

**REVIEW OF THE 2005 WILDFIRE SEASON &
PREVIEW OF THE 2006 WILDFIRE SEASON**

HEARING
BEFORE THE
SUBCOMMITTEE ON PUBLIC LANDS AND FORESTS
OF THE
COMMITTEE ON
ENERGY AND NATURAL RESOURCES
UNITED STATES SENATE
ONE HUNDRED NINTH CONGRESS
SECOND SESSION
TO
REVIEW THE 2005 WILDFIRE SEASON & FEDERAL LAND MANAGEMENT
AGENCIES' PREPARATIONS FOR THE 2006 WILDFIRE SEASON

APRIL 5, 2006



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REVIEW OF THE 2005 WILDFIRE SEASON & PREVIEW OF THE 2006 WILDFIRE SEASON

WEDNESDAY, APRIL 5, 2006

U.S. SENATE,
SUBCOMMITTEE ON PUBLIC LANDS AND FORESTS,
COMMITTEE ON ENERGY AND NATURAL RESOURCES,
Washington, DC.

The subcommittee met, pursuant to notice, at 2:32 p.m., in room SD-366, Dirksen Senate Office Building, Hon. Larry Craig presiding.

OPENING STATEMENT OF HON. LARRY E. CRAIG, U.S. SENATOR FROM IDAHO

Senator CRAIG. Good afternoon, everyone, and thank you for attending this oversight hearing on Federal fire preparedness. I'd like to welcome everyone to the hearing this afternoon and to develop an overview of this year's fire season.

Today, testimony will be provided by the Department of Agriculture's Under Secretary of Natural Resources and Environment, Mark Rey. Mark, welcome before the committee. And the Department of the Interior's Deputy Assistant Secretary of Policy, Management, and Budget, that's Miss Nina Rose Hatfield. Nina, welcome again. Both are accompanied by their respective fire experts who will be happy to answer the questions we might have. Welcome to all of you.

As you all know, we are heading into this year's fire season and in some regions of the country it has already been an extraordinary fire season. One only has to look at what happened in Texas and Oklahoma with hundreds of thousands of acres burned in January and February to worry about what kind of fire season we will have in the Southwest and in southern California. For many other parts of the country where winter moisture is near normal, we will have to see how much and at what frequency we get summer rains that could control our fire seasons. Sadly, the conditions of our Federal lands when it comes to hazardous fuels is not changing quickly enough to make anyone believe that one wet winter is going to put an end to the string of bad and worsening fire years.

There are a number of changes in fiscal policy and shifts in budget priorities that concern many senators, including myself, but I'm going to leave them to the questions and answers period of today's session. I do want to bring up an issue that I believe underlies the entire question of why fire suppression is so expensive, as well as a concern I have with the recent shift in funding within the fiscal year 2006 hazardous fuels account. On March 30, the chief signed

a memo to all regional foresters, station directors, and area directors pulling about \$10 million in hazardous fuels funding to spend that money in southern California. This redirection of funding means that regions one and four, where my State is located, will see approximately 2,000 acres less hazardous fuel work done in this fiscal year than was originally planned, and unless I miss my guess, the \$414,561 being withdrawn from regions one and four would accomplish many more acres in the inner mountain country than they will in southern California.

So, Under Secretary Rey, would you please be so kind as to explain why, after Congress focused so much emergency supplemental hazardous fuels funds on southern California forests over the last 3 or 4 years, the Forest Service thinks that hazardous fuel suppression funding in southern California is so much more important than similar work in my State of Idaho. I will close by telling you that I will have a number of other questions on this and will likely also submit additional questions on this subject for your staff to answer.

Also for those of you interested in the implementation of the Healthy Forest Restoration Act, I anticipate holding an oversight hearing on the implementation of that act in June and July. So now let me turn first to the ranking member of the full committee, Senator Bingaman of New Mexico.

Jeff.

**STATEMENT OF HON. JEFF BINGAMAN, U.S. SENATOR
FROM NEW MEXICO**

Senator BINGAMAN. Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman, and I appreciate you and Senator Wyden having this hearing and letting me participate. Let me just indicate the great concern that I have—and I think all of New Mexico's elected officials probably have—about the potential extreme fire risk that we see in our State over the next few months. We have an extreme drought that we have been experiencing in our State. The Governor has declared a state-wide fire emergency. This is the first time in our State's history that that has happened. At the same time, the State and Federal wildfire management agencies currently are struggling to overcome a 20 percent cut in the Forest Service wildfire preparedness budget, and that's on top of a \$2 million dollar cut from last year, fiscal year 2005. The State fire assistance budget for the Southwest has been cut by 77 percent since 2003, and BLM is proposing to eliminate altogether its \$10 million State and local fire assistance program. So these are important programs, and have been important programs for our State.

I also am concerned about the issue that Senator Craig raised about this recent directive from Washington to reallocate hazardous fuels reduction funds from my State of New Mexico to California. The directive cuts more from the Southwest than from any other region, even though, as I can see it—I may be missing something in the weather reports—but as I see it, there's no place in the country that is more likely to need that funding in the next few months than New Mexico. So I think the cutting of those funds is not justified based on all that I know and I hope to ask some questions about that. Thank you.

Senator CRAIG. Jeff, thank you very much.

Let me turn to the ranking member of the Subcommittee on Public Lands and Forests, serving with me on this subcommittee, Senator Ron Wyden. Ron.

**STATEMENT OF HON. RON WYDEN, U.S. SENATOR
FROM OREGON**

Senator WYDEN. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I think you and Senator Bingaman have said it very well and I would only add the following briefly. It was a bad fire year last year and certainly for many communities around the country it looks like we're going to get hit with infernos once more. But it seems to me the administration is still ignoring the basic problems that feed these horrible fires and literally my constituents call them infernos.

The problems essentially fall into three areas: inadequate funding for hazardous fuels, reductions, and thinning. I was very pleased, Mr. Chairman, you mentioned we're going to do an oversight hearing in this area. I think that's very constructive, and as always, I want to work with you in a bipartisan way on that. I hear constantly from local communities that they are not getting the money for the thinning that's needed. So inadequate funding for hazardous fuels reductions, inadequate flexibility so that communities that need less, depending on the year, for fire suppression, and we could use more of the dollars for fire prevention. I think that we all understand it is an important preventive kind of medicine. It, too, is being shorted.

Also, I think you and Senator Bingaman have touched on the funding cuts, reallocating money to southern California seems to me to be a dubious proposition at best, but in addition, we are seeing inadequate support for the handful of programs that make a difference in rural communities and particularly help to leverage funds at the local level. For example, the Forest Service has a program called the Economic Action Program that for every dollar the Federal Government has made available, something like \$5 has been generated at the local level from nonprofit programs and a variety of local kinds of sources, and these programs are being cut as well.

So those are three, I think, unfortunate trend lines with respect to how the Government deals with this fire issue. I look forward to working with you and Senator Bingaman and Senator Murkowski and our committee of westerners that have taken a special interest in this for a reason, and that is that we have had an awful lot of these tragedies over the last few years in our part of the world.

Senator CRAIG. Ron, thank you very much. Now let us turn to our panel. Oh, I'm sorry, Lisa, you moved in and I was less than observant. Let me recognize the Senator from Alaska, Lisa Murkowski, for any opening comments she would like to make.

**STATEMENT OF HON. LISA MURKOWSKI, U.S. SENATOR
FROM ALASKA**

Senator MURKOWSKI. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I don't really have any formal opening comments. I'm here again to check on what the prognosis is for my State. Looking at the map, it looks

like about half of the State is expected to be up in flames this year. We hope that's not the case. As I look at it, the areas where we're not predicted to have fire, it's partly because that's a tropical rainforest. The northern part has no trees and the Aleutian chain is in a different kind of geography of its own. So we're very concerned up north.

I appreciate the focus of today's hearing being on the impacts of last year's fire season, and what's happened thus far this year. The good news for us up north is that we still have good snow cover and our season hasn't started, but last year we started in early April and we're concerned once again. And so I appreciate the focus, Mr. Chairman, and look forward to the testimony from the witnesses.

Senator CRAIG. Senator Murkowski, thank you very much.

Now let me turn to Mark Rey, the Department of Agriculture's Under Secretary for Natural Resources and Environment. Once again, Mark, welcome before the committee. We get you here, if not on a monthly basis, a biweekly basis and we appreciate it. Thank you.

Mr. REY. It seems just like yesterday. On this particular one, we thought that Secretary Hatfield would go first, if that's all right with you.

Senator CRAIG. All right. Nina, thank you very much. Secretary Hatfield, please proceed.

STATEMENT OF NINA ROSE HATFIELD, DEPUTY ASSISTANT SECRETARY, POLICY, MANAGEMENT AND BUDGET, DEPARTMENT OF INTERIOR

Ms. HATFIELD. Well, thank you, Mr. Chairman, and members of the subcommittee. We appreciate this opportunity to review the Forest Service and the Department of the Interior's preparedness for the 2006 fire season. Accompanying us are Jim Douglas, who's the Deputy Director of the Office of Wildland Fire Coordination in the Department of the Interior and Tom Harbour, who's the Director of Fire and Aviation Management with the Forest Service.

There are three themes that characterize our efforts in wildland fire management and hazardous fuel reduction: the availability of forces that are necessary to achieve a high rate of success, good management of our firefighting forces, and collaboration with our partners. Our preparedness ensures initial attack capability, with public and firefighter safety continuing to be the highest priority in our operations.

As we look back on the 2005 fire season, it was a year of fire, wind, and rain. Approximately 66,000 fires burned 8.7 million acres of Federal, State, and private lands. Fifty percent of that acreage was in Alaska. The western and eastern Great Basin and southwest also experience significantly greater than normal fire activity. Importantly, wildland fire use accounted for an additional 489,000 acres. In 2005, Federal fire suppression cost totaled \$984 million.

Now, in addition to those fire activities, we also were tasked by FEMA for emergency response under the National Response Plan following Hurricane Katrina and Rita. The interagency response peaked on October 1 with 28 incident management teams on assignment. We had approximately 5,500 people, including 139 crews

and 2,780 management and support personnel assigned. While most of the response operations wound down in November, inter-agency teams continue to work with the States to plan for long-range fuel mitigation, fire readiness and prevention, and the fire suppression effort. The remaining personnel and equipment still providing State forestry assistance for hurricane response efforts will be demobilized on April 8.

As we look forward to the 2006 seasonal wildland fire outlook, the 2006 fire season, as you've noted, started early this year and fire activity has been well above normal in the southern and eastern areas of the United States. As this map demonstrates, the National Interagency Fire Center Predictive Services Office expects fire potential to be significantly higher than normal in the Southwest, southern California, portions of the Rocky Mountain area, Texas, Oklahoma, and central Alaska. Due to the lack of snow and rain, very dry conditions also extend from Florida to Virginia where an active fire season is likely this spring. Warmer than normal conditions are expected over much of the south and west with drier than normal conditions predicted primarily from the southern Rockies to the southeast coast. By midsummer, other portions of the rest, such as the Great Basin or northern California, are expected to see above-normal fire potential. Overall, we anticipate a very active fire season for the remainder of 2006.

In anticipation of that, we have secured and are securing firefighting forces, firefighters, equipment, and aircraft comparable to those that were available in 2005. The location of fire risk shifts with the progression of spring and summer, as the need arises, we will increase our firefighting ability by locating our firefighters and equipment in the areas of severe risk. The predictive services staff continually analyzes weather, climate, and fuel conditions. The frequency of their assessments continue to increase as the fire season progresses. Fire managers can use these analyses to assign local, geographic, and national firefighting personnel and equipment based upon anticipated fire starts, fire spread, and severity.

Our 2006 firefighting forces include full-time professional fire program leaders, firefighters hired based on geographic area fire seasons, Federal agency personnel who are qualified and mobilized as needed to perform incident management duties, State and local personnel, contract equipment, aircraft and crews, firefighting personnel from other countries, and Department of Defense aircraft and personnel. Overall, we anticipate that more than 18,000 firefighters will be available, including the permanent and seasonal Federal and State employees, crews from tribal and local governments, contract crews, and emergency temporary hires. We intend to have 17 Type-1 national interagency incident management teams and 38 Type-2 incident management teams available for geographic or national incidents.

As in the past, initial attack of a fire is handled by the closest available local resource regardless of our agency jurisdictions. When local areas experience severe fire risk we will continue to move firefighters, equipment, and teams to those areas to increase our firefighting ability. So with that I'd like to turn to Mr. Rey to talk about the rest of our statement.

STATEMENT OF MARK REY, UNDER SECRETARY FOR NATURAL RESOURCES AND THE ENVIRONMENT, DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

Mr. REY. Thank you very much. As you can see, we have submitted a single statement for the record and my statement picks up in the discussion of our aviation program. That was, indeed, the subject of a previous hearing on February 15, so I will not repeat that testimony except to say that our 2006 aviation plan includes 16 large air tankers, 258 large and medium helicopters, 2 CL-215 airtankers, 107 single-engine tankers, and a total of 8, over the course of the year, military C-130 aircraft equipped with modular airborne firefighting system units. Some of those C-130's have already been used in the south-central States in the fire season so far.

For fiscal year 2006, the total fire preparedness budget for the fire program for both Departments is \$934.9 million. The Forest Service receives \$666 million and allocates \$478 million of this to its regions for fire preparedness. The remaining \$188 million supports a variety of services, such as the National Interagency Fire Center, the National Advanced Fire and Resource Institute in Tucson, the Washington Fire and Aviation program and projects, the Missoula and San Dimas Technical Development Centers, and the Albuquerque Service Center for processing personnel and business transactions. The Department of the Interior receives \$268.8 million for fire preparedness that is allocated to the four participating U.S. Department of the Interior Bureaus.

Over the last several weeks, as the 2007 budget has been proposed, we've seen a number of statements to one degree or another taking issue with individual line items in the National Fire Plan account implying that funding for the National Fire Plan overall is being reduced. That is emphatically not the case. Funding for the National Fire Plan has increased each year since 2001. Indeed it's worth noting that in 2000 we were spending, together with the Department of the Interior, \$936 million to implement the National Fire Plan. We are requesting for fiscal year 2007 \$2.57 billion, an all-time record for an administration request in this area.

Now, obviously, within that overall budget we make adjustments in individual line items. Some are up, most are up, some are down and there are good reasons for those which are up and those which aren't and we can talk about those individually. But I want to belay the impression that because a single line item is down—particularly a relatively small line item, since those are the ones we hear the most about—anyone should come away with the impression that overall funding is down, because that's not the case. It is, in fact, up. It is, in fact, up substantially from where it was 6 years ago.

In addition to overall budgets, we have been engaged, as our testimony indicates, in an effort over the last 2½ years for cost containment on large incident fires, those fires which account for about 85 percent of the suppression costs. Several improvements have been made and that effort will continue this year along the lines indicated in our testimony.

With regard to hazardous fuels reduction, we have, as you all know, a tremendously complex, dangerous fire and fuel situation in

the United States. Many of the issues that we're addressing in the fuels area are particularly challenging due to extended drought, but we're pleased to report both a substantial increase in collaborative community-based planning to help restore forested landscapes, as well as absolute accomplishments over the last 5 years in what we've been able to treat. Today, on the average, we are treating four times more acres per year of Federal lands that are at risk to catastrophic fire than we were in any of the years of the 1990's. By the end of fiscal year 2007, the budget year which we're currently considering, assuming that Congress funds our request for fuels treatment in 2007 and that we meet our targets, we will have treated somewhat in excess of 26 million acres, 26.2 million acres to be precise. That's somewhat larger than the land mass of the State of Ohio, which is the State from which I originate, therefore it has some resonance to me. For the people in the field who were pushing hard to do this treatment work, I can assure you they're glad I wasn't born in Texas.

[Laughter.]

Mr. REY. The stewardship contract authority that you granted us beginning in 2003 has also been significant and beneficial. We have created 207 stewardship contracts since that time. We have 60 more scheduled for creation this year and 80 more for 2007. And the receipts that have been returned to us from those contracts have generated \$8.5 million, which has been reprogrammed into fuels treatment work. So by any measure, the success has been substantial. The budgets have been substantial, indeed, as is the case with fire suppression. The budget request for fuels treatment is an all-time record. Now, we can debate whether, notwithstanding the fact that it's an all-time record for an administration request, it's high enough, but I would say with all due respect that Congress has failed to fund the administration's fuels treatment request in 2006 and 2005. So I don't think that the primary issue is with the request, it's with the allocations that we make during the appropriations process.

With that, we will be happy to respond to any of your questions. I'll start by responding to the first one posed by Senator Craig and echoed by Senator Bingaman and that's the most recent reallocation proposal to put more money into southern California. We do think, given the resource values that are at stake in southern California, that that's a wise investment. We have reconsidered taking any money out of other regions, and about \$2.5 million that we were reprogramming from other regions we're not going to do. We'll find the \$2.5 million by reprogramming from other accounts and other priorities either within the California region or in the headquarters office. So I think we can assure you that, as was the case in the original program allocation among the regions, every region will see at least a slight increase in fuels treatment dollars in 2006 over what they saw in 2005. With that, both Secretary Hatfield and I would be happy to respond to your questions.

[The prepared statement of Ms. Hatfield and Mr. Rey follows:]

PREPARED STATEMENT OF NINA ROSE HATFIELD, DEPUTY ASSISTANT SECRETARY, POLICY, MANAGEMENT AND BUDGET, DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR, AND MARK REY, UNDER SECRETARY FOR NATURAL RESOURCES AND ENVIRONMENT, DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

INTRODUCTION

Mr. Chairman and members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to review with you the Forest Service's and the Department of the Interior's preparedness for the 2006 fire season. Since the Department of the Interior and the Department of Agriculture work closely together in fire management, the two Departments are providing a joint statement.

Three themes characterize our efforts in wildland fire management and hazardous fuels reduction—availability of forces necessary to achieve a high rate of success, good management of firefighting forces, and collaboration with partners. Our preparedness ensures initial attack capability, with public and firefighter safety continuing to be a core value in our operations. Reducing fuels to lessen the risk and severity of fires—preventative treatment—is a critical part of our fire management efforts.

2005 FIRE SEASON

2005 was a year of fire, wind, and rain. Approximately 66,000 fires burned 8.7 million acres of Federal, State, and private lands; 50 percent of the acreage was in Alaska. Other areas of the country experiencing significantly greater than normal fire activity were the western and eastern Great Basin and the Southwest. Twenty five fires exceeded 40,000 acres each. wildland fire use—by which fire was used to achieve resource management objectives in predefined geographic areas—accounted for an additional 489,000 acres. FY2005 Federal fire suppression costs totaled \$984 million including costs for hurricane response.

HURRICANE EFFECTS AND AFTERMATH

The Forest Service and Department of the Interior were tasked by the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) for emergency response under the National Response Plan following Hurricane Katrina which made landfall on August 29, 2005, on the Gulf Coast, and Hurricane Rita which made landfall on September 24, 2005, at Louisiana and Texas.

The ability of the Forest Service, the Department of the Interior, and their partners to contribute to hurricane emergency response is based upon years of experience in wildfire suppression and the use of the Incident Command System, the Incident Qualifications and Certification System (IQCS) and the Resource Ordering and Status System (ROSS). Interagency response peaked on October 1 with 28 Incident Management Teams on assignment. Approximately 5,500 people, including 139 crews and 2,780 management and support personnel, all qualified in the IQCS system, were assigned. In addition, 1734 pieces of equipment and 16 helicopters and fixed winged aircraft were mobilized and tracked through ROSS. Incident management teams managed all agency communications, coordinated the receipt and distribution of supplies, provided evacuees with food, shelter, and clothing, and supported emergency medical operations at the New Orleans base camp. Incident management teams also ran evacuation centers in Phoenix, Arizona, and Houston and San Antonio, Texas. Teams provided base camp operations and support to emergency responders and mortuary operations in 17 locations in Mississippi, Louisiana, and Texas. The agencies and their partners were able to adjust to the changing situation and provided coverage for fire suppression as well as rescue services.

While most of the response operations wound down in November, interagency teams continue to work with the States to plan for long range fuel mitigation, fire readiness and prevention, and fire suppression. The remaining personnel and equipment still providing state forestry assistance for hurricane response efforts will demobilize by April 8. We have conducted over 320,000 acres of hazardous fuels reduction on National Forests in the Gulf states. In addition over 60,000 acres of mechanical fuels treatment contracts have been awarded in Mississippi National Forests. The Forest Service has waived the normal 50/50 matching requirements for State Fire Assistance grants to facilitate the States' procurement of equipment and services for preparedness, mitigation of the severe fuel loading, and fire suppression. Due to drought, the enormous damage to forests by the hurricanes and resulting debris, firefighting crews and equipment have been moved to the Gulf Coast in anticipation of increased fire risk.

2006 SEASONAL WILDLAND FIRE OUTLOOK

The 2006 fire season started early this year, and fire activity has been well above normal in the Southern and Eastern areas of the United States. The National Interagency Fire Center (NIFC) Predictive Service Office expects fire potential to be significantly higher than normal across most of the Southwest, southern California, portions of the Rocky Mountain area, Texas, Oklahoma, and central Alaska. Recent precipitation in the Southwest and southern Plains will provide only temporary relief. Continued drought and carryover fine herbaceous fuels from 2005 will present an elevated risk of large fires over much of the West. Due to the lack of snow and rain, very dry conditions also extend from Florida to Virginia, where an active fire season is likely this spring. Assuming the weak La Nina pattern continues, warmer than normal conditions are expected over much of the South and West into the summer with drier than normal conditions predicted primarily from the southern Rockies to the southeast coast. By mid-summer other portions of the West, such as the Great Basin and northern California, are expected to see above normal fire potential. Overall, we anticipate a very active fire season for the remainder of 2006.

In this challenging fire season, citizens who live or vacation in fire-prone areas can gain valuable information about how to increase their safety and protect their homes and property through the FIREWISE program. Homeowners can learn how to protect their homes with a survivable, cleared space and how to build their houses and landscape their yard with fire resistant materials. Information about the FIREWISE program can be found at www.firewise.org, sponsored by a consortium of wildland fire agencies that includes the Forest Service, the Department of the Interior, the National Fire Protection Association, and the National Association of State Foresters.

PREPAREDNESS

For the 2006 fire season, we have secured firefighting forces—firefighters, equipment, and aircraft—comparable to those available in 2005 and achieve similar success at initial attack. As has already been demonstrated during the fires in the Southeast and Southwest, we increase firefighting ability by locating our firefighters and equipment in areas of severe fire risk. The location of fire risk shifts with the progression of spring and summer. The Predictive Services staff continually analyzes weather, climate, and fuel conditions; the frequency of their assessments increases as the fire season progresses. Fire managers use the analyses to assign local, geographic and, national firefighting personnel and equipment based on anticipated fire starts, fire spread, and severity.

In 2006, firefighting forces include:

- Full-time professional fire program leaders;
- Firefighters hired based on geographic area fire seasons;
- Federal agency personnel qualified and mobilized to perform incident management duties in addition to their normal responsibilities, often called the “militia”;
- State and local personnel (including volunteer fire departments) through cooperative and mutual aid agreements;
- Agency-owned equipment;
- Contract equipment, aircraft, and crews; and
- Firefighting personnel from other countries
- Department of Defense aircraft and personnel.

More than 18,000 firefighters will be available, including permanent and seasonal Federal and State employees, crews from Tribal and local governments, contract crews, and emergency/temporary hires. There are 17 Type 1 national interagency incident management teams (the most experienced and skilled teams) available for complex fires or incidents. Thirty-eight Type 2 incident management teams are available for geographical or national incidents.

Initial attack of a fire is handled by the closest available local resource regardless of agency jurisdiction. Generally this means that the agency with management jurisdiction and protection responsibility for the location of the fire, such as a national forest, Bureau of Land Management unit, wildlife refuge, or national park, handles initial attack. The local fire manager requests additional forces if the fire continues to grow.

The National Interagency Coordination Center, located in Boise, Idaho at NIFC, coordinates critical firefighting needs throughout the nation. In the event of multiple, simultaneous fires, firefighting forces are prioritized and allocated by the National Multi-Agency Coordinating group, a multiagency group of national fire directors also located at NIFC. Prioritizing ensures firefighting forces are positioned

where they are needed most. Fire managers dispatch and track personnel, equipment, aircraft, vehicles, and supplies through an integrated national system. In 2006, if conditions become extreme, we will work with the Department of Defense under our standing agreements to provide assistance; in addition, firefighting forces are also available from Canada, Mexico, Australia, and New Zealand using established agreements and protocols.

When local areas experience severe fire risk, we will continue to move firefighters, equipment, and teams to those areas to increase our firefighting ability.

The ability of the Forest Service, Department of the Interior agencies, and their partners to respond to fires is the result of years of experience in the use of the Incident Command System, the Incident Qualifications Certification System, the Resource Ordering and Status System, and communications. While wildfire is the main mission, in the event of another hurricane or other national emergency, the Forest Service and Department of the Interior will assist partners as needed as part of the National Response Plan.

FIRE AVIATION

The fire aviation program has undergone significant changes since the spring of 2004 when contracts for large airtankers were terminated in the wake of the National Transportation Safety Board report addressing airworthiness issues. Large airtankers are one of the many tools that we use to suppress wildland fires. We have increased our fleet of other firefighting aircraft to assist ground forces, particularly during extended attack. We also note that during any year, thousands of wildland fires are suppressed without the benefit of air support. We testified before this Subcommittee on February 15, 2006, about the status of our fire aviation programs and our interagency long term aviation plan, so we will not go into detail here.

Our 2006 aviation plan includes 16 large airtankers and 258 large and medium helicopters. Through cooperative agreements with states and interagency partners, we have 2 CL-215 airtankers, and 107 single engine airtankers (SEATS) ready for service. Four military C-130 aircraft equipped with the Modular Airborne Firefighting System (MAFFS) are currently available. Four additional MAFFS aircraft are being overhauled and will be ready by early summer.

MANAGEMENT

Fire Safety

The tremendous complexity of the wildland fire management environment places many expectations upon our wildland firefighters. Above all else, human safety is our first priority. The Forest Service has adopted a foundational doctrine—principles guiding operations of fire suppression activities and actions. Currently, the Forest Service is reviewing guidance for dealing with the parts of fire suppression that rely on interpretation, judgment, and agility. Review of current practices and policies is being done by people with expertise in risk management, human performance, fire safety, and the fire operations safety council.

Department of the Interior agencies and the Forest Service continue to require annual fireline safety refresher courses for all firefighting personnel. Additionally, the “6 Minutes for Safety”, an interagency safety initiative, is issued daily during fire season and alerts firefighters to high-risk situations. It is distributed throughout the fire community.

Contracted firefighting forces are additional assets for the agencies. A recent audit by the USDA Office of Inspector General looked at the effectiveness of administration of contract crews. The Forest Service agreed with the results of the audit and has implemented most of the recommendations; the remainder will be implemented by the end of this summer’s fire season. This Forest Service is working with the National Wildfire Coordinating Group to improve interagency oversight for ensuring safe, reliable performance of contract crews.

Budget

For FY2006, the total fire preparedness budget for the fire program for both Departments is \$934.9 million. The Forest Service receives \$666 million and allocates \$478 million of this to its regions for fire preparedness; the remaining \$188 million supports a variety of services, such as the National Interagency Fire Center, the National Advanced Fire and Resource Institute in Tucson, Arizona, Washington Fire and Aviation program leadership, projects at the Missoula and San Dimas Technology and Development Centers, the Albuquerque Service Center to process personnel and business transactions, and Information Technology programs. The Department of the Interior receives \$268.8 million for fire preparedness that is allo-

cated to the four participating bureaus—the Bureau of Land Management, the Fish and Wildlife Service, the National Park Service, and the Bureau of Indian Affairs.

In the Appropriations language for the Forest Service for FY2006, Congress directed that fire suppression pay a proportionate share of cost pools (indirect costs) on the same basis as other funds. We want to assure you that no crews have been reduced as a result of this requirement because crews are funded through fire preparedness allocations. However, this direction has reduced available suppression funding by \$209 million, which may significantly increase the need for borrowing from other accounts in the event of a severe fire season. We again urge the Congress to recede from this direction.

As a matter of policy, the Department of the Interior does not assess indirect charges to the Fire Suppression program. However, appropriate direct program costs for the Department's Aircraft Management Directorate are charged to suppression. This policy ensures that the majority of appropriated dollars reach the ground for suppression operations. Furthermore, Department of the Interior policy limits the amount of indirect charges to non-suppression programs to 10 percent.

Cost Containment

In 2004, the Wildland Fire Leadership Council convened a strategic cost panel comprised of senior State, local, Tribal and Federal representatives and incident management team members. The panel examined cost containment, including methods to better integrate suppression activities and vegetation management in a broader landscape context. Teams are currently working on recommendations and have made considerable progress in implementation. For example, we are working with the U.S. Fire Administration to refine interoperability standards between structural and wildland firefighters to expand the use of local volunteer and rural fire departments in extended attack.

At Interior, we have aligned our 2006 Rural Fire Assistance program with the new Ready Reserve program to focus on providing training and safety gear to these volunteers to further expand wildland fire response capability and minimize mobilization efforts. Geographic coordination will be enhanced this year to more effectively manage national resources for large fire suppression.

For incidents that meet certain size, cost, and duration criteria, we will continue interagency large fire cost containment oversight. The Forest Service asked the USDA Office of the Inspector General to conduct a large fire cost review in 2005 and results should be out later this year. We will continue our review of large fires in 2006.

HAZARDOUS FUELS REDUCTION

We have a tremendously complex and dangerous fire and fuels situation in the United States. Many of the issues we are addressing are particularly challenging due to extended drought, climate change, human demographics, and societal expectations of forests and rangelands. We are pleased to report collaborative community-based stewardship is helping to restore forested landscapes to a healthy condition. We now treat more fuels than ever before.

Here are some other accomplishments in reducing hazardous fuels:

- At the request of the Western Governors' Association (WGA), the Wildland Fire Leadership Council is presently reviewing the "Implementation Plan" of the "10 Year Comprehensive Strategy" signed by WGA and the Secretaries of Interior and Agriculture in August 2001. The review is expected to be completed in early summer.
- Earlier this year, the Departments of the Interior and Agriculture completed a report entitled: "Protecting People and Natural Resources: A Cohesive Fuels Treatment Strategy." The report presents policy and management objectives and methods that will help reduce fire risk.
- The Forest Service and Department of the Interior last year treated hazardous fuels on more than 2.9 million acres of land, and reduced hazardous fuels on an additional 1.4 million acres through other land management actions. Over 2 million of these acres were in the wildland urban interface. The agencies achieved resource management objectives on 489,000 acres of lands in predefined geographic areas through Wildland Fire Use.
- The Department of the Interior, in collaboration with our non-federal partners, has shifted the hazardous fuels program to incorporate greater community protection. In 2001, Interior agencies treated some 165,000 acres in the wildland urban interface. Those acres accounted for 23 percent of our total program. In 2005, over 540,000 acres in the wildland urban interface were treated, a 230 percent increase and 43 percent of all treated acres.

- In 2005, State Foresters and local communities treated 77,000 non-Federal acres of hazardous fuels in the wildland urban interface using funds from the State Fire Assistance, administered by the Forest Service. For FY2006, funding will be used by States, local and Tribal governments and non-governmental organizations to build fire fighting capacity, develop Community Wildfire Protection Plans (CWPPs), and complete hazardous fuel projects.
- State and Federal land management agencies and local communities can use CWPPs to determine hazardous fuels treatments in the wildland urban interface. As of March 1, 2006, 650 CWPPs covering 2,700 communities at risk have been completed and 600 are in preparation.
- In 2005, we increased firefighting capacity by providing technical assistance, training and supplies to nearly 11,000 small rural communities through the Volunteer Fire Assistance (Forest Service) and Rural Fire Assistance (Department of the Interior). In 2006, additional funding will continue this work.

SUMMARY

In conclusion, Mr. Chairman and members of the Subcommittee, we are prepared for the 2006 fire season. Where local areas experience severe fire risk, firefighters, equipment and teams will be assigned. We have a long term and complex fuels and fire situation that will continue to need to be addressed by communities, Tribes, States, and federal agencies. We appreciate your continued support and work as we move forward on these challenges. We are happy to answer any questions you might have.

Senator MURKOWSKI [presiding]. Thank you, Secretary Rey. The chairman has had to excuse himself for a few minutes and he's asked me to just kind of manage the order here.

Senator Bingaman, if you would care to pose any questions.

Senator BINGAMAN. Thank you very much. First, let me just be clear, this report, Mr. Rey, that you're referring to here, you say earlier this year the Department of the Interior and the Department of Agriculture completed a report entitled "Protecting People and Natural Resources: A Cohesive Fuels Treatment Strategy." We're informed that that's not been printed or is not available. We haven't been able to get a copy of that.

Mr. REY. It's actually at the printer now and will be available very shortly. We'll provide copies for the record of this hearing.

Senator BINGAMAN. Okay. That'll be good because I had several questions about how that was coming. Let me also ask, I noticed one statement in the combined statement that you've submitted that this direction—you're referring back here to the direction by Congress, and you say this direction has reduced available suppression funding by \$209 million, which may significantly increase the need for borrowing from other accounts in the event of a severe fire season.

My recollection is that we have had a pattern of borrowing from other accounts, going back many years, whenever we wind up with a more severe fire season than was anticipated, which seems to be every year. And I guess the other concern or the recollection I've got is that most of the so-called borrowing is never paid back, so that it's really a misnomer to an extent. I mean, it's taking funds from another account, using them for fire suppression, and then never having those funds that were intended for that other purpose available for that other purpose. It's not as though you come back the next year and put in those funds plus more. It's usually you just start again and try to fund it. Is my impression correct there? Am I wrong about this so-called borrowing?

Mr. REY. Partially correct and partially not quite. In the early part of this decade, as we were experiencing severe fire seasons, we

did utilize the authority provided by Congress to borrow from any program account available to the Secretary to fund fire suppression when we exhausted funds that were appropriated for that purpose. Two years ago—well, before I get to that, in subsequent supplemental appropriations bills, portions of that borrowed amount were reinstated, but not all of them. Usually that reinstatement was a negotiation between the administration and the appropriations committees.

Typically, we were not repaid for the cost of staff time that was diverted from whatever functions that they would have otherwise been doing to doing fire control work or fire suppression work. And there were some other accounts that were not fully repaid, but they were not completely ignored, they just weren't fully repaid. Two years ago, the appropriations committees, and then subsequently the entire Congress, tiring of that situation, created a contingency account which we have not fully used and which we are carrying as part of the carry-forward dollars that we'll use in 2006. I think we're sitting on about \$500 million in that account at present. So we have not borrowed in the last two budget cycles and perhaps might not need to in this cycle, depending in part on how bad the fire season is, depending in part on how quickly FEMA closes out its account assignments—assignment accounts, and reimburses us for the money we spent in hurricane relief.

Senator BINGAMAN. So do I take it that you are anticipating—if we have a severe fire season, you're anticipating having to borrow from these other accounts again, even though this contingency fund was established and still has \$500 million in it?

Mr. REY. It's unclear whether we will borrow because it's unclear how fast the season will get bad. If we're looking at a late summer supplemental, as has been the case in previous years, we could address it there, but I would say at this point we've probably got a pretty good chance of not having to borrow this year. The point of the statement in our testimony was that in last year's appropriations bill the Appropriations Committee gave us specific direction that the wildfire suppression account shall be assessed for indirect costs on the same basis as such assessments are calculated against other agency programs. Previously, prior to this direction, we had not made full assessments into the fire suppression account for indirect costs in order to husband that money to avoid borrowing in the future. If in the course of carrying forward our responsibilities under the statute this year, we do make fuller assessments to the suppression account for those overhead expenses—their fair share, in other words, of some of the overhead—then that account will be diminished more quickly and that will increase the probability or at least the possibility that we will be borrowing at some point later in the fiscal year. I think the key variable, given what we have by way of resources available to us now, that will dictate whether we have to borrow or not are, first, the severity of the season overall and, second, when we get into the most severe part of the season, and then third, when either a supplemental or the fiscal year 2007 appropriations bill is enacted.

Senator BINGAMAN. Can I just ask one follow-up, Madam Chairman? Do you have a projection—I mean, I made a statement in my opening statement that this promises to be one of the worst fire

seasons in our State's history because of the drought. Would you agree with that or do you not make predictions on that?

Mr. REY. I would say for your State that's true, but for a good part of the rest of the West, it's not. And what will drive our overall cost will be not only what happens obviously in the Southwest, but as the fire season progresses, whether we see the kinds of conditions that we think are going to exist in the northern Rockies continue or whether that starts to deteriorate as the summer progresses. So, unfortunately, the bad news for New Mexico is, yes, this is probably going to look a lot like 2002 and that means that the part of our fire season that we enjoy in the Southwest, which is usually early May through mid-July, will probably be a bad one. Now what happens after is that is less certain.

Senator BINGAMAN. Thank you.

Senator CRAIG [presiding]. To the committee, some of us have been asked to be on the floor at 3:15 for a speech by Leader Frist and so I'm now going to turn to Senator Wyden for questions and then to Senator Salazar and we will leave this—Jeff, if you're leaving, we'll leave this in the hands of Ron. I think Senator Murkowski will need to be going then, too. I know I will submit my questions to you for the record and I do appreciate your attention to them. With that, let me turn to Senator Wyden.

Senator WYDEN [presiding]. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I guess from Mr. Rey we have heard things are going to go well in the State of Ohio this year, which he has touched on, but I fear that much of the rest of the—

Senator CRAIG. In leaving this is your good hands, Senator Wyden, I do expect you to behave yourself.

[Laughter.]

Senator WYDEN. I am always going to be on best behavior. I think what is troubling to me about all of this—and by the way, this has gone on for years, there was a whole history of this that goes back for some time—is that fighting fires has been to some extent a financial shell game. Essentially what happens is you wait for an emergency and then you go out to try and borrow from whatever account isn't tied down and try to stay in front of the marshals.

Now, as I understood it, Mr. Rey, you said this time there may be some new money that has come for the contingency fund, so that strikes me as something that should be useful in the short term. But in this kind of difficult budget climate, won't you run through the contingency fund very quickly and then you're right back into the same old ritual that I call the financial shell game of trying to borrow from anything else you can get your hands on? What is your sense of how this contingency fund would work? This is a one time only sort of thing, is it not?

Mr. REY. It was a one time investment that's carried us through two fire seasons, so the question then would be what to do next if we find ourselves short. What we do as a normal course of budgeting is to budget the 10-year average for suppression costs as part of our budget request, so our suppression request has been going up each year as the fire seasons have been difficult and costs have been increasing. Next year will be the first time that the 10-year average will actually dip, because last year was a year where we

only spent on firefighting itself, as opposed to the additional money invested in hurricane relief, about \$618 million. But I think if we look at what we've budgeted for this year and the contingency account and the reimbursement from FEMA, we're going to end up pretty close.

As I told Senator Bingaman, there is a pretty good chance that we won't be borrowing from existing operating accounts, but the last variables that will determine that are how severe the back half of the fire season is. We can project, based on what we know now, that we're in a pretty difficult season in the Southwest. What we can project with less certainty now is what your State will end up looking like when the fire season fully develops in Oregon or what the northern Rockies will look like. If they dry up significantly over the course of the latter half of May and June and the first half of July, then we're going to be looking at a much worse fire season than the case that existed the last couple of years, where they stayed reasonably wet and the fire seasons were benign. So one variable is what the back end of the fire season is going to look like.

I guess the second variable is when the 2007 bill passes. If the 2007 bill passes as it did last year, thanks to the Congress we'll be already replenished without having to borrow any other 2006 program accounts. If, on the other hand, we get snarled up, as sometimes occurs, and the 2007 bill turns into an omnibus bill that passes at a later date, then we'll be fighting fires further into the latter part of fiscal 2006 and the first part of fiscal 2007, if it's a bad year, using the money that we have in hand, which in the case of a severe fire season might require some borrowing. But right now, given the resources that we have available and given the way the northern part of the Rockies and the Northwest look, I think we have a pretty good chance of not having to borrow this year. But it's still a pretty close call and we're going to know more as we go along.

Senator WYDEN. Lots of ifs. Put me down as skeptical. I mean, the whole history of this has been budget sleight of hand, trying to get money from this source to patch up this kind of hole. And you say if you're short you're going to be able to look once again to the Appropriations Committee. All I hear from the Appropriations Committee is "no mas," that this is the year that they're not going to be able to get this additional funding.

One other question, I know my time is close to being up. In addition to this process I call the financial shell game for fighting fires, I'm not convinced that you all spend the dollars you get in the right way and on the right programs. And in particular I'm very troubled that the programs that seem to be cut are the ones at the local level that do the best of leveraging the most local dollars to supplement the Federal effort. For example, you all propose to get rid of the Forest Service Economic Action Program. Now in our part of the country, for every dollar these programs get from the Forest Service, they've got a history of being able to leverage \$5 or so from local sources, from nonprofits, from community actions programs of charitable nature and the like. Yet the one that you all choose to cut is the one that seems to be most consistent with administration philosophy in terms of getting more done at home. What is the

logic of cutting something like the Forest Service Economic Action Program? Not just cutting it, getting rid of it all together.

Mr. REY. A couple of observations here: First, the Economic Action Program is not in and of itself a fire program. There are some projects that have been funded with that money that have a relevance to fire or fuels reduction work, but it is what it is.

Senator WYDEN. Just a second. Your point is a fair one. What I'm talking about is the economic action programs at the local level that are used for hazardous fuels reduction.

Mr. REY. And there is a portion of those programs that are used for it, but I think one of the things we're trying to do is align these accounts to produce more efficient program delivery by focusing on those agencies and departments who have a larger and more established role and a record of greater excellence in that—our Economic Action Program has existed somewhere between \$15 and \$25 million a year and while it's certainly useful and has done some useful things, our world development programs, funded under the farm bill at several orders of magnitude greater financing, do some of the same things.

So what we've been trying to do is consolidate like programs to eliminate the amount of overhead necessary to deliver them, and to work with the people who were the constituents of our Economic Action Program and move them toward our world development program so that they can compete and receive—as many of them are now doing—world development grants or loan guarantees for some of the work that was originally funded. When we can do that, we can then take the Forest Service resources that were devoted to administering this program and reprogram that into something that is our center of excellence.

In regard to the various fire programs, the State fire assistance grants and the volunteer fire assistance grants are an example of a similar phenomenon. The Department of Homeland Security and Fire Emergency Management administration manages a State grant program that is several orders of magnitude larger than ours, and the point we've been trying to establish is that the preponderance of those grants had been going to larger urban firefighting establishments, and with some assistance from the Department of Homeland Security we've been able to open those grants to some of the rural firefighting entities that are funded through the State grant program. Now, some of the most rural and smaller fire departments, particularly the volunteer fire departments, don't have access to the Department of Homeland Security grant program. That's why, in the broad scheme of things, we decided to increase our volunteer assistance program as we were decreasing the State grant assistance program. It's our objective to try to make sure that we can help the State firefighting agencies get money through the Department of Homeland Security in a larger and more robust program and then focus on those entities that can't access those programs with the money that we retain to do that through our National Fire Plan dollars.

Senator WYDEN. I'm going to turn this over to Mr. Salazar, but I'd only say two things. First, if you're talking administrative costs and you're talking about administrative overhead, these programs—come visit them in Oregon—these economic action pro-

grams have probably the lowest overhead of any programs on the planet. I mean, they are a textbook case for how to hold down administrative and overhead costs. And I will tell you that your argument that these programs that have leveraged so many private sector dollars are duplicative, when we ask you all to give us examples of what these economic action programs are duplicating elsewhere, like in rural development, we don't get any examples. We will continue the dialogue with you on this.

Senator Salazar has been waiting patiently. Senator Salazar, given the fact that both Senator Craig and I had to go, can we entice you and Senator Cantwell to stay with us until conclusion?

Senator SALAZAR [presiding]. Absolutely, Senator Wyden.
Senator WYDEN. Thank you.

**STATEMENT OF HON. KEN SALAZAR, U.S. SENATOR
FROM COLORADO**

Senator SALAZAR. Good to see you running the meeting. Thank you. It is a very important issue for all of us and I want to thank Mr. Harbour, Under Secretary Rey, Assistant Secretary Hatfield and Mr. Douglas for coming here today to address this very important issue that we're all facing.

I have an opening statement that I will submit for the record, but what I would like to do today though is to focus really on the bark beetle problem that we see in Colorado. The essence of my comments and questions is: Are we doing enough and what more can we do to try to address this infestation that is causing problems and fire issues within the Western States?

For us in Colorado, as all of you I'm sure recall, we are not unfamiliar with huge fires. The Hayman Fire in 2002 involved over four counties, and 138,000 acres were burned. I was Attorney General at the time involved in the prosecution of the person who started that fire. In that same year, the Missionary Ridge Fire down in the southern part of the State burned about 70,000 acres.

My great concern today is that we're in a position where we are looking at a repeat of 2002 because of two conditions: One, the drought is very much affecting the State of Colorado, especially in the southern parts of our State, and second of all, the major issue that we're facing with the infestation of bark beetle.

I want to just show a couple of charts that demonstrate the problem in a very visible form. The first one is taken in Colorado and essentially shows the green part of this—shows the major problem we're facing with bark beetle. You see that entire side of the mountain where it's been turned brown, infected by bark beetle, both on the upper end and the lower end, and it's only the green part that still appears to be healthy though probably already infected by this time by the bark beetle itself. So it just shows the extent of the problem, which when you look at the overall numbers for us in Colorado, as of 2004 we had 1.5 million acres of national forests which had been infected by the bark beetle. And I understand that in 2005 we had another 425,000 acres that were also infected. This last chart just shows the severity of the problem in terms of the fire fuel that is provided by all of these dead trees that have been infected by the bark beetle.

So as I understand where we are in terms of funding to try to deal with this issue, there has been enough money that's set aside at the 2006 budget level to address fuel treatment for about 35,000 acres. My understanding, from Colorado, is that about four times as much money could actually be used with respect to treatment, fuel treatment of these areas. So I'd like you to respond, if you would, Under Secretary Rey, to just that specific question in terms of the need on the one hand to address the bark beetle problem and what appears to be about 25 percent of the resources available to address it. And then second, if you also would just generally talk to us about how it is that we can get our hands around this huge issue, because it seems to me that it's going to continue to only grow exponentially in terms of the problem and threat that it causes to our national forests.

Mr. REY. I'd be happy to talk about both. The two pictures you have are very helpful, because they illustrate two points that I want to make. First of all, there's no question that we're facing a significant problem in the front range from one of our episodic bark beetle explosions that occur periodically throughout the West over time. When we can, one of the things we try to do is to take out spot infestations as quickly as we can before they spread. Once they've gotten beyond a spot infestation and actually start to get rolling, then your ability to stop them is diminished substantially because there are no pesticides that are useful because they're under the bark and for the most part pesticides, except on an individual tree basis, are ineffective. This looks to me like what probably was the beginning of a spot infestation. One of the ways we try to deal with an infestation like this is to go in and take out all the trees that are infected, using the categorical exclusion from more detailed documentation under the National Environmental Policy Act. We can get in cheaply and quickly, and quickly is as important as cheaply, because we have to get in before that spreads.

Now, that authority has been overturned by a Federal court decision and we're not doing these projects under categorical exclusions anymore. We are, at least until we can appeal that decision to the Ninth Circuit or something else intervenes, forced to do a full environmental assessment, which takes not only more money, which reduces the amount of work that can be done overall, but more time, mitigating the prospect of doing a spot—attacking a spot like that quickly, before it spreads.

Senator SALAZAR. Let me ask a question on the spot infestation. You say, "when we can." I understand the legal challenge you have now with the recent court decision. Give me a quantification, if you can, Under Secretary Rey, about how we would use the authority, if we did have the categorical exclusion, in terms of going after these areas that have been infested. For example, if you were to take my State of Colorado, how many of these spots do you think we could go after and cut down to avoid the bark beetle from spreading to other areas?

Mr. REY. We probably would try to get almost all of them that are of this size. Once they get much beyond this, then that tool doesn't work anymore.

Senator SALAZAR. When we talk about spot infestation—and I understand trying to get to the problem early, trying to get rid of those trees before the pollen spreads. What kind of criteria do we use to come up with the definition of what is a spot?

Mr. REY. Usually, size. If we're still under a couple of acres in size. That's something we would try to do with a CE, if we had that authority.

Senator SALAZAR. So there's an acreage size; you would say under two acres?

Mr. REY. Probably more like under 5 to 10 acres in each case. Beyond that, if it's much larger than 10 acres, there's a pretty good probability it's already spread, that you didn't get it fast enough.

Senator SALAZAR. I know I'm out of time and I want to respect Senator Cantwell's time as well, but could you, in just 60 seconds or so, describe to me the general issue where you're doing a bark beetle containment beyond dealing with the spot infestation?

Mr. REY. That's where your second picture comes in handy—if we could put that back up—because the middle stripe in that is a fuel break. Once we get to what are almost pandemic situations, and we're approaching that point in the Rocky Mountain front, then the ability to treat the whole infestation is severely reduced. At that point, you're looking to treat around communities and protect structures and the wildland interfacing. You're trying to build strategic fuel breaks, assuming that you're probably not going to be able to treat these areas. But if it does burn, you can keep the fire within a perimeter that is acceptable. That's a less than ideal situation, obviously, but when you get an epidemic to this degree, sometimes that's what you have to do. If on the next round you want to talk a little bit about some of the things we are doing in trying to encourage on the Rocky Mountain front, I'd be happy to talk about those as well.

Senator SALAZAR. Let me ask you if you would do this, Under Secretary Rey, I would request formally—and I'll send you a letter on this—to give me a summary in writing of what it is that you're doing within my State. You may want to expand it beyond Colorado, in terms of just the National Forest System, with respect to bark beetle.

Mr. REY. I'd be happy to do that, because we've been meeting with a lot of your constituents, local and State government people, and we have a couple of things that we think will help, that we pioneered in northern Arizona, which a couple of years back had a similar infestation.

Senator SALAZAR. I thank you very much. It is going to be a huge, continuing and very, very important issue for all of us. Thank you.

[The prepared statement of Senator Salazar follows:]

PREPARED STATEMENT OF HON. KEN SALAZAR, U.S. SENATOR FROM COLORADO

Thank you, Mr. Chairman and Ranking Member Wyden. I appreciate this opportunity to examine our wildfire preparedness for the coming fire season. Thank you, Secretary Rey and Secretary Hatfield, for being here today.

I will cut right to it: we are facing an extremely dangerous wildfire situation in Colorado, maybe worse than we have ever faced. Below-average snowfalls, protracted drought, and a massive bark beetle infestation have created fuel loads that threaten forest health, property, and human life. I fear that we are facing a perfect storm of conditions for devastating fires this summer in Colorado.

The southern half of Colorado, and much of the Southwest, has been hit by yet another year of below-average precipitation. With the exception of a few areas in Colorado's northern mountains, precipitation levels this winter were 25-50% of average. Colorado is now in its seventh consecutive year of drought.

Usually our big fires will come in late spring or summer, but we had our first big one just 10 days into January this year. We evacuated 40 people from Aguilar, Colorado and three homes were destroyed . . . on January 10th. That doesn't bode well for July and August when the temperatures are in the 90s and 100s.

In addition to the dangers caused by drought, a bark beetle infestation of unprecedented magnitude is killing trees over hundreds of thousands of acres, leaving huge, dry fuel loads in its wake. Across Colorado, but particularly in the Arapaho National Forest, bark beetles have turned entire swaths of forest into brown, dead stands. In 2004, bark beetles killed an estimated 7 million trees over 1.5 million acres in Colorado.

When you see pictures that show the stands that have been hit by the bark beetle, you can see why people are so concerned. You can easily imagine what a fire would look like if it got into one of these stands—it would jump from crown to crown, racing up these ridges and through the forest faster than we could respond.

Beetle-kill stands are everywhere in Grand County and Larimer County, and are increasingly visible in pockets along the Front Range, among houses and communities in the wildland-urban interface.

The areas with smaller outbreaks, like those in the Pike National Forest and the Gunnison National Forest are just as worrisome as the massive outbreaks in northern Colorado. When we see beetle-kill trees like these, it usually means that the bark beetles are already attacking the surrounding trees.

The beetles usually attack by chewing their way through the bark of the trees. At maturity, the beetles have pouches, which carry spores of a blue-staining fungus. In the tree, the spores dislodge from the beetle and the fungus begins to germinate. In a few weeks, the fungus blocks the conductive vessels in the bark, preventing nutrients from reaching the foliage. Within a year the tree's foliage turns brown and the tree dies. These beetle outbreaks are usually part of the natural process. Normally they attack a few trees that are the least healthy. The current drought, though, has stressed even the healthiest trees, making entire forests vulnerable to this infestation.

Private land owners and local governments are doing their best to reduce the danger to property and lives—and I appreciate all efforts the Forest Service can make to partner with these local initiatives—but there simply are not enough resources available right now to curb the advance of this infestation.

At the FY06 budget levels, Colorado will receive only 35,000 acres of fuels treatment—but they could do three or four times as many acres if funding were available. An additional 12,500 acres are ready for timber sales and forest health treatments, but these projects, cleared through the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) process, have been shelved for lack of funding. People don't understand why Congress and the Administration aren't moving faster to curb this onslaught—to clear out the dead trees, to create buffers to prevent the beetle from spreading, from providing more resources and expertise to help local communities protect themselves.

Coloradans are anxious because we remember the fire storms of 2002, when the Hayman Fire burned 138,000 acres on the Front Range, the Missionary Ridge Fire burned 70,000 acres near Durango, and scores of other fires across the state chewed up resources and claimed property and lives.

This year could be as bad, or worse, if we don't get more resources to the front lines right now. We must find a way to reprogram funds, or, if that is not possible, provide emergency funding. Whatever we do, we must act quickly. The fire season is already upon us.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Senator SALAZAR. Senator Cantwell, I turn the baton over to you.

Senator CANTWELL. I didn't know I was going to get to call you "Mr. Chairman" so soon, but thank you for chairing this committee. And Secretary Rey and other panelists, thank you for being here.

I wanted to talk about the Department of Agriculture's recent inspector general report that was issued a few weeks ago that found that roughly one-third of the contract wildland firefighters did not meet—

Senator SALAZAR. Senator Cantwell, since you give me the accolade of being the chair, the gavel—

Senator CANTWELL. For not even 30 seconds.

Senator SALAZAR. Congratulations to you.

[Laughter.]

Senator CANTWELL. Thank you, Senator Salazar. The report basically said that the firefighters were not meeting the standards set out by the National Wildfire Coordinating Group, or that they lacked the documentation necessary. In a lot of ways, the IG report was very damning in the sense of procedures to conduct a review of their qualifications, records, monitoring—all of those were not being met. So, Mr. Rey, first I want to know, do you concur with the findings that are in this IG report?

Mr. REY. We concur with their recommendations for action so—

Senator CANTWELL. You don't concur on their findings? You don't think it's—

Mr. REY. We might differ or quibble with the way some of the individual findings are stated, but I don't think that that's relevant because the recommendations are sound and we're going to implement them and are implementing them. And there were five specific recommendations and we have programs underway to deal with each of them.

Senator CANTWELL. And since this I think is the third time for you and me going round and round about fire safety and the training of individuals, particularly the contract workers, and whether they were being trained properly, asking for separation of actual budget expense spent on training and never getting that information. So now it's a little hard to say, "Okay, we're going to meet and accept these recommendations and implement them." The thing that was so shocking about the 30-Mile Fire, in which we in the Northwest lost four young individuals that were part of a contract group, is the fact that when you look back at what were some of the challenges and difficulties that they faced on that day, they were very similar to the same problems that had been faced in other wildland fires. In fact, it was almost haunting when you look at the recommendations that came out of the Storm King Fire and the recommendations that were then being made about what were the mistakes made in 30-Mile Fire. It was like looking at the same recommendations X number of years later and then repeating, "Oh, we still haven't corrected that." So you can imagine that to just say we're going to implement those—what specifically is going to be done differently with these recommendations that's going to give those entities that are out there putting workers on the line and fighting fires the confidence that these individuals really are going to meet the training or requirements?

Mr. REY. Let me break it down recommendation by recommendation. Their first recommendation is that we should develop a program to review and verify the national contract firefighter qualification records. We are in the process of doing that and will complete that before we issue the national contract awards.

Senator CANTWELL. For this season?

Mr. REY. They will be in the 2006 crew contracts before those contracts are finally executed.

The second recommendation is that we should verify that the training sessions conducted by the association of contractors, because they have banded together for training purposes and other purposes into an association, but that we sufficiently monitor their training protocols and sessions so that we can assure that they're in accordance with the National Wildfire Coordinating Group training protocols that we use for our own employees. And we are doing that this year as their training systems—their training sessions get underway this spring. So we will have our staff in attendance monitoring the training work that they're doing.

The third recommendation is that we should ensure that the associations—again, the associations that represent the contractors—and restrict privileges to create and modify their electronic training records to individuals who don't have an employment or financial interest in any contractor's business. What essentially the IG said is that the electronic records of the training that is conducted should have a firewall so that it can't be accessed by individuals who have a financial interest in the business operations of a contractor. There should be a wall between the training entity of their association and their individual business; the individual contractor should not have access to those data bases, because there's no way to assure then the integrity of the data bases and the training that has occurred and been documented; and we will modify the contracts and evaluate the computer systems that the associations are using to compile the information that they use to report to us about the training that occurs so that it can't be accessed by the individual contractors as it's compiled.

The fourth recommendation was to adopt the Oregon Department of Forestry's standardized field language assessment for national contract crews and to complete the pre-season language assessment and certification procedure. One of the things the IG did was to not only look at our contract operations but look at the Oregon Department of Forestry's contract operations. They actually have more contract teams than we do because the contract work force is a larger percentage of their overall work force. The IG's conclusion is that their language certification and assessment protocols were superior to ours. As we've reviewed them, we agree and we're substituting theirs for ours in the 2006 contracts.

And then their last recommendation is to coordinate with those Federal agencies that have regulatory or enforcement authority in order to identify counterfeit documents used to obtain employment on contract crews. Those were the counterfeit documents associated with the immigration status of the individuals who are hired by the contractors. That was a problem years ago. We've dealt with it for a while. It's a chronic issue that requires a chronic—or consistent, I should say—level of attention. And I'd say it's probably fair that we haven't paid as much attention to that as we did in years past when it was a larger problem. The IG's recommendation is well-considered and we'll go back to the level of monitoring and assessment and cooperation with the INS and Customs Service that we were doing several years ago when we were having a much more chronic difficulty with the contractors that are providing us this service.

Senator CANTWELL. What is the point on that last issue in your mind?

Mr. REY. The point on the last one is to make sure that they're here legally.

Senator CANTWELL. Because if someone's violating these—they're violating dropping the ball on this end of the issue they're likely to be dropping the ball in other areas?

Mr. REY. Exactly.

Senator CANTWELL. Because one of the things the IG report was clear on is that communication on the line is critically important. And when you have a workforce that you can't communicate with—so they might in some cases even be—act appropriately, documented to be working, but what's the process for overseeing and requiring that there is good communication and sufficient understanding of command on the fire line?

Mr. REY. That's the point of adopting the Oregon Department of Forestry language assessment protocols, to do a better job of testing and assessing the English language capabilities of the contract crew members. That was a recommendation for—

Senator CANTWELL. If they don't meet that, they won't be hired?

Mr. REY. Correct.

Senator CANTWELL. Now, what'll the penalties be for—how will you assess whether the performance of individual associations who've done the association training sessions, how will you verify their success and what will you do when you find problems? Because obviously monitoring on the front end is one thing—

Mr. REY. Right. Being able to evaluate their success is part of the reason to make sure that the data bases that they turn over to us are secure and can't be modified, so we're going to install these new requirements into the contracts, we're going to monitor on a first-hand basis the implementation of these new requirements as training is conducted by the contractor's associations in the field, we're going to evaluate in addition to monitoring the data about training and capability that's provided to us from the association, and then if we're not getting the performance against these new contract provisions that we want, that'll be grounds for contract termination. If, on the other hand, what we're finding is—

Senator CANTWELL. What would contract termination mean?

Mr. REY. That means—

Senator CANTWELL. Would you seek more people from the same training group in the future?

Mr. REY. No, we would—

Senator CANTWELL. It would be disqualified, you're saying?

Mr. REY. We would terminate the contract of that contractor, and then, under our contracting rules, we'd have to evaluate the grievousness of the failure to perform on the contract to decide whether this is simply a case of terminating this contract or beginning a process of debarring the contractor from ever being able to bid on any further contracts. The contract laws do protect contractors from automatic debarment unless certain circumstances are met, so it's a fairly severe remedy to go to debarment, although it is done.

Senator CANTWELL. Is that part of Department regulation or you're just saying that's part of negotiation in contracts?

Mr. REY. The terms for termination are part of the departmental regulation. The terms for debarment are Government-wide standards for the most part. So debarment is a very severe remedy that can't be done in all instances. Termination, on the other hand, is something that we have a greater degree of flexibility on and then stop-work orders we have even greater flexibility on. So to go to your specific question, what are the remedies, the least severe remedy is a stop-work order, stop working on the contract until you correct the flaws that we've discovered. The second most severe remedy is to terminate the contract, you're so far away from performance that we don't see any point in continuing, or to terminate and look for another contractor to do this job. And then the third most severe remedy is debarment. In that case, you as a contractor have exhibited repeated violations and a failure to correct them and we have now moved into an area where we have grounds for debarring you, which means not only is this contract terminated but you can't bid on any contracts in the future, in some cases for a period of time and in other cases forever, depending on the grounds for debarment.

Senator CANTWELL. And you're saying all this will be in place for the 2006 fire season?

Mr. REY. Much of what I've described is in place as a matter of course. What will be in place for the 2006 fire season are new contract provisions that meet the five requirements of the IG, the five recommendations that flow from the IG's findings. And those new contract requirements will then be the ones we enforce against in deciding whether, if they're not met, we go to stop-work, termination, and ultimately, at some point, debarment.

Senator CANTWELL. And what did you mean, Mr. Secretary, that these mostly are in place?

Mr. REY. The procedures for stop-work, termination, and debarment.

Senator CANTWELL. Oh, okay.

Mr. REY. Those are not new. Those are—

Senator CANTWELL. So you think the change from this—because this IG report is reflecting what they think has been practiced in the last 12 months and many more before that.

Mr. REY. Correct.

Senator CANTWELL. So you're saying you take this and the implementation of this—you think the changes—by putting language into contracts, it gives you the ability to terminate associations that aren't meeting a standard?

Mr. REY. Individual contractors actually. The associations do some of this work. It's the contractors who we have individual contractual relationships with.

Senator CANTWELL. Right. But the training then leads them into the contract.

Mr. REY. Right. But the remedy we would seek is against the contractor. They, in turn, would probably stop funding their association if the training protocols weren't meeting our needs. Their remedy would be against their association. The way it—hopefully, this is straightforward, but the way it works is that they band together to create the associations to do the training, because it's something that can, on the face of it, be done more effectively by

somebody who specializes on it. We deal with the contractors directly though, so to the extent that we're dissatisfied with the training, we will obviously apprise the associations we're monitoring it and say, "You're not serving your member companies very well, because the training modules and protocols that you're developing are not getting us to what we want." But our remedy is against the contractors ultimately. We'll just say, "These people aren't trained to our new contract specifications so we're either going to stop-work, you can't continue until you train them, or we're going to terminate the contract, or ultimately debar, if it's a repeated violation."

Senator CANTWELL. I am sure I'm well beyond whatever round we were giving to individual members, but since I'm the only one here, I don't hear an objection, so I'll ask you a few more questions, if I could.

[Laughter.]

Senator CANTWELL. And just because it's such an important issue as it affects the lives of individuals who are—I think the people from Washington State and families who are involved in the 30-Mile Fire have tried to put a face on this challenge and focus and I applaud them for that. One of the things that was also talked about in the IG's report was just the importance of greater reliance on enhanced situational awareness and decisionmaking. And I saw this is the 30-Mile Fire, the same issues from Storm King to 30-Mile. We have these watch-out rules and these are the things that people should be looking out for, but if the individuals really don't—in a very short—in some instances, I think it's a 6-week training session and then all of a sudden they're facing a big catastrophic situation. I'm wondering what this means for those 10 standing firefighting orders and 18, I think, watch-out situations. If they're saying, "Listen, you need to enhance situational awareness and decisionmaking," how does that fit with what has been this norm by saying we have these 10 orders and watch-out situations?

Mr. REY. I think that the lesson learned from these fatality incidents is that the standing orders and the watch-out criteria are good as far as they go, but what we need is a lot more training that provides real world circumstances that people can react to in a training situation so that the watch-out and standing orders are more meaningful to them when they face a real life situation on the ground. So one of the things we've tried to do since 30-Mile is to build into our training modules some exercises where we put them in a situation, a computer-based simulator, where they face and have to use the standing orders and the watch-out situations as they would, or at least as close as we can make it to as they would, in a real life situation. That training is being given now more increasingly to our type 2 and type 3 incident commanders.

Historically, we looked at our type 1 incident commanders, because of the nature of their responsibilities, as the people who needed the most training, because we were tasking them with dealing with the most difficult incidents. One of the things that 30-Mile taught us and that we've learned in non-fatality incidents where we were dissatisfied with what happened even though fortunately there were not fatalities is that transitional situations are at least

as dangerous in some instances as what you face when you're already dealing with a large incident fire. Indeed, because in a transitional situation you're more likely working with a type 2 or a type 3 team, you're working with a team that hasn't been trained up to the level of a team that we would trust with the most complicated and dangerous situation. So one of the things we've done since 30-Mile is increase the training module for our type 2 and type 3 commanders using simulator exercises to put them in situations where their failure to abide by the watch-out and standing orders will, in a computerized scenario, put them in a situation that they don't want to be in, and hopefully by doing that, give them a better grounding in the dangers inherent in what a reasonably benign incident can turn into under adverse circumstances in a relatively short order, which is pretty much what happened at 30-Mile. So we hope that by that extra training we will have remedied that gap in the training system. But I think up until what we learned from 30-Mile and during that time period by studying some other transitional fires, we concluded that that was an area where we should be focusing a lot more training and how—

Senator CANTWELL. In this situational training, are you saying every firefighter's going to go through this or—

Mr. REY. Every incident commander and then down the line to crew and team leaders.

Senator CANTWELL. I'm sorry. Team leaders, you're saying?

Mr. REY. Right.

Senator CANTWELL. So that's a—so a team leader is maybe running a nucleus of about six to 10 individuals, is that right?

Mr. REY. Right.

Senator CANTWELL. So all of those—all of that hierarchy of communication chain you're saying would go through these and that's going to be required under these contracts?

Mr. REY. That's going to be a requirement of the certifications for team leaders and incident commanders for type 2 and type 3 incident teams to a substantially greater degree than it was previously.

Senator CANTWELL. And then just my last question on this and we can continue. I'm sure if I have other questions, we can follow up, but how would that have helped in the 30-Mile Fire situation in the sense of—because you're talking about this issue of transition and all of a sudden a fire goes from being a certain level to another level. In fact, I think that was exactly what happened on that particular day.

Mr. REY. And what we're trying to do through this training is to inculcate in the team leaders and the incident commanders a couple of things: One, simply because it seems like a benign incident, that doesn't mean you should ignore the standing orders and the watch-out orders. They are empirical and rather emphatic requirements no matter the severity of the incident and you can't ignore them because you think you've got the incident pretty much under control. The second thing we'd hope to inculcate in them is the proposition that an incident can take a turn quickly and materialize into something that you aren't expecting and that your plans for attacking the incident ought to assume that going in and not try to adapt to it after the fact when you're already at some

risk and some significant disadvantage. So you shouldn't go into an incident without having already followed those standing and watch-out orders. You shouldn't go into an incident, no matter how benign, without an agreed upon escape plan. You shouldn't cut any corners on the assumption that what you're doing is just a mop-up operation to an incident that's already largely under control because that isn't an assumption that will necessarily hold throughout the entirety of your deployment, and therefore you should start from the assumption that it won't hold, and act accordingly.

Senator CANTWELL. I thank you, Secretary Rey, for those comments. Can we at the end of this fire season get a report on the implementation of this?

Mr. REY. Sure.

Senator CANTWELL. I thank the panelists for being here and the committee is adjourned.

[Whereupon, at 3:48 p.m., the hearing was adjourned.]

APPENDIXES

APPENDIX I

Responses to Additional Questions

RESPONSES OF GALE NORTON TO QUESTIONS FROM SENATOR CRAIG

Question 1. Thus far this year the Forest Service and the BLM have sent a significant number of people to help with hurricane relief, and expended a large amount of money to do so. As I understand it, the sending agency is expected to cover the cost of the base eight hour day while their employees are on these assignments and that FEMA, or in the case of the space shuttle crash, NASA, do not repay the lending agency for these costs.

Can you tell me how much of the Department of the Interior funding has been expended on hurricane relief and, conversely, on the fires in Texas and Oklahoma and other states, thus far this year?

Answer. The Department estimates the DOI bureaus have spent over \$38 million under ESF#4 (firefighting) on FEMA mission assignments to support hurricane relief. Approximately \$16 million will be eligible for reimbursement by FEMA. From October 1, 2005 through March 31, 2006, DOI has obligated \$63.9 million on all fires. The fires in Texas and Oklahoma have largely occurred on non-federal land—any expenditure for specific firefighting resources requested by State or local jurisdictions outside existing mutual aid agreements will be reimbursed to DOI. The Department also benefits from these aid agreements as non-Federal resources support our firefighting efforts, particularly initial attack.

In accordance with FEMA policy, the base eight salaries for firefighting personnel that responded to the hurricane under the National Response Plan will not be reimbursed. This is standard practice as the Department would have incurred these costs regardless of whether or not firefighters had been deployed to assist FEMA with its hurricane response. Base eight salaries for temporary employees that were extended beyond their original firefighting employment season are eligible for reimbursement.

Question 2. I also understand that FEMA and others do not repay the lending agencies until a disaster is closed. Approximately how much money is currently owed to the Department of the Interior for hurricane recovery work this fiscal year?

Answer. Reimbursement requests can be forwarded to FEMA monthly, regardless of the bill amount. Agencies should submit final bills upon completion or termination of mission assignments in a timely manner as agreed to by FEMA. The bureaus are working to compile the supporting documentation as required for reimbursement by FEMA. As noted in the response to question 1, the Department estimates that DOI bureaus have spent over \$38 million under ESF#4 (firefighting) on FEMA mission assignments to support hurricane relief. Approximately \$16 million will be eligible for reimbursement by FEMA.

Question 3. Much of the land affected by the recent fires in Texas and Oklahoma is in the vicinity of Department of the Interior lands or tribal allotments.

Does the DOI rely on state and local resources for initial attack and large fire support?

Answer. Yes. DOI relies on existing mutual aid agreements with State and local jurisdictions to support firefighting efforts. This is particularly true in remote areas where DOI firefighting resources may be several hours away from the land they protect. Of the recent fires in Texas and Oklahoma, only the East Amarillo Complex fires were near DOI lands (Lake Meredith NRA).

Question 4. What effect will the proposal to eliminate funds for Rural Fire Assistance—the program that supports these local resources near DOI lands—have on the

Department's ability to cooperatively address the suppression needs in Texas, Oklahoma, and throughout the West?

Answer. The Department of the Interior has invested heavily each year since the creation of the National Fire Plan to help small community and rural fire departments with equipment, training, and public education. For the future, we are moving more toward assisting these departments with specific wildland fire training to further enhance their response capabilities. Beginning in FY 2006, Preparedness funds have been set aside to implement the Ready Reserve program as a pilot project. In 2006, this program is closely aligned with the Rural Fire Assistance program, and is designed to expand wildland fire response capability by providing wildland fire training and technical assistance to local and rural fire department personnel. The 2007 DOI request for Preparedness continues the \$1.9 million set aside for advancing the Ready Reserve concept. The 2007 Interior budget does propose to terminate the Rural Fire Assistance program; however, the Department will continue ongoing efforts to work with the Department of Homeland Security to meet the needs of rural fire departments for basic training and equipment through the much larger DHS Assistance to Firefighters Grant program. The Department recently updated the existing agreement with DHS that will ensure a greater role for the wildland fire agencies in reviewing grants to departments through programs they administer. As part of this enhanced collaboration, the two Departments now link websites to better direct those seeking grants to rural fire departments to available funding.

In FY 2005, the DOI and USDA Forest Service provided technical assistance, training, supplies, and equipment to nearly 11,000 small rural communities through Rural Fire Assistance (DOI) and Volunteer Fire Assistance (USDA Forest Service) and entered into cooperative agreements with many rural volunteer fire departments for the purpose of protection of both communities and natural resources. For 2007, the Administration's budget proposal reflects a continued commitment to Volunteer Fire Assistance, which supports communities of less than 10,000 inhabitants.

Question 5. I've heard that the Forest Service is working on a plan to establish two 7 or 8 person Incident Command Teams called National Incident Management Organization or NIMO teams with at least one of them being stationed at the NIFC facility in Boise.

What can you tell me about these NIMO teams? For example, how will they work? Who is going to pay for them and from what funding sources, and what work will they accomplish?

Answer. The Forest Service is the lead for this proposal. Accordingly, the Department of the Interior defers to the Forest Service in responding to this question as this proposal involves Forest Service personnel and obligations. DOI has not proposed funding for these teams in FY 2007.

Question 6. And can you tell me why we find these things out from people outside the agency when, if my information is correct, these teams could cost up to \$30 million per year?

Answer. The Department defers to the Forest Service for a response to this question, as this proposal involves Forest Service obligations.

RESPONSES OF GALE NORTON TO QUESTIONS FROM SENATOR DORGAN

Question 1. While the budget for firefighting increases in your request, you propose cuts in critical fire preparedness and prevention programs that keep fires from starting, provide resources to state and local governments, and maintain firefighting readiness. The administration's Forest Service 2007 budget request proposes decreases for fire preparedness, state fire assistance, fire research, and fire rehabilitation. The request for Interior proposes cuts for hazardous fuels reduction and completely eliminates the rural fire assistance grants program.

How do you reconcile these budget cuts with your claims about the sufficiency of the fire budget?

Answer. DOI currently plans and budgets all predictable firefighting expenses within the Preparedness account, including all firefighters and aviation resources. The \$6 million increase requested for Preparedness would fund fixed costs for this firefighting force. The Department and the Forest Service are currently engaged in the development of Fire Program Analysis, an innovative system to conduct fire management planning and budgeting across ownership and jurisdictional boundaries. Beginning with the 2008 budget request, this effort is designed to provide efficiencies through common and unified planning and budgeting.

We believe that the hazardous fuels reduction funding request will continue to sustain significant progress toward performance goals. By using new authorities (such as stewardship contracting) to leverage additional resources while also more

efficiently using existing funds, and by better use of partnerships and collaboration, the bureaus have been able to exceed performance targets the past two years.

Although the 2007 budget proposes to eliminate the pilot RFA grant program, the request continues to fund the Ready Reserve program. This DOI pilot program began in FY 2006 with \$1.9 million in Preparedness funding. The purpose of this program is to strengthen initial attack and extended capabilities of rural fire departments (RFDs) that provide firefighting assistance on DOI lands. In 2006, firefighter training will be repackaged for delivery at local fire facilities around the country. Additional training will be developed that bridges existing training in both the structural and wildland fire sectors, and training delivery will begin. With these funds, a supplementary workforce of 1,000-2,000 RFD personnel would be trained each year. This enhancement of local capacity will reduce the Department's reliance on the more expensive alternative of transporting Federal and contract firefighters from other regions of the country.

Question 2. How can you make these cuts without shortchanging your level of readiness?

Answer. The Department's 2007 budget proposal includes a modest reduction to the hazardous fuels budget. Despite this reduction, funding for the hazardous fuels program in 2007 would still be more than 4 times the level provided by Congress in FY 2000.

Since we plan and budget all predictable firefighting expenses within the Preparedness account, including all firefighters and aviation resources, the Department does not expect readiness levels will be adversely affected by the proposals. The budget includes an increase of \$6 million to fund fixed costs for both firefighters and aviation resources.

Question 3. Funding for wildland fire grants to rural fire departments is zeroed out in the Interior budget request. The budget request states that Interior has aligned its fire assistance program to expand local fire response capability and minimize federal mobilization efforts. This looks like you are trying to shift fire suppression costs to local fire departments, while cutting off their financial support. Your budget also claims that the \$10 million rural fire assistance grant program can be eliminated because of cooperation with the Forest Service volunteer fire assistance and the Department of Homeland Security Assistance to Firefighters grant programs. The budget for Forest Service volunteer fire assistance grants is only going up by \$38, 000. The DHS program is being slashed from \$648 million to \$293 million. It is obvious that the administration has no intention of providing necessary support to the local fire departments that put out thousands of fires on BLM lands, national parks, and wildlife refuges.

How do you justify cutting eliminating the rural fire assistance grant program when the administration is drying up other sources of financial assistance?

Answer. As explained above, the Department continues to fund the Ready Reserve program at \$1.9 million. In 2007, this program will train and provide safety gear for about 1,000-2,000 local firefighters.

The Ready Reserve program was appropriated \$1.9 million in FY 2006; awards are not yet complete. Those funds will be spent for the following:

Training Repackaging	\$250,000
Training Development	\$250,000
Personal Protective Equipment	\$585,000
Training Delivery	\$789,000

In FY 2007, the program will direct all funds to training.

Question 4. What incentive will there be for rural fire departments to respond to fires on federal land?

Answer. Local firefighters will likely continue to respond to fires that threaten their communities. Where they respond to fires on DOI lands in remote areas that have no locally available Federal firefighters, the Department will continue to emphasize that training and safety gear may be available through the Ready Reserve program. We also continue to expand our working relationship with the Forest Service and DHS, to ensure that limited funds are efficiently allocated to eliminate duplication and target those rural departments most in need of critical training and safety gear.

APPENDIX II

Additional Material Submitted for the Record

MESCALERO APACHE TRIBE,
Mescalero, NM, April 4, 2006.

Hon. JEFF BINGAMAN,
*Ranking Member, Committee on Energy and Natural Resources, U.S. Senate, Wash-
ington, DC.*

DEAR SENATOR BINGAMAN: For FY2006, the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) has enacted substantial budget cuts in the Mescalero Agency's Fire Preparedness Program. The fact of the matter is—this level of budget reduction will dramatically increase the potential for catastrophic escape wildfire on lands of the Mescalero Apache Tribe. The budget cuts combined with what is predicted to be the region's worst drought since the 1950's will place life, property and untold natural resources at risk.

The Mescalero Apache Tribe is completely dependent on their land and natural resources for spiritual, cultural and economic sustenance. The levels of budget cuts that have been enacted leave the Mescalero lands susceptible to the worst ravages of wildfire, and could financially devastate Tribal enterprises such as Mescalero Forest Products and the Inn of the Mountain Gods Resort and Casino.

Furthermore, I must stress that the level of budget cuts will be a serious breach in the Bureau's federal trust responsibility to the Mescalero Apache Tribe. The cuts will severely limit the capability to pre-position fire apparatus and crews in anticipation of a rapidly approaching "Extreme Fire Danger" manning classification. Ignitions that occur in escape during times of limited coverage will likely become major conflagrations costing untold dollars to suppress and rehabilitate. The potential damage from unmitigated wildfire creates unfathomable levels of liability for the Bureau and federal government.

In more concrete terms, the budget cuts will cause a major Reduction in Force (RIF) within the Fire Management Section of the Mescalero Agency Branch of Forestry. The RIF will impact approximately 10 permanent employees, all Tribal members. In addition, funding will only allow hiring of seasonal "preparedness" staff for 5 of the 13 pay periods during the normal fire season of mid-March through September. Safety will also become a concern, as funding will be minimal for fire fighter training and replacement of fire equipment and supplies.

The entire Department of Interior has been very active in educating all publics, including tribal publics, of wildfire dangers in recent years. The Mescalero Apache Tribe has done its part to actively promote and implement hazardous fuels reduction projects on the reservation and create defensible space. Now to decapitate the effectiveness of ground-pounding fire fighting resources is near incomprehensible.

Some BIA staff has suggested that other federal agencies could provide fire suppression coverage of tribal trust lands through cooperative agreements. In theory this may be true, but in reality it is not. The Mescalero Apache Tribe expects the Bureau to be the primary contact in government to government relations with the United States concerning trust issues. It is also a fact that other federal agencies, such as the US Forest Service, do not have adequate staffing and are undergoing similar budget cuts making this suggestion unrealistic.

Therefore, I am requesting your assistance to help restore Federal funding that will allow the Mescalero Agency to adequately prepare for a potentially dangerous fire season. If you have any questions concerning this request, please feel free to contact me so we may discuss the situation further. Your assistance in this very grave matter is deeply appreciated.

Sincerely,

MARK R. CHINO,
President.

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