing processes, and providing up-to-date, accessible data to states.

Prioritizing investment in building a workforce dedicated to restoration and mitigation efforts is important throughout the nation. Firefighter pay has been at the center of discussions for many years now. Utah recently passed legislation addressing the pay of state wildland firefighters. This allowed for an increase in compensation for those involved in fighting wildfire. Increasing pay across agencies is needed, but we caution against swift pay raises to prevent wage conflicts in Utah among state and federal agencies.

CONCLUSION:

We need to learn to live with wildfire being the new normal. We need to recognize the increasing threat. Making communities firesafe is part of learning to live with the reality of wildfire. We need to fight fire with fire, putting more fire on the landscape through prescribed burning. Lower intensity fire creates healthy resilient forests that are much more manageable and reduce the risk to fire fighters, communities and the impacts to air quality. Increasing funding and capacity, along with finding ways to strengthen collaborative relationships and engage in planning and permitting reform is the key to successful forest management and reducing the number of wildfires throughout the nation.