

DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR, ENVIRONMENT, AND RELATED AGENCIES APPROPRIATIONS FOR FISCAL YEAR 2017

WEDNESDAY, APRIL 6, 2016

U.S. SENATE,
SUBCOMMITTEE OF THE COMMITTEE ON APPROPRIATIONS,
Washington, DC.

The subcommittee met at 10:09 a.m., in room SD-124, Dirksen Senate Office Building, Hon. Lisa Murkowski (chairman) presiding.
Present: Senators Murkowski, Hoeven, Daines, Udall, Leahy, Tester, and Merkley.

UNITED STATES FOREST SERVICE

STATEMENT OF TOM TIDWELL, CHIEF

ACCOMPANIED BY TONY DIXON, DIRECTOR OF STRATEGIC PLANNING, BUDGET, AND ACCOUNTABILITY

OPENING STATEMENT OF SENATOR LISA MURKOWSKI

Senator MURKOWSKI. Good morning. We will call the committee to order.

We are here today to review the fiscal year 2017 budget request for the United States Forest Service. Chief Tidwell, it is good to have you back before the subcommittee. Thank you for being here.

I would also like to welcome Mr. Tony Dixon, who serves as the Director of the Office of Strategic Planning, Budget, and Accountability there at the Forest Service.

I just remind colleagues that my hope is that we will be able to do several rounds of questions here this morning, 6-minute rounds, but we do have a vote at 11 o'clock. So we will figure out how to deal with that when we get to the 11 o'clock hour.

To the budget request itself, the Forest Service has asked for \$4.8 billion for fiscal year 2017. That is 13 percent or \$730 million less than the current enacted level, primarily because of the additional \$593 million Congress provided above the 10-year average for fire suppression in the event of a severe fire season in fiscal year 2016.

Again, the Forest Service has requested an additional \$864 million for a wildfire disaster cap adjustment to bring the total fire spending authority at the agency to over \$1.7 billion.

I am pleased the request builds upon the increases the subcommittee included last year for hazardous fuels management. I also appreciate the funding proposed for the Forest Inventory Anal-

ysis (FIA) program to continue to expand that program into interior Alaska. FIA provides critical information to States, industry, and other land managers on the health of all of our Nation's forests. And I appreciate that this budget includes funding for subsistence programs, which are critical to managing the subsistence resource in State of Alaska.

But there are some things that I find concerning. As you know, Chief, this subcommittee is bound by the caps established by the Budget Control Act. But unfortunately, the President's budget does not adhere to this reality and chose to put together what I consider to be more of a wish list of mandatory spending.

The budget requests \$128 million for Federal land acquisition through the Land and Water Conservation Fund, \$62 million of which is proposed to be mandatory spending. We know that our Nation's forests have dire management needs—we will certainly hear more about them this morning—and rather than investing in those, the administration has again prioritized land acquisition, which I have to confess I just do not get it.

I have said on more than one occasion in this subcommittee that when it comes to the Forest Service budget, I feel like it is Groundhog Day again, and unfortunately, we are here again today and it feels like that. The progress on keeping the timber industry alive in Alaska, southeast Alaska is too little but only too late if the policies continue on as they have been.

During questions, I want to take the opportunity to follow up on some issues that I raised with you when you were before the Energy Committee, so we will carry on that conversation.

But I do want to point out that it is not only southeast Alaska that is suffering. The budget is an example of how the Forest Service seems to be drifting away from being managed for multiple-use and sustained-yield, as well as basic forest management.

The National Forest System budget activities, which represent the agency's most fundamental responsibilities, get a cut in the budget. And this is particularly frustrating in light of the manner in which the administration continues to propose a wildfire cap adjustment that moves 30 percent of the cost of wildfires off-budget. Now, this has purportedly been to allow the most devastating wildfires to be treated as disasters, while allowing the Forest Service to invest the savings into active forest management activities that your department has long indicated are necessary to reduce the costs associated with wildfire and increase forest health.

Unfortunately, I just do not see this playing out in the budget request. I know that the 10-year average has increased, and that has to be accounted for in the budget request. But the savings that you have requested to achieve have resulted in a request that invests less than \$10 million more in fuel reduction and actually cuts Federal forest management.

So it does not make sense to me. On the one hand you say that you need to have the wildfire cap adjustment moving more off-budget. And there are going to be some savings. With those savings, we will work to deal with the forest management practices, but we are just not seeing that translate in your budget request which invests less than \$10 million more in fuels reduction and actually cuts Federal forest management.

So this is one of those reasons that I support the creation of a cap adjustment as long as it is fiscally responsible and accompanied by what we would consider to be meaningful forest reforms.

So I will continue to push for funding choices that allow us to have both healthy economies and healthy forests. And if we work toward that as our goal, I think that we will solve many of the problems that we face. We would not require hundreds of millions of dollars for subsidies to our logging communities. We could make great strides in reducing fuels loads on our Federal forests. We could make advancements in technology that will result in commercial uses for currently non-merchantable timber. And most importantly, we could have thriving and healthy communities and forests.

So we will have a series of questions, and I look forward to that. Again, Chief I appreciate you being here, and I look forward to your testimony.

And with that, I will turn to my friend and colleague, Senator Udall.

STATEMENT OF SENATOR TOM UDALL

Senator UDALL. Thank so much, Senator Murkowski, Chairman Murkowski.

Good morning and welcome, Chief Tom Tidwell and Budget Director Tony Dixon. Thank you for joining us today as we discuss the fiscal year 2017 budget request for the Forest Service.

Chief, thank you for your visit to New Mexico in February and for your chief's review of Forest Service programs in the Southwestern region. I understand that it went well. I know that you and your staff met with many New Mexicans on that trip from the land-grant heirs, the acequias, and community ditches, and I hope to talk to you about that a little bit later.

New Mexico has a unique relationship with our national forests. The forests are literally our backyards. They are critical to our local economies, to water resources, and to our incredibly diverse wildlife. Our forests sustain recreation, fishing, hunting, hiking, horseback riding, and skiing, which, Chief, I know that is one of your passions.

But the risk of Forest Service fire tempers those benefits. Last year, New Mexico escaped the brunt of fire season, but we cannot become complacent. Just yesterday, the National Weather Service issued a notice of extreme risk for fire weather conditions in northeast New Mexico due to strong, sustained winds, low humidity, warm temperatures, and an abundance of dry fuel on the ground. In the last 5 years we saw three of the largest fires ever recorded in the State. In 2011, 2012, and 2013 fires burned a combined 592,000 acres.

Before humans intervened, fires caused less severe damage. Forests were fire-adapted. Today, homes and communities are at risk from wildfire, and we have a catch-22. We spend billions of dollars on fighting fires but we do not invest enough resources in managing and restoring forests and preventing severe forest fires.

The President's fiscal year 2017 budget for the Forest Service shines a light on this problem. This year, more than half of the discretionary budget request is devoted to wildland fire programs.

This is unprecedented, and that does not even count the \$864 million proposed for disaster funding.

I know this is an issue that keeps you up at night, Chief, and it has occupied much of your time over the last several years. We came so close last year to passing a meaningful disaster cap adjustment.

Senator Murkowski, thank you for your efforts last year for the provisions you proposed in the Senate bill and your work during our conference negotiations with the House. We made a valiant effort then, and I hope we can find common ground on this sensible proposal as we work on this year's bill.

I am disappointed we did not get a disaster cap adjustment, but we did provide the additional resources. That should prevent the Forest Service and the Interior Department from having to borrow for firefighting this year.

But I am still concerned that we had to pay for these resources with discretionary dollars since we could not access disaster funds. That translates to nearly \$600 million in fiscal year 2016 alone. These are funds that could have been spent to reduce the risk of future wildfires, to restore restoration work on public lands, improve trails, or fund many other important activities. This seems to me to be a perfect example of why the disaster cap is so important. It is frustrating that we have worked for 3 years to pass the legislation but to have come up empty.

Typically, in an opening statement like this, I would outline new initiatives or other major budget proposals, and we could talk about them at length during this hearing. But there are virtually none in this budget request. Wildland fire is literally taking all of the oxygen out of the room when it comes to the Forest Service budget, mission, and energy. The budget proposes an overall \$29 million reduction in non-fire accounts. This speaks louder than words about the immediate need to address the fire budget. We will discuss this important issue in greater detail this morning.

Thank you, Chief, for joining us this morning, and I look over to hearing the testimony of both of you.

Thank you, Senator Murkowski.

Senator MURKOWSKI. Thank you, Senator Udall.

With that, we will turn to the Chief of the United States Forest Service. Welcome, Chief Tidwell.

SUMMARY STATEMENT OF CHIEF TOM TIDWELL

FISCAL YEAR 2017 FOREST SERVICE BUDGET PROPOSAL

Mr. TIDWELL. Madam Chair and Ranking Member Senator Udall, members of the subcommittee, once again, thank you for the opportunity to be here to discuss our 2017 budget request.

As the chair pointed out, when you adjust our budget request, take out the additional FLAME funding that occurred in fiscal year 2016 and plus our proposal for fire suppression funding, our request is very similar to the 2016 budget level with a few changes. It represents some really tough choices we make to prioritize our limited funding.

This request does allow us to continue to increase the pace and scale of our restoration efforts, allowing us to treat another 2.9 mil-

lion acres to restore the resiliency, and the forest health on those acres. It also allows us to reduce sediment and improve wildlife habitat by eliminating 2,000 miles of deferred road maintenance. It also allows us to improve fisheries on over 3,000 miles of streams and increase the overall function of 22 watersheds to provide those clean, abundant flows that our communities rely on. It also will yield 3.2 billion board feet of timber.

We do this by maintaining our 23 Collaborative Forest Landscape Restoration projects, allowing us to be able to expand the use of the Farm Bill authorities we received in 2014, the stewardship contracting authority, the insect and disease designations, and the Good Neighbor Authority that we are moving forward with, getting more and more States on board every day. We will continue to increase this production.

Our non-fire staffing has experienced a 39 percent reduction since 2001. However, this request also reduces the wildfire threat to firefighters and communities by treating another 1.6 million acres in the wildland-urban interface. In addition to that, we will treat another 400,000 acres outside of that to further reduce the threat of wildfire to our communities and our firefighters.

Our State and Private programs are going to build on the concept of a landscape-scale restoration approach. We combine a portion of funding from our Forest Health accounts, our forest health cooperative lands, our Forest Stewardship, Urban and Community Forestry, to funding so that the States and State foresters can do a better job to address the forest health concerns they face.

Our research program will continue to focus on dealing with the effectiveness of our restoration efforts, finding solutions to the insect and disease infestations, and to do what we can to stop the spread of invasives.

We are also expanding our research program to be able to find new markets—expand current markets, but also find new markets for the wood that needs to be removed from our Nation's forests to be able to restore the forest health.

Our budget also maintains the fiscal year 2016 funding levels for our Forest Legacy proposals and does request a \$2 million increase for Land and Water Conservation Funds. Once again, these projects are focused on maintaining and acquiring public access, reducing management costs, and keeping working landscapes working.

The budget request also provides for the level of fire suppression resources needed to protect not only the national forests, but to provide support for the States and our local firefighters. We will have the adequate number of large airtankers this year. We will have the helicopters, and the Hotshot Crews that we need to be able to continue to provide that support when we work in conjunction with our States and local fires.

Last year in 2016 you did provide additional funding for the FLAME account, but I think we all can remember with FLAME, that approach just does not work. I appreciate the leadership from this subcommittee to find a long-term, sustainable solution to address the cost of fire.

As we all know, the solution needs to stop this disruptive practice of transferring funds. We also need an alternative to the 10-

year average. This is not working anymore. I believe that we need to accept that 1 to 2 percent of our fires just need to be recognized as natural disasters.

From 2015 to 2017, our 10-year rolling average for fire suppression from 2015 to 2017 will go up another \$237 million. This takes away really all of your discretion, as you have pointed out already, for you to be able to address the needs of the American public for what they want and need from their national forests.

The graphs and slides that I have shared with you earlier best express the consequences of the cost of wildland fire. In 1995, 16 percent of our budget was consumed by our fire programs; in 2015, 56 percent; in 2025 our scientists project it will be 67 percent. Then the other slide that we have up there shows the impact that this has had on the agency.

So outside of fire, our employees that are out there managing the national forest, maintaining our roads, maintaining recreation, providing that service, has gone down 39 percent. Where I am very, very pleased with the amount of work that we are getting done on the ground today is very similar to what we were producing when we had 39 percent more employees, we are at the breaking point.

This cost of fire suppression, we are doing everything we can to be able to manage those costs, but as there are more and more homes in the wildland-urban interface, it continues to drive up our costs. As our fire seasons are longer, hotter, and dryer, we are going to continue to have to deal with severe fire seasons. We are making progress with the hazardous fuels work that we are doing. We are making progress in increasing the health of our forests.

I really appreciate the support of this subcommittee, and I look forward to answering your questions.

[The statement follows:]

PREPARED STATEMENT OF TOM TIDWELL

Madam Chairman and members of the subcommittee, thank you for inviting me here today to testify on the President's fiscal year 2017 budget request for the Forest Service. I appreciate the support this subcommittee has shown for the Forest Service in the past. I look forward to continuing to work together with members of the subcommittee to ensure that stewardship of our Nation's forests and grasslands continues to meet the desires and expectations of the American people. I am confident that this budget will allow the Forest Service to meet our mutual goals while demonstrating fiscal restraint, efficiency, and cost-effective spending.

BUDGET REQUEST AND FOCUS AREAS

The President's proposed overall budget for discretionary funding for the Forest Service in fiscal year 2017 is \$4.9 billion. That is \$787 million less than the fiscal year 2016 enacted level and reflects strategic investments to reduce wildfire threats to communities and maintain forest restoration investments. The fiscal year 2017 President's budget for the Forest Service focuses on three strategic goals, as identified in our Strategic Plan for fiscal year 2015–2020:¹ (1) sustaining our Nation's forests and grasslands; (2) delivering benefits to the public; and (3) applying knowledge globally. Below, we outline how our budget for fiscal year 2017 will fund programs corresponding to each strategic goal.

Strategic Goal 1—Sustaining Our Nation's Forests and Grasslands

The Forest Service responds to the many stressors affecting our landscapes and watersheds by sustaining and restoring healthy, forests and grasslands. By restoration, we mean restoring the functions and processes characteristic of healthier, more resistant, more resilient ecosystems, even if they are not exactly the same eco-

¹ U.S. Forest Service Strategic Plan 2015–2020: www.fs.fed.us/strategicplan.

systems as before. Our goal is to protect and restore the ability of America's forests and grasslands to deliver all the social, economic, and ecological values and benefits that Americans want and need, both now and for generations to come.

The fiscal year 2017 President's budget for the Forest Service will fund the treatments and infrastructure needed to protect and restore the most critical landscapes.¹ Our goal is to sustain and restore ecosystems that are capable of (1) furnishing clean and abundant drinking water; (2) resisting damage from fire, drought, floods, and insects and diseases; and (3) maintaining a strong productive capacity, thereby supporting economic opportunities for rural communities. To meet our goal, the fiscal year 2017 President's budget makes key investments in the following program areas:

- Collaborative Forest Landscape Restoration Program (\$40 million, the same level as enacted for fiscal year 2016)—to continue the 23 existing projects, which reduce the risk of catastrophic wildfires in high-priority, high-risk areas; improve water quality and quantity; increase carbon sequestration; and build on innovative implementation and monitoring work with our partners.
- Suppression (\$873.9 million, an increase of \$62.9 million above the fiscal year 2016 enacted level)—this amount represents 70 percent of the 10-year average costs for fire suppression, currently calculated at \$1.248 billion. The proposed cap adjustment would cover the remaining 30 percent of the 10-year average suppression costs as well as any costs currently funded through fire transfers. For fiscal year 2017, the proposed cap adjustment is \$864 million.
- Hazardous Fuels (\$384.1 million, an increase of \$9.1 million above the fiscal year 2016 enacted level)—focusing on fuels treatments in the wildland/urban interface to reduce the risk of catastrophic fire on 1.8 million acres.
- Land Acquisition Program (\$65.7 million in discretionary funding, \$2.2 million above the fiscal year 2016 enacted level, and \$62.3 million in mandatory funding) to consolidate fragmented lands within National Forest System borders and specially designated areas to support effective land and watershed management. The mandatory funds are part of the President's proposal for Land and Water Conservation Fund reauthorization, which calls for full mandatory funding starting in fiscal year 2018.
- Forest Legacy Program (\$62.3 million in discretionary funding, the same as the fiscal year 2016 enacted level and \$37.7 million in mandatory funding) to focus on preventing the conversion of private forests to other land uses and parcelization of ownership and conversion of private forests to other land uses. The Forest Legacy Program is a key component of the President's America's Great Outdoors Initiative to conserve critical landscapes and reconnect Americans to the outdoors through reauthorizing the Land and Water Conservation Fund, with full mandatory funding starting in fiscal year 2018.
- Forest Products (\$359.8 million, the same as the fiscal year 2016 enacted level) to accelerate the pace of restoration and continue to work to create healthy landscapes. We anticipate the sale of 3.2 billion board feet of timber with this funding level.

Strategic Goal 2—Deliver Benefits to the Public

The fiscal year 2017 President's budget will help the Forest Service with our goal to build thriving communities by helping ensure abundant clean water, jobs and flourishing local economies, and opportunities to connect to the outdoors. To meet our goal, the fiscal year 2017 President's budget makes key investments in the following program areas:

- Landscape Scale Restoration (\$23.5 million, an increase of \$9.5 million above the fiscal year 2016 enacted level)—this increase will fund about 20 more innovative, cross-boundary projects that target high-priority areas identified in the States' forest action plans. This continued investment in cross-boundary, landscape-scale projects on State and private lands will spur innovation, bring partners to the table, support climate change mitigation and adaptation, and allow the agency to leverage partner contributions. This investment will sustain and restore forest health across large landscapes, assist urban communities in protecting their forests, and increase the number of cross-boundary projects.
- Recreation, Heritage, and Wilderness (\$264 million, an increase of \$2.2 million above the fiscal year 2016 enacted level). This increase will modernize our recreation special uses program, expand access to the National Forest System, and increase the capacity of our community service and volunteer programs.
- Law Enforcement & Investigations (\$131.6 million, an increase of \$5 million above the fiscal year 2016 enacted level). The funds will support intensive operations at marijuana plantations on the national forests and a comprehensive eradication, dismantling, and reclamation strategy. The additional resources

- will pay for removing infrastructure, trash, debris, and hazardous materials (such as rodenticides and herbicides) at the plantations and for reclaiming old marijuana sites.
- Facilities (\$71.6 million, a slight increase from the fiscal year 2016 enacted level) to maintain our developed recreation sites and our fire, administrative, and other facilities.
- Secure Rural Schools (SRS)—the administration proposes reauthorization of the act. SRS is an important tool to strengthen economic opportunities for local communities.

Strategic Goal 3—Apply Knowledge Globally

The Forest Service has a long record of land management success, even though we work in complex and changing environments. We attribute our success in part to our world-class expertise in research and development; our capacity to develop new technologies; our innovation in forest products; our ability to conduct resource assessments; and our vast collection of geospatial information, inventory data, and monitoring information.

Through intellectual inquiry and knowledge transfer, the Forest Service will continue offering land managers and others better information, applications, and tools for natural resource management. By improving our fundamental understanding of forests and grasslands, we will make better decisions and better achieve our goals of sustaining the Nation's forests and grasslands and delivering benefits to the people we serve.

The fiscal year 2017 President's budget for the Forest Service will fund the research and development needed to sustain America's forests and grasslands and to deliver benefits to people. From on-the-ground natural resource management to long-term strategic policy development, all of our efforts to sustain forests and grasslands and to deliver benefits to people depend on new knowledge, information, and applications.

To meet our goal, the fiscal year 2017 President's budget makes key investments in the following program areas:

- Forest Inventory and Analysis (\$77 million, an increase of \$2 million from the fiscal year 2016 enacted level) to continue to implement the annualized inventory program in all 50 States (including interior Alaska), the affiliated Pacific islands, Puerto Rico, and the U.S. Virgin Islands.
- Land Management Planning, Assessment, and Monitoring (\$183.9 million, a slight decrease from the fiscal year 2016 enacted level). Through implementing the 2012 Planning Rule, we will achieve efficiencies in agency assessment and monitoring activities. The 2012 planning rule promotes a collaborative science-based approach for planning, monitoring, and conducting assessments.
- International Forestry (\$8 million, the same as the fiscal year 2016 enacted level). These funds will support preventing illegal logging internationally, protecting U.S. forests from invasive species, supporting international policy discussions on climate change and the role of forests and grasslands in greenhouse gas mitigation, and bringing innovative technology developments to the United States.

In connection with the fiscal year 2017 President's budget, we propose several key legislative changes to improve our effectiveness in delivering programs and services:

- Fire Suppression Cap Adjustment.*—We propose a budget cap adjustment to fund suppression costs for large and complex fires. Suppression would be funded at a level that covers 98 percent of the fires we fight, or 70 percent of our 10-year average suppression costs. Remaining fire costs would be funded through an "off-budget" fire suppression cap adjustment. Off-budget funding would follow from Secretarial declaration of need.
- Collaborative Forest Landscape Restoration Program.*—We propose increasing the authorized funding level for this successful program from \$40 million to \$80 million which would fund up to 10 additional projects. The legislative proposal also extends the end date of the authority to 2026 to allow for the full implementation of additional projects should the Forest Service receive an increased appropriation.
- Federal Lands Recreation Enhancement Act.*—We propose a 1 year extension of the Federal Lands Recreation Enhancement Act. Under the Act, 95 percent of the recreation fees collected on a national forest or grassland are retained at the unit where collected, to be reinvested in recreation sites and services. This is an interagency proposal together with the Department of the Interior. The current act expires on September 30, 2017.

- Small Tracts Act Conveyance Authority*.—We propose establishing additional categories of NFS land which the Secretary of Agriculture is authorized to sell, interchange or exchange, if in the public interest. By tying to the existing Small Tracts Act, the Forest Service will be better equipped to resolve landownership and management challenges, save limited resources, address community needs, and to move appropriate lands into private ownership. It would also minimally increase the maximum value of the land that could be conveyed to better align with current land values.
- Land and Water Conservation Fund*.—The administration proposes permanent authorization for annual mandatory funding, without further appropriation or fiscal year limitation for the Departments of the Interior and Agriculture Land and Water Conservation Fund programs beginning in fiscal year 2018. Starting in fiscal year 2018, \$900 million annually in mandatory funds would become available. In fiscal year 2017, our budget proposes \$900 million in total Land and Water Conservation Fund funding, comprising \$425 million in mandatory and \$475 million in discretionary funds. Proposed language will be transmitted to Congress shortly.
- Secure Rural Schools and Community Self-Determination Act*.—We support Congress reauthorizing the Secure Rural Schools and Community Self-Determination Act of 2000 making payments through mandatory funding. The funding for extending the act through 2020 is included in our Budget Justification, and we look forward to working with the Committees to develop the legislative proposal.
- Extension of Grazing Permits*.—We propose that the terms and conditions of section 325 of Public Law 108–108 (117 Stat. 1307), which regard grazing permits issued by the Forest Service on any lands not subject to administration under section 402 of the Federal Lands Policy and Management Act (43 U.S.C. 1752), shall remain in effect for fiscal year 2017. This would address recent amendments to section 402 of the Federal Land Policy and Management Act and public concerns that the amendments do not apply to grazing permits issued by the Forest Service on the national grasslands and on eastern national forests.
- Direct-Hire Authority*.—We propose Direct-Hire Authority for resource assistant interns who have successfully completed the new Resource Assistant Program. The program is designed to attract recent graduates of institutions of higher education, with particular emphasis on women and on graduates from historically Black, Hispanic, and Native American schools or other schools with diverse student populations. Direct-Hire Authority will give us more flexibility in recruiting successful graduates of the program into our workforce.
- Grazing Administrative Processing Fees*.—The budget includes appropriations language for a 3-year pilot project to allow the Forest Service to recover some of the costs of issuing grazing permits/leases on Forest Service lands. The Forest Service would charge a fee of \$2.50 per Animal Unit Month, which would be collected along with current grazing fees. The fee will assist the Forest Service in processing pending applications for grazing permit renewals. During the period of the pilot, the Forest Service would work through the process of promulgating regulations for the continuation of the grazing administrative fee as a cost recovery fee after the pilot expires. The fees will be credited to the Management of Lands and Resources appropriation. The estimate for 2017 is \$15,000,000.

FUTURE OUTLOOK

The Forest Service serves the American people by ensuring that their forests and grasslands deliver a full range of values and benefits, including hundreds of thousands of jobs and annual contributions to the economy worth many times more than our entire annual discretionary budget.

Now we are facing some of the greatest challenges in our history. Invasive species, climate change effects, regional drought and watershed degradation, fuel buildups and severe wildfires, habitat fragmentation and loss of open space, and devastating outbreaks of insects and disease all threaten the ability of America's forests and grasslands to continue delivering the ecosystem services that Americans want and need. In response, the Forest Service is increasing the pace and scale of ecological restoration. We are working to create healthy, resilient forest and grassland ecosystems capable of sustaining and delivering clean air and water, habitat for wildlife, opportunities for outdoor recreation, and many other benefits.

Our budget request focuses on restoring resilient landscapes, building thriving communities, and safely managing wildland fire while providing an effective emer-

agency response. Our requested budget will enable us to address the growing extent and magnitude of our management challenges and to furnish the mix of values and benefits that the public expects from the national forests and grasslands. Our budget priorities highlight the need to strengthen cooperation, collaboration, and public/private partnerships that leverage our investments to reach shared goals. Through strategic partnerships, we can accomplish more work while also yielding more benefits for all Americans, for the sake of all generations to come.

This concludes my testimony, Madam Chairman. I would be happy to answer any questions that you or the subcommittee members have for me.

Senator MURKOWSKI. Thank you, Chief.

Mr. Dixon, were you prepared to make comments this morning or just be here for answers, sir?

Mr. DIXON. Be here to assist the Chief.

Senator MURKOWSKI. All right, great. Thank you.

Chief, let me begin. As you know, not only do I have the privilege and pleasure of chairing this Interior Appropriations Subcommittee that has the oversight of Forest Service budget, I serve on the authorizing committee, the Energy Committee. So I am in a somewhat unique position as both being an authorizer and appropriator. I know that Senator Daines is in that same position as well. So I obviously, take a very, very keen interest in making sure that we are doing right when it comes to Forest Service, we are doing right when it comes to dealing with forest management issues throughout the country and how we deal with the ever-increasing threat of wildfire.

We have already had at least two wildfires up in the State of Alaska, probably had our earliest fire ever. I think it was late February. And it has been a very, very light and warm winter with not a lot of snowfall, so the real concern for us is what is on deck this year. So there is great interest in working through these longer-term solutions rather than just kind of the band aid approach that we have taken.

And the whole discussion of how we deal with fire borrowing is one that I take very seriously, and I want to make sure we get it right. I do not want to do something just because we have a vehicle in front of us right now and so let us slap something together and hope we get it right. This is too important.

And so I appreciate the back-and-forth that many have engaged in in trying to identify how we deal with not only the wildfire suppression issues, fire borrowing, and what that means then for forest management reforms, which I feel very, very strongly about.

And I mentioned in my opening that I am looking at how the budget lays out the priorities, and it just does not seem to fit with the discussion that we have had when it comes to the wildfire suppression. The budget proposal proposes to take 30 percent of the cost of wildfire suppression off budget so ostensibly you can invest more in forest management and restoration activities, as well as deal with the increasing cost of fighting fires.

But, again, I am having a tough time seeing where you have actually invested these savings from this proposed cap adjustment, aside from the increase in fire suppression because, as I look at it, you have got a proposed decrease in national forest management, only a very small increase for hazardous fuel reductions.

You have indicated that the Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF) does go up. I look at that and I say, okay, you are invest-

ing in buying more land, and you are not doing what you have said you wanted to do with this discretionary funding source, which happens when you are able to take this off budget.

So tell me how you got to the place where you are in this proposal that the Forest Service would invest less money in forest management.

FOREST MANAGEMENT

Mr. TIDWELL. Well, Senator, I share your concerns. I think back to when I have been up here over the last couple of years when we first started this proposal. We looked at our budget request at that time, and when you factored in the increase of cost of suppression plus the additional request we were asking for on hazardous fuels and in forest products, you were close to where we would see the difference if we would move forward with a different way to fund fire.

What has happened over the last 2 years is that the cost of fire suppression keeps going up. It has basically eliminated any potential savings that we had 2 years ago when we started this discussion.

Now, our request does maintain the increase you provided us in forest products last year. I appreciate that. It also maintains the increase in hazardous fuels that you provided over the last couple of years. So that has helped us to move forward to be able to create more acres. You will see this year with our increase in production when it comes to timber harvest to go to 3.2 billion, that does reflect the increase you provided us in 2016.

So, we have been able to maintain those slight increases, but the rest of the discretion that was available when we first started this discussion has gone into the cost of fire suppression.

Senator MURKOWSKI. But then why would you—recognizing that—because I do not disagree that the cost of suppression is growing, but then why would you take those discretionary dollars and put more towards land acquisition? Why would you not put more towards forest management?

And the example that I will use for you, we had the funny River fire in Alaska back in 2014. In the wake of that fire, we had 11.3 million acres that were identified as high priority for fuels reduction. Again, folks at home are real concerned about what may be coming with this fire season.

So you have got areas that have been identified for fuels reduction as high priority, but have we been able to do anything to make sure that on those 11.3 million acres we have been doing something? Because I am not seeing that the dollars are going towards that level of management.

Mr. TIDWELL. Well, Senator, year after year we keep increasing the number of acres that we are treating to restore forest health, along with reducing hazardous fuels. Yes, there is a backlog out there that I have been very clear about.

Senator MURKOWSKI. So why not take some of that money that you are allocating towards LWCF and put it towards that?

LAND AND WATER CONSERVATION FUND (LWCF)

Mr. TIDWELL. Well, LWCF is another one of our programs that has tremendous public support. As I try to put together a proposal each year with basically a constrained budget, I admit, it gets very difficult to make those choices. So when we look at the LWCF proposal, it is \$2 million more than what you provided us last year, but those are based on just trying to prioritize the best use.

When I look at some of these LWCF proposals, they do help reduce our administrative costs and they do lock in that public access that I see year after year. There are more private landowners that for a variety of reasons, probably very sound reasons, that are no longer allowing the public to cross their lands to get to the national forest and grasslands, so that is also a pressing need.

So I share your concern. I wish I could be up here asking for a significant increase in forest products, a significant increase in watershed, a significant increase in hazardous fuels, but with the budget constraint that we are working under, this is the proposal that I have.

Senator MURKOWSKI. Well, and I understand that, Chief, my time is expired, but again, you have to understand the frustration of so many of us that at a time when we cannot take care of the lands that we have, we are going to spend more dollars to bring more into that account.

And, you know, you are saying that LWCF is very popular, it is, but it is also quite significant to make sure that people feel that we have attended to our forests in a way that help those that are in that urban wildfire space, that we protect our forests in a way that makes sense for all.

So this is an argument I have with Park Service, it is an argument that I have with you, and until we are better custodians of the lands that we already have, it sure makes it tough when you see increases in the land acquisition side at the same time we see decreases in the management side.

I am going to turn to my colleague.

Senator UDALL. Senator Tester can go ahead.

Senator MURKOWSKI. Okay. As always, Senator Udall is very courteous to his colleagues who have other places to go, so we are going to turn to Senator Tester.

Senator TESTER. Thank you, Madam Chair, and thank you, Senator Udall, for the courtesy.

I just want to say thanks for being here, Chief. And with no offense to the chairman, thank you for funding the Land and Water Conservation Fund.

And I am going to just tell you that the reason this money is so important—and remember that this money was supposed to come from offshore drilling and it was supposed to be funded at \$900 million 30 years ago, 40 years ago maybe, there are a lot of reasons for it.

Plum Creek, now Weyerhaeuser, is divesting a lot of their property, a lot of this is checkerboard property, and it will help with management. But maybe the most important thing that I take back to the taxpayers in Montana is that outdoor recreation is a \$6 billion economy in Montana alone, \$6 billion in Montana alone. Now,

the tax rate at the high-end is 35 percent. If we take it and tax that \$6 billion a 20 percent, every year it would pay for that \$128 million. So I think that it is very important for our economy as we move forward.

And lastly, I would just say many of these landscapes are not going to be around in 10 or 15 years. You are exactly right, there is big money on the coast that will buy up this land that Weyerhaeuser has now, and quite frankly, they will put chains across it, and the outdoor recreation economy that we are so proud of today will not be around in 10 years.

So thank you for that. I think it is visionary. And I think if we just stayed with what we were doing, taken the offshore leasing and putting it to Land and Water Conservation Fund, we would not even be having this debate because it would be funded at \$900 million.

I want to talk a little about the same issue about forest management. Your firefighting costs in 1995 were 16 percent. Today, it is 52 percent. It will be two-thirds of your budget by 2025. It has tripled over the last 30 years. What is driving it? Is it a lack of management that is driving it? What is driving that?

FOREST MANAGEMENT

Mr. TIDWELL. What is driving it is just the reality of the cost of wildland fire suppression increasing. It is being driven by—primarily the homes would drive a lot of the cost for us to use the resources to be able to keep that fire away from our communities, away from individual homes, but it is also—our fire seasons today are running 60 to 80 days longer than what they were earlier in my career. It takes more resources, and it is going to take more funding.

Senator TESTER. So let us talk about the wildland-urban interface (WUI) for a second, as long as you brought it up. What percentage of the WUI has been treated?

WILDLAND-URBAN INTERFACE

Mr. TIDWELL. Well, as I mentioned, we have been treating close to over 1.5 million acres of the wildland-urban interface every year, and so we are making steady progress.

Senator TESTER. I got you. So what are the total acres—

Mr. TIDWELL. There is about 50 million acres that need to be treated.

Senator TESTER. Fifty million? And if you are doing 1.5 million a year, where are you at now? Are you at 10 million, 15, 20?

Mr. TIDWELL. We have them probably treating over 10 million now.

Senator TESTER. Okay. So you have got a ways to go.

Mr. TIDWELL. The problem with it, too, is it keeps the vegetation growing, so there is also maintenance that by the time we get through the first 50 million, we will need to be going back to continue to treat the acres.

Senator TESTER. Okay. Well, just as the chairman put out in Alaska, it has been warm and dry in Montana also. And that becomes an issue with the fire season and the management and all

of that. And now that there are more houses put on the land that butts up against the forest, it does become a problem.

I want to talk about trails for a second and recreation in general. Montana is going to receive a 30 percent cut in the trails budget over the next 3 years, 10 percent of your—I think more than any other State. What did we do wrong?

TRAILS AND RECREATION

Mr. TIDWELL. Senator, you did not do anything wrong.

Senator TESTER. Okay.

Mr. TIDWELL. What you are seeing is an attempt by my staff to be able to deal with the reduction of trails funding over the last few years at the same time with an increased demand and to be able to look at where is the highest priority for that work.

When I hear this I think about my experiences in Montana. Those trails, every mile of those trails is just as important as any mile in California or Colorado, places where we have higher level of use, but it is still important. So what you are seeing is an effort for us to prioritize our limited resources.

Senator TESTER. I got you. Some of those regions actually got plussed up, not a lot but a little. The point—and I started out with talking about Land and Water Conservation Fund. The fact is that if we are going to continue to grow our outdoor economy, those trails are pretty damn important.

Mr. TIDWELL. Yes.

Senator TESTER. And we have a million people in Montana, but we have far more, far, far more than that that visit our State because we have access to our public lands. So I would ask that we take a look at that and try to figure out some way where we can be—I will not call it punitive but more fair. Let us put it that way.

Mr. TIDWELL. Senator, the staff is looking at that. When they see the consequences, they are taking a second look at it to see if we can moderate that.

Senator TESTER. Now—

Mr. TIDWELL. Until we fix the cost of wildland fire suppression, I am not going to have a real positive answer for you.

Senator TESTER. We will continue to work and try to get a bipartisan solution for that.

One last thing, and I know what you are going to say. You are going to say you have to work within the budget, but part of the problem with timber sales right now is you have got to go through a National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) process—which I support by the way—and make sure it is done right. Public lands should be that way. Unfortunately, you have far fewer NEPA specialists than you have had in the past and a number of far fewer. It looks to me like there is no way we are going to get any timber sales out the door as long as you are looking at those kind of numbers on NEPA specialists.

NATIONAL ENVIRONMENTAL POLICY ACT SPECIALISTS

Mr. TIDWELL. Well, Senator, you are correct on the impacts to our staff. On the other hand, I am so appreciative of what our employees are able to do. When I look at the level of production we are doing today with 39 percent fewer employees, they have done

a good job to be able to look at much larger landscapes, working with our communities, but we are probably maxed out to the point that it is difficult to ask them to do much more.

We have the opportunity with the 2014 Farm Bill authorities to actually get more work done, and to be able to work with the States.

Senator TESTER. Right on. Yes.

Mr. TIDWELL. We have got to have at least enough Forest Service capacity there to meet and match our partners.

Senator TESTER. Right. Well, thank you, Chief.

Thank you, Madam Chair. Thank you, Senator Udall.

Senator MURKOWSKI. Senator Daines.

Senator DAINES. Thank you, Madam Chair, and Ranking Member Udall.

Chief Tidwell, good to have you here again. I want to thank you for your commitment also to continue to work on ways to reduce obstructions to litigation in Montana, as well as what you do, I think, oftentimes around the country.

I also share the concern echoed by Senator Tester about the trail budget reductions. I am an avid user myself. Perhaps many Senators in August are off traveling around the world. My wife and I enjoy using the trails in Montana in the backcountry, and I would ask you to take a new look at that. It is hard to find parking places anymore in a lot of the trailheads in Montana. We have been discovered. And you continue to maintain what we have well, but thanks for looking at that.

Regarding the Farm Bill, as you are aware, we have identified nearly 5 million acres in Montana that were designated as insect and disease areas with the 2014 Farm Bill. For fiscal year 2015 and 2016, my understanding is we currently have nine Farm Bill projects in process in Montana. That covers about 6,200 acres. I am also told there are about 25 additional Farm Bill-related projects slated over the next 3 years.

I also want to emphasize and reinforce my appreciation to the Forest Service strike teams that have been in Montana who are working to utilize the Farm Bill authorities. This is a step in the right direction.

Here is the challenge. We have identified in Montana about 5 million acres with dead or dying trees, and that is something we have been communicating to Montanans back home is that if these are dead and dying trees, 5 million acres, you take 6,200 acres of projects that have been identified so far, do the quick math, it is about .1 percent is currently on the slate to address dead and dying trees, which of course present a wildfire risk.

Question one is in the conference report to the fiscal year 2016 spending bill, Congress directed Forest Service to spend at least \$5.4 million to carry out the 2014 Farm Bill, but I am concerned the agency has not followed this congressional direction. Do you know how much funding is in the fiscal year 2016 for the Forest Service? What have they dedicated to carrying out the Farm Bill Authority?

FARM BILL AUTHORITY

Mr. TIDWELL. Well, Senator, we are looking at 34 projects under the Farm Bill authorities. We will spend over \$10 million for those 34 projects. So, we will actually exceed what you asked us to do. I expect that even by the end of the year the number of projects will increase, because our employees are getting more comfortable using the authorities. There are more States that are entering into the Good Neighbor Authority agreements with us and being able to bring their resources to the table just like Montana is doing. So I expect that by the end of the year that will even increase.

Senator DAINES. So I am glad to hear you are well above the \$5 million. That is good news. And again, we look at the overall acreage treated still just about around the area, we have got a long ways to go, so I am going to continue to invest in this. We can still recover dead and dying trees until they become unsalvageable.

Question, though, have you directed your personnel in your DC office with a mission to ensure that regional offices are maximizing the utilization of these authorities?

Mr. TIDWELL. We are having those ongoing discussions to be able to look at every authority we have, the flexibility we have to be able to get the work done on the ground. So we are actually revisiting our appraisal system to make sure that we are using the maximum flexibility to be able to get the work accomplished.

We are also looking at the potential to be able to look at how we can, for lack of a better term, subsidize or reflect on the appraisal longer haul distances to be able to get the wood to the mills. Our focus is on getting the work done, and we are continuing to look at everything we have available for us to get that done.

Senator DAINES. Do you know about how many folks—I appreciate the leadership there. I think it is all about focus, waking up every morning and driving this—how many people in DC are focused on this, would you say?

SAWMILLS

Mr. TIDWELL. Well, I can tell you our forest management staff, the majority of them, are focused, but there are just a few. Once again, when I look at where we are today, we have 49 percent fewer foresters today than what we had when we were producing the same amount of timber that we are projecting to do this year. We are fortunate in that your region we have probably one of the best people to really understand our appraisal system to be able to look at that.

So I am optimistic that we are going to be able to maximize our flexibility to do everything we can to get the work done, but even more importantly, keep the industry alive.

Senator DAINES. Yes, well that is what we are. Yes, we are down to just a handful of sawmills left in Montana. We used to have 30 when I was growing up there. The endangered species is probably sawmills in Montana. We could probably add them to the list.

Regarding tribal forest protection—I want to shift gears—Chief Tidwell, as you know, the Tribal Forest Protection Act of 2004 authorized the Forest Service to prioritize tribal forestry projects on Forest Service and the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) land

to protect these neighboring Indian trust resources from wildfire, disease, and threats originating on nearby Federal lands. Unfortunately, in more than a decade only six projects have been carried out in 10 years.

Last year, the House passed a forestry bill, H.R. 2647. It included a provision to give tribes more certainty in exercising its authorities. Question: Do you agree that provisions such as those in that House-passed bill are needed to ensure that more work near tribal lands gets done?

TRIBAL FOREST PROTECTION ACT

Mr. TIDWELL. So the provisions that we are addressing to help support the tribes by helping us to be able to do a better job working with them. Yes, we feel that those are helpful. We have also invested some efforts this past year to be able to work with the tribes. We are going to accomplish another six projects this year, which will basically double what we have been able to accomplish.

Senator DAINES. It is a better trend line. Six in 10 years. And to get six more this year, that is good.

Last question, and then I am out of time. We have seen some success with the Tribal Forest Protection Act (TFPA) in Montana, as with the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes (CSKT's) McGinnis/Cabin project. Overall, the promise of TFPA remains unfulfilled, however.

In an Indian Affairs Committee this last month, I secured the commitment of the Department of Interior's acting assistant secretary for Indian Affairs Larry Roberts to work with us and with the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) to address challenges in tribal forestry.

My question, Chief Tidwell, can I get your commitment to work with me and with the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) to do the same?

TRIBAL FORESTRY

Mr. TIDWELL. Yes, you have that commitment from myself and from our staff. It was when I was a regional forester there in the northern region when we did the first project—and so as you have shared we have only done six in 10 years.

Senator DAINES. You have firsthand experience?

Mr. TIDWELL. We had the first, but now we need to be able to move this in a very different direction.

Senator DAINES. All right. I look forward to working with you, Chief Tidwell. Thank you.

Senator MURKOWSKI. Thank you, Senator.

Senator Udall.

Senator UDALL. Thank you, Madam Chair.

I, Chief Tidwell, would like to focus on the fire borrowing a little bit. I understand that your agency's most recent forecast predicts a less-active fire season this year. That means that the agency is expected to spend between \$885 million and \$1.7 billion on fire-fighting activities with a median forecast of \$1.28 billion.

As you know, the subcommittee provided \$1.62 billion to fight fires this year, so unless the fire season really outpaces your predictions, you should have sufficient funding to cover your fire-

fighting needs, and you should be able to do that without borrowing from other programs.

However, if you need more than that, we also continued language from previous years which allows transfers between the Forest Service and the Interior Department, and of course we included the longstanding authority allowing you to transfer funds from non-fire accounts.

That allows you to keep fighting a fire if appropriated funds run out. This did occur during the 2015 fire season, and Congress repaid the \$700 million in emergency funding. We did that almost immediately so that you could repay your non-fire accounts.

Secretary Vilsack has been very public in his disappointment about failing to pass the disaster cap adjustment. He has stated for the record that he will not authorize transfers for fire suppression. He said that most recently at the agriculture appropriations hearing last month. That essentially bars the normal practice of fire borrowing, as you know.

As I said in my opening statement, I share the Secretary's frustration that we do not have a cap adjustment in law yet, and I hope this is the year that we will be able to enact a fix for the fire-fighting budget. But until that happens, we must be clear. We expect the Forest Service to use all of its existing legal authorities to fight catastrophic wildfires.

Chief Tidwell, can you assure us that when the time comes the agency will use all available tools to protect the public and our natural resources from wildfires?

SUPPRESSION CAP ADJUSTMENT

Mr. TIDWELL. Senator, we will continue to carry out our responsibilities on the ground to be able to suppress the fires and protect the communities no matter what the budget.

I share the Secretary's urgency, and as I shared with the chair earlier, the longer this issue goes on, the less and less discretion you have to be able to solve it, to make a difference, for us to be proactive. I appreciate the chair understanding the significance of this and that we definitely do need to get it right.

But that being said, there is some urgency, and so we will continue to work with the subcommittee. I am optimistic that so far with the projections that we should be okay with the level of the additional funding you provided. But as the season progresses, we definitely will have ongoing discussions informing the subcommittee about where we are with the rate of expenditures so hopefully we can avoid that situation of running out of money for fire suppression this year.

Senator UDALL. Thank you, Chief, for that answer. One of the Forest Service's most important and visible firefighting assets is the air tanker fleet, and over the last several years, both you and the Congress have worked to expand and upgrade your air tanker fleet to address the growing threat of wildfires. The members of this subcommittee have been very vocal about this for years, as you know.

I understand that the agency will field the largest air tanker fleet in 15 years this season. This is a good step forward, but more work must be done to ensure a modern and efficient fleet. You now

have a significant fleet of contracted aircraft, but I would like to discuss two opportunities that Congress has given you to acquire government-owned aircraft.

In the fiscal year 2014 Defense Authorization bill, this authorized the transfer of seven C-130H aircraft from the Coast Guard to the Forest Service. Chief Tidwell, do you have an update for us on the schedule for the transfer of the Coast Guard C-130H aircraft? Are there any funds in the fiscal year 2017 budget associated with the delivery of the C-130Hs?

AIRTANKERS

Mr. TIDWELL. The status is we used one of the planes last year that had a Modular Airborne Fire Fighting System (MAFFS) unit put on board. That plane goes back to have an internal retardant tank installed on it. So this coming year we will have one of the C-130Hs in 2017 and in 2018 we will have four, and by fiscal year 2019 we will have all seven of those with the installed internal tank.

The reason the planes are being retrofitted is because they are having the new wing boxes installed. The Air Force, who supervises the contract, will be installing the new wing boxes and the Forest Service will be installing the MAFFS. Following delivery of the planes, the Forest Service will replace the MAFFS with a more efficient Retardant Delivery System. We will have the full fleet of seven ready for use in fiscal year 2019.

Senator UDALL. Thank you. Thank you, Chief.

Thank you, Madam Chair.

Senator MURKOWSKI. Senator Hoeven.

Senator HOEVEN. Thank you, Madam Chair.

And, Chief, good to see you. Thanks for being here. Thanks for coming in to visit with me a couple weeks ago and for your visits to North Dakota. We appreciate it very much, coming out of working with our ranchers in the grasslands. It is very important. And you have been open and accessible, and we appreciate it.

The first thing I want to ask you about is the carryover for grazing fee credits. Our ranchers can do more significant projects out on the grasslands and so forth if we are able to carry over those credits. So what do we need to do so that our grazers can carry over those fee credits and do more and better projects?

GRAZING FEE CREDITS

Mr. TIDWELL. Well, Senator, we have looked at our authorities, and I am going to need your help. I would like to work with your staff to be able to provide some language that would give us that flexibility in those cases where we need to actually carry over these grazing fee credits so that we can bank credits for a year or two to be able to take on a much bigger project, which is more efficient, more effective than trying to parcel out that same project over 3 years. So I would appreciate your support with us to be able to get that done.

Senator HOEVEN. And you agree that makes good sense, something we should do?

Mr. TIDWELL. Yes, I do. I think it makes very good sense, and we have examples of projects where if we could have one contract,

one large contract, we get a better price versus doing three contracts over 3 years for the same amount of work. It is just a more efficient way. We need that flexibility.

Senator HOEVEN. Thank you. I know our grazers would very much appreciate it, and it is a win both for the ranchers and for the environmental stewardship that you work to achieve.

I found it interesting, you know, we talked about the different uses, fences, water development, land exchanges, watershed protection, and others. Here is what I thought was interesting. I do not know if you want to explain or not—I am not sure what it is—vegetative manipulation. Do you know what that is? I mean, we are just farmers and ranchers so I was not sure what vegetative manipulation was. You do not have to explain if you do not want, I just thought it was interesting.

VEGETATIVE MANIPULATION

Mr. TIDWELL. Well, no, it is a term that we use whether it is to deal sometimes with elimination of invasives, sometimes it is a term that can be used for thinning, and a term that can be used for eliminating brush by planting grass.

Senator HOEVEN. A broader term for farming and ranching practices is it—

Mr. TIDWELL. Yes.

Senator HOEVEN. Okay. I just want to make sure I know what is going on out there.

Mr. TIDWELL. A better term might be restoration.

Senator HOEVEN. Okay. Anyway, thank you on that issue, really appreciate it. Again, I think that is a good example of where you are trying to make things work and we appreciate it.

Also, I was just out to see our grazers last week, and they had good comments about your people out there. They like working with them. So hopefully that message will go back to your men on the ground out there in the grasslands in western North Dakota and Montana. I have not met them yet, well, unless he was at one of our meetings, but they were saying they like working with them, so I want to express appreciation. That is very important, that relationship out there. I thank you for that.

RESTORATION

Mr. TIDWELL. Thank you for your support and efforts and time that you have invested in that to be able to help us move forward on some issues that have been there for a few years. So thank you very much.

Senator HOEVEN. Now, I do have a concern in the fiscal year 2017 budget for the Forest Service. You are requesting a pilot project to allow the Forest Service to charge a new grazing application processing fee, which you estimate will generate \$15 million. I know you know this, but this is a tough time in agriculture. Our farmers and ranchers are up against it. You know, the prices are not there. We are going through tough stretches. It is going to be a tough year in agriculture. I hope next year is better. So, you know, increased fees is a concern to me in terms of, you know, for our ranchers, particularly at this time.

GRAZING FEE

Mr. TIDWELL. Senator, I share those concerns. I mean, this proposal is an idea to be able to basically offset the impacts that have occurred to our budget over the years. To find another means for us to be able to move forward not only with the basic administration needs doing occur to ensure that our ranchers can continue to access their permits, but also to allow us to move forward on doing some more of the NEPA.

But I understand the concerns and the impacts. I would much rather be up here asking for a budget request versus a fee increase, but it is the only option I have, and that is where it is coming from, just trying to find some way for us to be able to maintain the capacity so that we can be good partners with the ranchers.

Senator HOEVEN. Right. And I will try to work with our chairman and ranking member to see what we can do as far as making sure you have, you know, the resources to process the applications in a timely way, serve the needs of the grazers and the ranchers out there. But again, I am concerned about any fee increases at this point, particularly given the challenges in farm country right now.

Again, thanks for your service.

Senator MURKOWSKI. Thank you, Senator Hoeven.

We have been told that the vote has just started, so you will see members popping in and out, but just for members' information, we will be moving through this vote. We will not be taking a recess. So if you want to come back for a second round, know that we will do that.

With that, we will turn to Senator Merkley.

Senator MERKLEY. Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

Chief Tidwell, you said the fire season is longer than before. Why is that?

CLIMATE CHANGE

Mr. TIDWELL. Climate change. Our weather is hotter and drier, and what we are seeing is it is warming up earlier in the spring and it stays warmer later into the falls. By Labor Day we were pretty much out of fire season, and now it goes way past Labor Day. You saw that in your State.

Senator MERKLEY. Your projection to the year 2025 shows a steady upward climb. Is that based on climate change predictions of the dryness of the land and the amount of lightning strikes and so forth?

Mr. TIDWELL. Yes. The longer fire season is based on the hotter and drier weather, which is a big contributor to those increasing costs.

Senator MERKLEY. Thank you. I want to turn to a mineral withdrawal request. There is a 2-year temporary mineral withdrawal on an area in southern Oregon that involves many tributaries to the north fork of the Smith River, which goes down into California. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has said that mining activities are incompatible with the high resource values of this bioregion, and the proposed withdrawal has had overwhelming public support, two public hearings, 30,000 support level, endorsements from a

broad spectrum of cities, counties, tribes, businesses, conservation groups, scientists, so on and so forth.

Currently, this is under consideration by the Department. Senator Wyden and I, along with Congressman DeFazio from Oregon and Congressman Huffman from California because of where the Smith River goes have encouraged the Department to complete its environmental assessment and to consider as an option a 20-year withdrawal.

So I just wanted to re-accentuate the extreme importance of this because there is a nickel strip mine that is being proposed in these pristine, phenomenal, wild and scenic rivers of southern Oregon, and it would just be an absolute disaster.

MINERAL WITHDRAWAL REQUEST

Mr. TIDWELL. Well, Senator, we share your concerns with the area, and we are moving forward to complete the environmental analysis that would support a recommendation for a 5-year withdrawal. For us to stop the process now and go back out for public comment on a proposal for a 20-year withdrawal was going to provide a significant delay. So our hope is that we move forward with this, we can make our recommendation to the Secretary of Interior that would provide for 5 years for us to ideally get legislation passed to make this withdrawal permanent.

Senator MERKLEY. Okay. That is the first I heard that that would create a delay. We do not want a delay. But if there is a way to include an alternative without that delay, and apparently there may not be, but that would be our hope.

Let me turn to the Columbia Gorge. At the time the Columbia Gorge Scenic Area was set aside, there was an authorization for \$10 million. This was a key part of the deal in which the communities agreed to curb their boundaries and not develop additional houses or spaces.

And so the Columbia Gorge has been protected, and it is an incredible area. But they feel like the Federal Government did not honor the deal because they have received \$8 million of the \$10 million, but they could certainly use the other \$2 million in economic development. And it kind of felt like that was minimal to begin with.

Recently, the Department said that the original authorization has now expired but without any sort of underlying explanation of why. Rather than take time now, would you join with us in understanding why it is suddenly there is an expiration of that authorization?

COLUMBIA GEORGE SCENIC AREA

Mr. TIDWELL. Senator, we will look into that, but it is my understanding that the funding is still there, and if it is at the direction of Congress, we can move forward and fulfill that responsibility, and use that money. I will get with your staff as to what it would take for us to be able to go ahead and move forward.

Senator MERKLEY. Great. Thank you. I want to express appreciation for the increase in funding for Collaborative Landscape Restoration. Oregon has some 25 collaboratives working in partnership with the Forest Service. It is in combination with—stewardship

agreements have helped basically resolved the paralysis that has often haunted the ways of managing our forests. I think you have proposed \$80 million for those collaboratives versus last year it was funded at \$40 million. And I appreciate the support expressed in the budget for that.

COLLABORATIVE FOREST LANDSCAPE RESTORATION (CFLRP)

Mr. TIDWELL. Senator, thank you for the recognition of the success of that work. Our collaboratives not only in your State but throughout the country is really what is making a difference for us to be able to address these much larger-scale projects and to be able to move forward without the controversy and the conflict that we have had in the past.

In fiscal year 2018, the Forest Service will request additional funding for CFLRP projects, we would appreciate your support to make that occur so that we can know that it is potentially going to be there so in 2017 so we can start to ramp up our operations.

Senator MERKLEY. Well, I certainly support that, and the State has put money into it.

Mr. TIDWELL. Yes.

Senator MERKLEY. Local communities have put a tremendous amount of energy and huge number of stakeholders. So often we hear about the conflicts. Every now and then, there is a shining example of people really sitting down in the room who might have had historic disagreements and working out a plan, and that is what those collaboratives have represented.

I do want to note that on fire-borrowing I have this concern as well. I understand the position of the Secretary of the Department of Agriculture and the way he is saying let us figure this out. We should figure this out. We should absolutely stop fire-borrowing. It shuts down all the other components of the Forest Service when we have these high fire years. I am not sure just how we will figure this out here on this subcommittee, but I applaud the interest of all of the colleagues who have spoken about this, both sides of the aisle, and we will continue to work on that.

And then finally, I just wanted to mention outdoor recreation in Oregon, it accounts for \$12.8 billion in consumer spending, \$4 billion in wages and salaries, 141,000 direct Oregon jobs. As my colleagues from Montana expressed, it is a huge part of our economy, and in many ways, the funds that have come from offshore drilling have been very helpful in addressing key components of access by the public in maintaining this key part of our economy, and I strongly support the budget request you have made.

RECREATION

Mr. TIDWELL. Well, Senator, thank you for that. Without any question, outdoor recreation supports more jobs than the rest of the activities that occur on the national forest. It has become the number one driver, especially in our smaller rural communities. It not only contributes to the quality of life, but it is what people enjoy the most about their national forest. So I appreciate your support for our budget request to have additional recreational money in fiscal year 2017.

Senator MERKLEY. Thank you very much.

Senator UDALL [presiding]. Senator Leahy.

Senator LEAHY. Thank you, Chief. Thank you.

Your folks in Vermont are great, and I enjoy being with them when I am there. And thank you for the State and Private Forestry program. It gives a lot of technical and financial support to the Vermont Monitoring Cooperative, and that has become a regional resource after 25 years of experience.

Let me ask you one thing. In your budget request, I have always made acquisition of high-resource-value lands within the Green Mountain National Forest. And I realize this is somewhat parochial, but I will—

Mr. TIDWELL. Okay.

Senator LEAHY [continuing]. After 40 years on this subcommittee, I have heard some parochial questions. I am proud that nearly 150,000 acres have been added to the national forest since I came here to the Senate.

Now, you are going to have a rare opportunity to secure the largest single private in-holding in the Green Mountain National Forest, 6,000 acres of pristine forest habitat. It is surrounded by the national forest. It will be perfect for it. The owner, TransCanada, has announced it will sell the land, along with its hydroelectric facilities in the region. Do you have the capacity that you could take this on if you wanted to? Is it something you are interested in?

I just thought I would mention my interest.

GREEN MOUNTAIN NATIONAL FOREST

Mr. TIDWELL. Yes.

Senator LEAHY. Go ahead.

Mr. TIDWELL. Well, no, it is more of how you are describing the property, and an in-holding, it sounds like it would be exactly what LWCF program is about.

The challenges that we have is that we already designated the projects for this year that we are going to be funding. However, we have a very good track record of being able to work with our partners that are able to step in and acquire a parcel like that and then hold it with basically an understanding that we will then provide the funding over the next couple years.

That is what is so beneficial about having LWCF reauthorized so that those partners have some assurance that if they step out, commit their resources, that there is a high expectation that we would be able to come in and buy that parcel.

Senator LEAHY. You know, I have been a prime champion ever since I have been here. One of my predecessors, Senator Bob Stafford of Vermont, was another one. But this is such—my family has been in Vermont since the 1800s. This is such a unique piece. I just do not want us to lose the opportunity.

As you know, it is easy, you can buy the land. If you make up your mind later that was a mistake, you can always sell it back, but if you do not buy it, you are never going to get it back, especially and in-holding like this. It would be very valuable.

Thank you.

Mr. TIDWELL. I will personally look into this to see what our flexibility is based on your description, it sounds like it is a parcel that we need to do what we can to provide it to the public.

Senator LEAHY. And the other thing I wish you would take a look at, and my staff will work with you on this, is woodstoves. I think Vermont and Alaska are among the highest number of usage in the country. I know a lot of others do, certainly in New England. We do in our own home. I mean, we obviously have a furnace because we are not there all the time, but when we are there, we use a woodstove. And it is kind of nice, especially when it is 10 below zero except going out to the woodshed to get the wood.

But where it is going in this next generation of wood design, it is going to be a challenging time for the companies that make the woodstove to meet the new stricter emissions standards. And I hope that you can provide assistance on that as they try to do that and to give them enough time to make everybody—we will follow the standards, but we need time, otherwise, some of these companies are going to go out of business if they cannot figure out just what it is that they have to do.

WOODSTOVES

Mr. TIDWELL. So, Senator, we are working with the Alliance for Green Heat woodstove, the challenge design, so that we can help the industry to determine the changes that they need to meet, and then we do need to provide the time for the industry to catch up.

Senator LEAHY. It is the time——

Mr. TIDWELL. Yes.

Senator LEAHY [continuing]. That is important there. I do not think anybody objects to doing it. They just want to have the time. Otherwise, some of them are just going to go out of business. And in my State, they provide a lot of employment and good employment.

And lastly, I know you are working on this, but I continue to worry about the white-nose syndrome now in the Western States that we have seen the effect of that on agriculture, forestry, and everything else. It is significant. So I just throw it on your radar like you do not have anything else to worry about.

WHITE-NOSE SYNDROME

Mr. TIDWELL. Well, when it comes to white-nose syndrome, it is one of the things that is top of my list.

Senator LEAHY. Thank you.

Mr. TIDWELL. It is what our research and scientists are working on and working with the universities to be able to find a solution to this.

We are having some progress on a limited basis, and so there is some hope there. But I will share with you when I read probably the same article about the bat that was found in Washington.

Senator LEAHY. That is scary.

Mr. TIDWELL. Yes. At that point we did not know that we had white-nose that far out West, and indications is that it has been there for a while. So it just increases the urgency for us to find a solution.

Senator LEAHY. When I first started working on this getting money to study it, people thought I was thinking of a fictional character sometimes in movies called Batman, and it is not. It is a very

important thing. What it is doing to agriculture throughout this country is awful.

Mr. TIDWELL. Well, Senator, your leadership helped us to be able to be where we are with the research because if we were just starting today, we would be that much farther behind the eight ball to be able to find this solution.

Senator LEAHY. Thank you. And we have been helped here. So thank you very, very much.

Now, I see our distinguished chair back, and I think I had better go vote.

Senator MURKOWSKI. You better go vote.

Senator LEAHY. I was talking about woodstoves——

Senator MURKOWSKI. Oh.

Senator LEAHY [continuing]. And that is a concern in Alaska, Vermont, and elsewhere, and I appreciate the response I got.

Thank you very much.

Senator MURKOWSKI. Thank you. I am sorry I missed your question. As you say——

Senator LEAHY. Yes.

Senator MURKOWSKI [continuing]. It is an issue for us at home.

Chief, since everybody has left us, let us talk about the Tongass. This is a little bit of a follow-up to the questions that I posed to you in the Energy Committee, but at that hearing you mentioned that you did not think that the Forest Service needed to request the money in the fiscal year 2017 budget for a site stand inventory, studies to look at the young growth in terms of how much is actually available. You know my concerns there.

Can you give me, I guess—you kind of outlined why you think you did not need it at the hearing. How much in program funds will be made available for this inventory study? Are you looking at perhaps having to curtail or just move money around from other programs for this work? Is it going to delay, for instance, permits or timber sale preparations? How do you see this moving forward? Because you know the importance that we are certainly assigning to this inventory.

TONGASS/TIMBER SALES

Mr. TIDWELL. Well, Madam Chair, it will not have any impacts on the ongoing operations, programs we have there on the Tongass. We are using our State and private funding to work with the State to be able to do the inventory on 50,000 acres of young growth and 20,000 acres of old growth, which will provide the information for the project level design that we need as we continue to move forward, following the planned amendment.

Senator MURKOWSKI. How much are you counting on the State for funding for? Because as you know, they are in a world of hurt right now with their budget.

Mr. TIDWELL. Well, we are providing the funding. We are using their capacity to help us.

Senator MURKOWSKI. Okay.

Mr. TIDWELL. Also, I think it just makes better sense for us to be working closely with the States, so we are providing the funding and then using their staff to help us to be able to get this work done.

Senator MURKOWSKI. So you do not see a situation where you are either going to see a slowdown or a delay in timber sale preparations or in issuing permits because you have had to direct funding to the inventory analysis?

Mr. TIDWELL. No, we are using our State and private funds which do not contribute to the work that you are describing.

Senator MURKOWSKI. Okay. So you say you have got State and private. Given what you have, given that there was \$2 million plus that were allocated from fiscal year 2015 funds, how much more then will you need in fiscal year 2016 or fiscal year 2017 to complete the study here?

Mr. TIDWELL. So it is my understanding that the money that we have provided will provide inventory on the total of 70,000 acres.

Senator MURKOWSKI. Well, wait, the total is 70,000.

Mr. TIDWELL. Well, it is 50.

Senator MURKOWSKI. I thought it was 400—the complete inventory is 435,000 acres.

Mr. TIDWELL. Excuse me. The money we have right now will pay for the 70,000 acres.

Senator MURKOWSKI. Okay.

Mr. TIDWELL. We will continue to do the inventory, design the projects, and yes, there will be additional stand-level inventory. It is always just part of our work. I will have to get back to you on what we will need in the future after we complete this inventory.

[The information follows:]

The agency did not fund and does not intend to fund an intensive survey of all 435,000 acres of young growth on the Tongass. The cost of funding such a survey would exceed the benefits gained. The information collected through the current agreement with the State of Alaska on 70,000 acres of combined young growth and old growth bridge timber, when combined with existing information on Tongass young growth stands, will provide a rich data set from which sound estimates can be developed for a variety of land use planning purposes.

Senator MURKOWSKI. Would you do that? Because I want to know that we have funding in place. I want to know that we are going to be able to complete this, and of course complete this within a reasonable time period but really be able to do the work and get a full and honest inventory.

You know, the concern that I have is if we are talking about the need for any of our mills, whether it is Viking or otherwise, to convert so that they can accommodate the young growth timber, you know, you have got to go to the banks. And the concern that I have is you are not going to have any commercial lenders that are willing to provide any level of financing for a mill that might be looking to convert until you have these studies that show what it is that is actually available to the mills so that they can amortize the investment that they have made. So it is one of these very circular issues, and until you have that analysis and knowing that it is a complete and full analysis, again, the concern that I have is that this whole proposal just does not work.

There is an article in today's clips about action that the State is taking at the State level to provide State inventory to Viking to kind of keep it alive for the next couple of years because they have said that they have only got a year-and-a-half of timber left available because the Big Thorne sale has been reduced so significantly. The number in the article is that there is 128 timber-related jobs

right now in the State of Alaska. It is the lowest number since 1890, 1890. And again, I have not fact-checked that, but that was what was reported yesterday.

I have a whole series of questions about how we are going to work to make sure that Viking, as the last medium-sized sawmill left in southeast Alaska, how they are going to be able to survive this transition. And, you know, maybe what I will do is the more specific questions I will just submit to you for the record, but just tell me how, if Mr. Dahlstrom were sitting here today, how would you tell him that the Forest Service intends to keep Viking Lumber alive after next summer?

VIKING LUMBER SAWMILL

Mr. TIDWELL. Well, I would start with our 5-year plan that shows the sales that we are planning to move forward with, when we will have the NEPA done, and when we will make the offer. And that is with the old-growth bridge timber that we are still committed to doing. Then in addition to that, I would also talk about the young growth that we are going to start moving into. Then ideally—the inventory is essential, so we have the information to be able to do those future projects.

But, I also think what is more important is that after the plan amendment is completed, we would be in a position to enter into a long-term stewardship contract on that young growth. So not only would you have the inventory information that you would need, here you would have a stewardship contract that guarantees the Forest Service is going to make X amount of material available over the next 10 years. I think that is necessary.

Senator MURKOWSKI. But Mr. Dahlstrom has to get to that time period when this is all happening, because right now he can get Viking Lumber through next year. You know, are the sales coming from Naukati? Are they coming from Wrangell Island? It is one thing to show somebody the plan. It is another thing to show him the timber, show him the logs.

And this is where, you know, quite honestly, on the Federal side people are just giving up on you. That is why they are going to the State right now and saying is there not something that you can help us do to piece some things together? Because they are not seeing—we keep talking about a transition, and on paper it might look okay, but in the meantime, you have to have operators that are staying alive. Promises of being able to go to young growth work if you are able to convert your operations to that. But in the meantime, what do you have that is piecing you together?

So we have these conversations either here, in Interior Appropriations, or at the Energy Committee, and, you know, again, the believability about how this all works on the ground out on the mill site, that part of it is not translating, Chief, and that is the problem for Mr. Dahlstrom and for people like me that are trying to help him.

Mr. TIDWELL. Senator, I appreciate your concern. The region, I think, is doing an excellent job to reach out and work with everyone, whether it is the State, which I really appreciate what they are doing, whether it is Sealaska, whether it is Mental Health Trust, to be able to look at what we can do together so we have

kind of a coordinated program over this—especially through this bridge time so that here is the amount of bridge timber that is going to be available over this period of time. And we are talking about many years. I mean, it is not going to happen tomorrow or the next year. So the bridge timber has to be over a period of time.

Then it is the second time for the Forest Service to be moving forward with our young growth and to be able to put enough of it out there that would justify the investment to retool a mill. That is where there has got to be some level of certainty. When I reference a long-term stewardship contract, for instance, is one way to provide that certainty on the young growth. That is in addition to what we are doing to be able to have that coordinated effort to be able to provide the bridge timber into the future.

Senator MURKOWSKI. There is not going to be anyone to walk over that bridge. I mean, this is—you have got all the right buzz words, transition, bridge timber. You know, there is nobody left, and I feel like I am Viking's advocate and I am kind of highlighting them because they are a poster child. They are a poster child because there is nobody else who has been able to survive. And this is the concern that I have.

You say you appreciate my concern. My concern is it is not just the Dahlstroms. It is a whole economy in southeastern Alaska that has been just kind of pushed over the edge, a direction that Forest Service has taken that in the eyes of many of us has been one that is just kind of unfortunately slow-rolling things. And people have to move on. They move out. They give up. And it is not because there is not sufficient resource. There is certainly sufficient resource.

And I know that this is hard. I know that this is hard, but I think about those who just get up every day and say we are here to make a living, we are here to employ a few people. We recognize that we will never get back to the timber heydays in southeast Alaska.

But, you know, I think that what is going to happen is by the time this administration leaves, you will have more in the industry that just have not been able to survive, and we do not get them back.

I want to ask a question that presented itself after the hearing last month. You said that if Congress were to simply remove the language in the appropriations process to allow you to offer deficit sales, basically where timber is expected to be unprofitable to harvest and sell, that you could probably offer a lot more timber for sale in the Congress.

Now, I heard that, and I have to think that I misunderstood it because it sounded like what you were saying is that if we here in Congress allowed you to sell more unprofitable timber that you could offer a lot more of it. But why would anyone actually bid on the timber if they are being told in advance you are not going to make any money off this; this is not going to be profitable? Why would they do it? How does that make sense? Maybe I am missing something here.

TIMBER SALES

Mr. TIDWELL. So the way it works in the lower 48 States is that we do our calculations on the appraised value. Sometimes the sales are somewhat marginal.

Senator MURKOWSKI. Right.

Mr. TIDWELL. So what we do, we sit down with the operators and we share it and ask if anyone is interested. If there is no interest, then we say, okay. Often we make an offer and sometimes we have no bids. But there are sales, from our calculations, that look like they are marginal and they are bought.

Senator MURKOWSKI. Is that going to be true in the Tongass?

Mr. TIDWELL. No. In the Tongass we have to go through the calculation to calculate the logging cost, the stumpage rate, a set profit margin, and then also to cover a percent of the risk. So it is kind of the locked-in figure and we do not get to factor in the changes in the market. We do not get to factor in that, by having that other 15 million board feet, it keeps my shift going so I have efficiencies. So what we would like to do is just be able to offer this. If it is not profitable, we do not expect anyone to buy it, but it puts an additional burden on us. For instance, we had a sale last year and it has been working for us.

Senator MURKOWSKI. But does that not take money and staff to prepare all that and you are just going to hope maybe that—

Mr. TIDWELL. Well—

Senator MURKOWSKI [continuing]. Somebody bids?

Mr. TIDWELL [continuing]. It is really just to provide the industry and the operators some options so they can look at it and they can also give us some feedback about what changes we can make to make it a little bit more profitable for them.

But it is a requirement that we are able to operate without it in the rest of the States, and so I expect that some of these sales—and we have several of them that I am asking the region to take a look at because the prices of timber have come up the last several years. We are in much better shape today than we were 3 or 4 years ago. So are some of these that show there is interest? To actually let the industry, let Viking say yes, I can make that work because it allows me to be able to maintain this. I will not make a lot of money on it, but it is still a good project. I want to go for it versus not going forward with it.

And as we deal with the fluctuation with the prices and we are fortunate today. I do not know where we are going to be next year or the year after, but I think the price—when I looked at what the sales were going for there on the Tongass in just the last 2 years they have gone up significantly in what they are paying for it.

So this is, I think, a better time for us to be able to have that discussion, to have the flexibility to offer it, and then to see if there is any interest. It has worked for us in the other States. We still put the work together. I am looking for everything that I need to be able to find a way to move forward with these projects and to be able to deal with, at times, a soft market. But that is where I was coming from.

Senator MURKOWSKI. Okay.

Mr. TIDWELL. I was not asking anyone to pay more because the last thing we want is for anyone to lose money. We need them to stay in business. They cannot stay in business if they are losing money. But sometimes their calculations are better than ours because they actually know what their true costs are. We use the costs that are given to us and they are more general. It has been my experience they have better information. So I just like to share it, offer it, and then they can say no.

Senator MURKOWSKI. Let me turn to Senator Udall.

Senator UDALL. Thank you, Madam Chair.

Chief, I was looking at your chart you had here, and the way I—excuse me, one way of reading this chart is that since 1998 you have had a reduction of total employees of 3,000, you have had a reduction of 9,000 non-fire employees, and an increase of 6,000 fire employees. Does that sound right?

REDUCTION OF NON-FIRE EMPLOYEES

Mr. TIDWELL. Yes.

Senator UDALL. And was there someplace that we took away a lot of that work from you so that you were able to shuffle that around? Is it fair to just say that—you know, I am not asking for an answer here. Is it fair to say that the employees you have left working in this non-fire area are doing a lot of additional work for people that are not there from 1998 until 2015?

Mr. TIDWELL. Senator, we have made significant improvements on our processes to be more efficient and more effective. But that being said, there is definitely parts of our mission where the public is very frustrated because it takes us so long to be able to respond to them. So there has definitely been consequences. Our efficiencies will only take us so far, and I really do feel that we have kind of topped out.

Senator UDALL. Yes. And so I applaud all the hardworking Forest Service employees that are doing such good work out there.

I wanted to discuss the proposal to divert an estimated 14,000 acre-feet of water from the Gila River in New Mexico. The headwaters of the river in the Gila National Forest, the diversion would serve communities in southwest New Mexico. This proposed project concerns me for a variety of reasons. I believe the project's costs are way out of proportion to the benefits. It is estimated to provide very little water on a consistent basis.

The project also would take an enormous environmental toll. The Gila River is one of the last remaining free-flowing rivers in the United States. It is a crown jewel of the Southwest. It is critical for recreation, wildlife habitat, and many other uses, and it has tremendous historical value. It is so special, I am considering legislative options to designate sections as a wild and scenic river. The Wild and Scenic Rivers Act was established to prevent the loss of free-flowing rivers in our most precious waterways.

The Gila is in every way outstandingly remarkable, as the act specifies. How does the current management plan for the Gila National Forest protect the Gila River's outstandingly remarkable qualities, and what enhancements could be made to protect this important watershed and ecosystem for future generations?

FOREST PLAN ON THE GILA RIVER

Mr. TIDWELL. Well, Senator, I will have to get back to you as to the specifics of the forest plan there on the Gila, generally on our forest plans, especially as you mentioned the significance of this river, that there will be standards and guides in there to be able to maintain the characteristics of that river and provide for those flows.

[The information follows:]

The Forest Service recognizes the value and significance of the Gila River and protects it through management practices outlined in the Gila National Forest plan. Specific areas of focus are as follows:

- Wildlife and Fish Habitat*: Maintain and/or improve habitat for threatened and endangered species and work toward the eventual recovery and delisting of species through recover plans.
- Soil and Water*: Provide for long-term quality waterflow needs through improved management technology.
- Riparian*: Improve all riparian areas to satisfactory or better condition.
- Cultural Resources*: Inventory and prevent loss or damage of cultural resources until they can be evaluated for scientific study, interpretive services, or other appropriate uses.
- Riparian*:
 - Manage riparian areas in accordance with legal requirements regarding floodplains, wetlands, wild and scenic rivers, and cultural and other resources.
 - Manage riparian areas to protect the productivity and diversity of riparian-dependent resources by requiring actions within or affecting riparian areas to protect and where applicable, improve dependent resources. Emphasize protection of soil, water, vegetation and wildlife and fish resources prior to implementing projects.
 - Give preferential consideration to resources dependent on riparian areas over other resources. Other resource uses and activities may occur to the extent that they support or do not adversely affect riparian-dependent resources.
- Facilities*: Road construction will be avoided in riparian areas.

The project you are referring to is one that—as I understand, we have not seen a formal proposal yet. We are having discussions with the Bureau of Reclamation on it and definitely would share some of the concerns that you have mentioned, but at the same time would want to work with the Bureau of Reclamation.

There is just no question of the beauty and the benefits of that free-flowing river that comes off the Gila. It provides an incredible recreation resource for the folks that not only live there but people that come from all over the country to see that place.

Senator UDALL. Yes, well, thank you for that. And as you know, the two water management agencies, the Bureau of Reclamation and the New Mexico Interstate Stream Commission, are co-leading the environmental review process, and I am just hoping that the Forest Service will also take an active part of that. I mean, you know and understand the river better than anyone, and so we hope that just because they are the co-leads that we want you to step out and speak strongly about the values that are there for the Gila River.

Chief, the traditional communities in New Mexico, the land grants and the acequias, are important stakeholders when it comes to land management decisions in my State. These folks have a long history and centuries-old traditions. They are deeply tied to the land. The fiscal year 2016 Senate appropriations report strongly encourages the land management agencies to incorporate these

communities in the land management planning process. It is very important for your agency to make a good-faith effort on this, and I thank you for your recent visit with some of these communities in New Mexico.

I understand that these folks gave a presentation to you and your staff during your chief's review. I would really like to see the Forest Service build on these positive efforts. Congressman Ben Ray Luján is working with the land grants on legislation over in the House that will help facilitate the progress that has been made thus far, and I intend to join his efforts by introducing a bill in the Senate sometime in the future.

Can I get your commitment to continue working with me to ensure that these traditional communities in New Mexico have a seat at the table when it comes to land management decisions and get your valued input on this legislation when the time comes?

LAND MANAGEMENT

Mr. TIDWELL. Yes. Senator, we look forward to working with you on that. Our forest on the Cibola—they have just recently been granted cooperative status to land grant heirs there, which is our authority to be able to allow them to be an active participant throughout the planning, not unlike what we provide to a county. So I think this is one step forward where we can do a better job to be able to make sure that we understand their needs, their traditional uses of the land, and to be able to factor that into our planning efforts.

Senator UDALL. Thank you, Chief. Madam Chair, I have a couple more questions here, quick ones. Shall I go ahead or do you want to—

Senator MURKOWSKI. I am going to do another round. Do you want to do another round?

Senator UDALL. Sure. Let us go ahead and do another round.

Senator MURKOWSKI. Okay.

Senator UDALL. That would be great.

Senator MURKOWSKI. All right.

Senator UDALL. I yield back to you.

Senator MURKOWSKI. We will both try to stick to our limits here.

Let me ask you, Chief, about the demand study required within the Tongass Timber Reform Act requiring the Forest Service to provide enough timber to meet market demand for Tongass timber. We are seeing in this draft demand study cause for a pretty sharp increase in demand this year and into the future.

And there are a few things that it mentions as a result of this, and that is the value of the U.S. dollar causing some of the demand decline, but then it goes on to say that the demand dropped dramatically not because of market forces but because the transition requires that a cap be placed on the amount of old growth timber being offered, and so the study limits its demand estimates to the amount of timber that might be made available to supply the market. So it is a very circular logic if you will.

I am told, again, not only by Viking but by Sealaska as well that they could sell a lot more timber at economic prices if the timber was made available. So I interpret that to mean that the demand

is higher than what is being assumed, certainly higher than what you are seeking to provide.

So what is the justification for this latest demand study that shows this very precipitous drop? It goes from—I mean, a drop of more than 100 million board feet in market demand between 2014 and 2015. How do you justify this?

TONGASS TIMBER REFORM ACT

Mr. TIDWELL. Well, Senator, I will have to get back to you on some of the specifics that is being used in the calculation and the modeling for that demand. But I think it just probably states the reality of where we are. Once again, we have been at this for decades of trying to find a way to go forward so we can assure that——

[See information below under the heading “Specifics for Latest Demand Study, Potential Export Demand, and Export Market”.]

Senator MURKOWSKI. Well, the reality is is that there is more demand than you are allowing to be provided. And if the law requires that the demand study—you provide what is being requested, there is the mismatch there.

Mr. TIDWELL. I will get into the calculations. There is the demand, what is needed domestically, and then there is the potential demand for exports internationally, which is the export of whole logs—when I look at the amount of timber that is harvested there in the southeast and I look at what goes through the mills there, there seems to be adequate timber if you were not exporting.

Now, I understand the export is necessary to make it economically viable, but I think that is the other part that needs to be factored into this. So I am going to have to get back to you on the specifics of what is driving those calculations that our scientists are using to be able to come up with that shift.

[See information below under the heading “Specifics for Latest Demand Study, Potential Export Demand, and Export Market”.]

I think what is even more important for us is to just be able to sit down with the industry that is there, be able to have the discussions, what is it that you need to be able to operate your mill and to be able to look at the land ownership there in the southeast, and then to work together to provide that level of material.

Senator MURKOWSKI. Well, I think that——

Mr. TIDWELL. I will always be looking for opportunities where we can find ways to keep more of those logs in southeast Alaska and that they are put through a mill there ideally put into some form of potentially mass timber mill, a Cross Laminated Timber (CLT) facility or something like that to create more jobs.

Senator MURKOWSKI. We would like to see that, yes.

Mr. TIDWELL. I understand the needs for the export market to make it economically viable, so I am going to have to get back to you to answer your question.

[The information follows:]

SPECIFICS FOR LATEST DEMAND STUDY, POTENTIAL EXPORT DEMAND, AND EXPORT MARKET

From 2000 to 2011, the Tongass National Forest timber harvest declined by nearly 70 percent. Factors contributing to the decline included changes in the structure

of the Alaska forest products sector, macroeconomic conditions in domestic and overseas markets, markets for Alaskan products, and conditions faced by Alaska's competitors. Considering all these, the Pacific Northwest (PNW) Research Station projected the average demand for Tongass National Forest timber, over the next 15 years, ranged from 46 to 76 million board feet. Three different scenarios display alternative futures for Southeast Alaska that all incorporate the transition of the Tongass National Forest from old-growth to young-growth timber harvest. These scenarios differ in the use of the projected harvest, in that the young growth scenario calls for a reduction in harvest from the Tongass National Forest, the wood energy scenario focuses on demand for utility logs, and the U.S. housing scenario includes a projected increased demand for saw logs for lumber.

PNW Research Station scientists established that demand in the "seek to meet" language meant demand for end forest products. This interpretation of demand is based on solid economic theory and is the accepted definition in all PNW Research Station long-term timber demand analyses. The application of this definition in peer-reviewed methodology includes identifying all markets receiving Alaska wood products, assembling historic market data for wood products, and projecting the future using a trend-based approach. The Forest Service's timber demand projections are based on accepted principles of economics and undergo rigorous peer review to ensure that the decisions they support are scientifically sound and legally defensible.

Senator MURKOWSKI. Well, let us do that because I think it has been made clear what the operators need, what they want. We know who has the land there. It is publicly held. Everything in southeast is there in the Tongass, so there are not a lot of unknowns in that way.

Let me ask about the commercial thinning. You published a requirement in 2010 that requires a substantial investment in commercial thinning in the Tongass to obtain the 30 to 50 million board feet of young growth volume that you said in 2010 could be achievable within the first decade of a young growth transition. So far, all that we have seen coming out of the Forest Service has been the pre-commercial thinning in the Tongass.

How much timber needs to be commercially thinned in the Tongass to meet the 30-to-50-million-board-feet level a year that you had said would be that requirement? What is the cost of that, and how much of it have you actually been able to accomplish?

COMMERCIAL AND PRE-COMMERCIAL THINNING

Mr. TIDWELL. It is my understanding we have had one commercial thinning sale that sold and we are moving forward to be able to put more of that type of work together. We are going to have to continue not only the pre-commercial thinning in the young growth but also the commercial thinning to be able to manage those stands so that as we move forward with the transition we are actually increasing the rate of growth of the trees, which will actually accelerate and be able to get to the point where those trees are marketable.

Senator MURKOWSKI. But I mean this is your statement. This is your publication. When you took over, you said that this was what we are going to need to do. This would be the substantial investment. So what you are telling me is we have only done one pre-commercial thinning in that period of time?

Mr. TIDWELL. Well, we have started. It is part of collecting the inventory information so that we understand which sites where we actually need to make our investment into the young growth to be able to do this pre-commercial thinning. So we have started this

work, and we are going to be able to continue as we move forward with it.

Senator MURKOWSKI. How have you funded for it in this year's budget then?

Mr. TIDWELL. It is part of the forest products budget that has been provided to the region.

Senator MURKOWSKI. And do you know how much is estimated for the commercial and the pre-commercial thinning, how much you have in the budget directed for that?

Mr. TIDWELL. I will get back to you as to how much the region has been allocating for those three different activities.

[The information follows:]

Purchasers implement and pay for commercial thinning during execution of a commercial timber sale, and the Forest Service does not track their expenditures. For commercial thinning, the Forest Service pays for preparation work (designating and measuring trees to be harvested), and administration of the contracts. The Tongass has offered, and sold the Heceta Young Growth Stewardship contract which implemented a "commercial thin" prescription and it was successfully completed in 2015. The sale was planned, designed and administered within the normal forest products appropriations for the Tongass.

Senator MURKOWSKI. Thank you.

Let me turn to Senator Udall then.

Senator UDALL. Thank you, Madam Chair.

Chief, in recent years we have had a couple of sawmills close in my State. One was the Mescalero Forest Products sawmill. This was a tribally owned enterprise. It was responsible for hundreds of jobs in southern New Mexico. This sawmill used to conduct hazardous fuels reduction projects in smaller-size trees, but it was forced to close due to a number of factors. And I want to work with you to reopen this mill and others like it in New Mexico.

In recent weeks, we have seen a number of fires on Mescalero lands and in the nearby community of Ruidoso. Luckily, these fires were not as bad as they could have been. This is largely due to the extensive and collaborative fire restoration work in the area, including the Lincoln National Forest. Clearly, fire restoration work is good for the forest and good for communities like Mescalero, which need the jobs.

Will you work with us on long-term Forest Service contracts and the necessary environmental analyses on a large scale to provide for more long-term predictability in the market for small sawmills in my State of New Mexico?

MESCALERO SAWMILL

Mr. TIDWELL. Senator, yes. What you are describing is what is needed for us to have more of these long-term stewardship contracts where there is some certainty about the amount of biomass, the amount of saw timber that is going to be available for, say, over 10 years.

In addition to that, we are working with the tribe to be able to do the analysis, to look at what it will take for the investment that is necessary to be put into that mill so it can be reopened.

Senator UDALL. Thank you, Chief. Chief, Senator Heinrich and I have recently learned some troubling information regarding Forest Service hiring practices. It is my understanding that a job fair was recently held in Phoenix, Arizona, for 16 Forest Service posi-

tions in New Mexico. And apparently, the only way for New Mexicans to apply for these positions was in person, so New Mexicans would have to travel from New Mexico over to Arizona. This puts New Mexicans at a severe disadvantage obviously. These are jobs in New Mexico, and they are opening up over there in Arizona where you have to travel to do that. But the hiring was done only in Arizona.

Similar job fairs were held in New Mexico last year for positions in Arizona, and this obviously put folks in Arizona at a disadvantage. How can the Forest Service change its practices so that more New Mexicans can be considered for those positions if they are unable to make a trip to Arizona? Have you all looked at various things that could be done there short of somebody having to travel in person over to another State?

FOREST SERVICE HIRING PRACTICES

Mr. TIDWELL. Yes. We do job fairs where we interview people on-site. They are supposed to be able to have anyone who wants to send in their application to be considered. The job fairs that I have personally participated in at those sites we were able to interview applicants that are there. We also interview applicants that just sent their application in, either do a phone interview or follow up with them.

As we explore different ways to be able to do our outreach, to be able to ensure that we are going after the future generation for the Forest Service, we are going to have to do a better job to coordinate these job fairs and do it in a way so that everyone can apply, whether you are in that location or you happen to be in town that day. We need to make sure that folks have an opportunity so we can look at the full candidate pool.

So it is an area that we need to be doing a better job, and as we have gained some experience on this, we are improving our process.

Senator UDALL. Great. Thank you very much.

My understanding on the two that I described is that they were actually unable to apply and to participate unless they traveled in person. And that was true in the Arizona one for New Mexico people and then the New Mexico one for Arizona people.

And I am glad to hear that you are trying to adjust your processes because we have many good folks that have lived close to the land and near the national forests that really want to do these jobs, and we look forward to having those positions be available to them in a number of different ways.

Thank you, Chief.

Thank you, Madam Chair.

Senator MURKOWSKI. Thank you. I just have one very quick question and then we will wrap here. And that relates to the Forest Inventory and Analysis Program. We had increased funding in the omnibus last year, and Forest Service had indicated that this would allow the program to extend into interior Alaska.

FOREST INVENTORY AND ANALYSIS PROGRAM (FIA)

Mr. TIDWELL. Yes.

Senator MURKOWSKI. We had a quick exchange about the benefits of being able to rely on our State foresters. I think we recognize that they have an ability to perhaps be a little more nimble and provide work at lower cost. How has this additional FIA funding been distributed to the regional programs and the States? And are we going to get to what we had hoped, which would be the effort to bring interior Alaska into the FIA program? How are we coming on that?

Mr. TIDWELL. Yes. Interior Alaska is now going to be added into the FIA program, and this additional funding allows us to be able to have the program across the board in our Western States so that we are reading those plots at a 10-year interval in the West and a 7-year interval in the East. The big addition is with Alaska.

We work with FIA with a partnership with our States. Some of the States contribute additional money just so that the plots are read at a higher frequency. We also work to employ people from the States. It is one of the things we need to look at in Alaska to be able to strengthen our partnership there with the State and to use their personnel and their skills to be able to help us to carry out our FIA program there in Alaska.

Senator MURKOWSKI. Good. Thank you. We will be working with you on that.

The Senators from Montana both mentioned the recreation funding and the accounts and the impact to Montana on trails. As you know, we were able to see a little bit of an increase in region 10 with regard to the recreation funding because there had been that disproportionate cut into the region.

But even with this, we are still hearing some concerns, some issues, that despite the funding trends, there are some problems that continue to persist. One example was there is a company in the Chugach National Forest that wants to expand into paddle boarding, and they have been told that Forest Service does not have sufficient funds to consider an expansion, really small example but I think we continue to hear it across both the Tongass and the Chugach from our folks in the State and it gets to us back here. So I am assuming other regions outside of Montana and Alaska are experiencing the same.

So again, we recognize the great recreational values that comes out of our national forests. You hear me take up most of my time in these hearings talking about timber within the Tongass, but I also recognize again the great recreational value, so making sure that we are able to meet the needs and the interests of folks as they access our Forest Service lands and how we deal with what would be considered some pretty simple permits and simple opportunity for access. Know that that continues to be a concern for us.

RECREATIONAL PERMITS

Mr. TIDWELL. Well, Senator, with any one of those requests by themselves, yes, they would look fairly simple and we could take that application, process it, and be able to grant the permit. The problem is we just have so few people from what we have been able to do in the past. Yes, we have been able to hold the recreation budget basically flat in Alaska. But even with a flat budget over the last couple years, we still have not recovered from the signifi-

cant reduction. I think it was in fiscal year 2012 with our recreation funding. So we are dealing with that.

We are working to improve our processes just like we have when it comes to our timber sales where we reduced our cost by over 39 percent. Our unit costs are lower today than they have ever been. We are looking at trying to do the same thing in recreation.

And so part of it is to look at our processes so that we can make it easier for groups to be able to access their national forests and grasslands. What we need to do is review our policies, especially for those noncommercial groups to make it very easy for them, which would then free up more time for us to be able to look at the commercial opportunities and have our staff, our limited staff actually spend more time on those efforts than what we do with more of these noncommercial activities that we get tremendous interest in that.

So it is one of the things we are working on. I would hope when I come back here next year that when you ask me that question I will have a better answer about how we have been able to improve our policies to make sure we are using our staff the best place we really need them to work because often it is the commercial activities that take up a little more time to process the permit versus some of these noncommercial activities. So I am optimistic that we will improve our processes when it comes to permit processing, just like we have done when it comes to our timber sale program.

Senator MURKOWSKI. Well, I know that there are many that are anxious for that. And I would be remiss if I did not publicly acknowledge the good work of so many within the Forest Service, particularly there in the Chugach that helped to facilitate the harvesting and the safe transport and the celebration that we had here at our Nation's capitol when the Chugach sponsored or hosted the Capitol Christmas tree. It was great to see the tree. And when I was talking to the guards that were onsite while that tree was there—they said—they did not know who I was, they did not know my interest in the tree. They said that is the best-looking tree that we have had here. So we were Alaska proud. So we appreciate that.

Mr. TIDWELL. Thank you for your support and sponsorship. I, too, definitely enjoy—it is often by far the best time in this town for me. But not only was it a beautiful tree, but what I remember is the stories from the children that came from your great State and their participation in that and being involved in that. That is the sort of thing that really helps me to know that we are on the right track. I am just asking for your help so that we can increase our rate of progress and to be able to address these issues.

But thanks again for your support for that event. It really made the difference.

Senator MURKOWSKI. It was. It was lots of fun. And we look forward to working with you throughout the rest of this year.

ADDITIONAL COMMITTEE QUESTIONS

[The following questions were not asked at the hearing, but were submitted to the Department for response subsequent to the hearing:]

QUESTIONS SUBMITTED TO TOM TIDWELL

QUESTIONS SUBMITTED BY SENATOR LISA MURKOWSKI

Question. In recent years, we have had discussions regarding recreation funding for Alaska. While dollars allocated to Region 10 have generally increased, we continue to hear concerns regarding administration of recreation programs in Alaska. This is an ongoing problem that, despite funding trends, continues to persist. The feedback I get from Alaskans is fees are increasing and the Forest Service claims there are no funds to maintain trails. Additionally, the Forest Service seems unwilling to look at new opportunities for guides or other special use permit holders who want to increase tourism and business opportunities, which are the kinds of economic opportunities the Forest Service has placed a large emphasis on given the decline in timber sales. For example, in the Chugach National Forest we have a company that wants to expand into paddleboarding, but has been told the Forest Service doesn't have sufficient funds to consider an expansion. This is just one small example, but across both the Tongass and the Chugach there are numerous examples that my staff reports to me on a nearly daily basis. I'm guessing that other regions have similar issues to those we are facing in Alaska. The budget request proposes a \$2 million increase for recreation funding. How would that increase help with the problems outlined above?

Answer. In fiscal year 2016, Wildland Fire Management accounted for 56 percent of the Forest Service's discretionary budget and the percentage is expected to rise to 67 percent of the discretionary budget by fiscal year 2025. Therefore, finding a lasting solution to the fire funding problem will be critical. The long-term erosion of the agency's capacity due to the need to budget for the 10-year average of wildfire suppression costs limits both our financial and staff resources to accomplish recreation work, including trail maintenance and recreation permitting. There is a limited amount of funding for each Government agency/program, so the more that has to be spent on suppression, the less there is available for recreation, hazardous fuel reduction, other restoration treatments, and cooperative fire protection—whether that is on the “front end” through the budget request and appropriation or on the “back end” when funds are reduced through the fire transfer process.

When prioritizing programs, the administration has recognized the importance of facilitating recreational access to National Forest System lands. Our fiscal year 2017 funding request for an additional \$2 million for the Recreation, Heritage, and Wilderness program will enhance the Forest Service's efforts to strengthen and deepen connections with the public through outdoor experiences. At this level of funding, we will continue to expand and enhance outdoor experiences for the public by implementing five goals:

- modernize our recreation special uses program;
- increase capacity and focus on our community service and volunteer programs;
- implement digital innovation;
- enhance citizen access through our system of recreation roads and trails; and
- leverage demonstration projects in key special places.

Regarding your specific concerns, the Forest Service is implementing a broad effort to modernize Recreation Special Uses, which is focused on enhancing guest services. Currently we are clarifying and simplifying policy around when special use permits would be required for temporary and priority outfitter activities. We are simplifying processes to facilitate access for hosted activities such as youth groups and educational organizations. We are developing standardized national training for Recreation Special Uses. Finally, process improvements are underway for modernization of our internal business tools and creating an electronic permit application process. We are working closely with outfitters and guides and other permittees on these process improvements. The modernization effort is occurring nationally, but will help facilitate process improvements in Alaska.

Recreation fees generated from fee retention authority granted under the Federal Lands Recreation and Enhancement Act have remained relatively flat but stable over the past 3 years averaging roughly \$3.8 million in fee revenue for Alaska's forests (\$3.86 million in 2013, \$3.9 million in 2014, and \$3.77 million in 2015). This authority is critical for maintaining our ability to collect fees and maintain recreation sites, thus we hope it will be reauthorized and extended beyond September 30, 2017.

Recreation fees paid by the public are primarily used to support operations, maintenance and amenity enhancement at developed recreation sites. Recreation fees paid by outfitters and guides are used to cover costs of administering recreation permits issued to outfitters and guides under this authority as well as support operations, maintenance and amenity enhancement at facilities and trails used by these

permit holders. Cabin rental fees are used almost exclusively for the upkeep and maintenance of these in-demand recreation resources. New recreation fees will be spent on the resources where fees are charged. For example, increased fees at Mendenhall Glacier and for cabin rentals will be used to support operations and maintenance at Mendenhall Glacier and add new amenities such as outdoor restrooms and wildlife viewing platforms to accommodate heavy visitor use and demands. Recreation fees are separate and distinct from appropriated funding for trails.

There are requests for the Forest Service to increase commercial guiding opportunities, which are currently limited, for example by permit term length, and applications for special use permits have been denied due to lack of available capacity on the landscape and existing moratoria. However, there are over 400 commercial recreation service permits on two national forests in Alaska, which provide opportunities for the public to connect with the outdoors.

Question. The Forest Service in a 2010 publication after you took over as chief stated that it requires a “substantial investment” in commercial thinning to obtain the 30–50 million board feet of young-growth volume that you said in 2010 could be achievable within the first decade of a young-growth transition. So far, the Forest Service has only performed pre-commercial thinning in the Tongass.

A. How much timber needs to be commercially thinned in the Tongass to meet your 30–50 million board feet level a year?

Answer. “The Economic Analysis of Southeast Alaska”, May 2010 was conducted, upon request, to ascertain the potential for a more rapid transition to a young growth based forest management program. Analysis and modeling was conducted based upon the best information available in 2010. The 2010 report served as a point of reference; however, it did not form the baseline information used in the modeling for the Forest Plan Amendment nor did it drive any of the alternatives under consideration.

The Forest Service has more current and accurate information on the ages, location and distribution of young growth stands which has been used for modeling in support of proposed alternatives in the Forest Plan Amendment. The 2010 report has not been used to drive budget requests or considerations with respect to commercial thinning in young growth stands nor has it been used to drive day to day considerations around the young growth transition.

B. How much timber will need to be pre-commercially thinned for it to grow large enough to be profitable to harvest?

Answer. The Tongass has already pre-commercially thinned over 211,000 acres over the years and has identified an additional 84,000 acres of potential pre-commercial thinning needs in the 15–30 year old age groups. The Tongass currently pre-commercially thins approximately 5,500 acres per year across all previously harvested landscapes. While the activity advances stand structure towards optimal harvest specifications more rapidly than natural processes, pre-commercial thinning alone does not guarantee profitable harvest, as profitability is dictated more by markets, location, and harvest systems employed.

For example, the Tongass Collaborative Stewardship Group and Tongass Transition Collaborative group recently visited a pre-commercially thinned stand on Koscuisko Island, a highly productive site, and found a stand which was harvested in 1955, regenerated naturally and was pre-commercially thinned in 1977. The thinned stand generally has larger diameter and heights than adjacent un-thinned stands and consequently more standing volume per acre. An additional benefit of the pre-commercial thinning is increased understory plant occurrence and diversity beneficial to dependent wildlife species. The stand in question could be scheduled for a commercial thinning at this time while adjacent, un-thinned stands need an additional 10–20 years of growth before a harvest would be available.

C. What is the estimated cost of commercial and pre-commercial thinning and have you proposed any money in your budget for such work this year or next?

Answer. The current annual program for pre-commercial thinning is approximately 6,200 acres per year at an average cost of \$500 per acre. The Tongass plans to continue the program at the same pace into the future.

Purchasers implement and pay for commercial thinning during execution of a timber sale. Forest Service pays for preparation work (designating and measuring trees to be harvested) predominantly using Forest Products funding, and administration of the contracts.

D. How much has the Forest Service funded for commercial thinning on the Tongass in the past 15 years and what is your expectation of the amount

that your agency is planning to devote to the transition over the next 10 years?

Answer. The Forest Service does not fund the implementation of commercial thinning using discretionary budget resources. Commercial thinning is accomplished through timber sales. The Forest Service uses discretionary forest product funds to execute the planning, preparation, sale and administration of both old growth bridge timber and increasing amounts of commercial young growth timber.

Question. I was disappointed to see that the Forest Service budget proposes to cut funding for minerals and geology management. As you know, in Alaska we rely on public lands for economic activity—with mining being an important economic driver in many communities. Sadly, your agency's unwillingness to prioritize mining development in Alaska is not surprising given the roadblock to development that the Roadless Rule presents. Mine exploration and development require road access to transport heavy equipment and to provide for affordable maintenance and operation. Arbitrarily prohibiting roads causes many otherwise excellent mining projects to be technically or economically infeasible.

- A. What set of criteria will the Forest Service use to evaluate a mining projects' economic and technical feasibility to allow road access to such projects in and through Inventory Roadless Areas under a new Tongass Transition Plan Amendment?
- B. Will the Forest Service consider adopting a Mineral Land Use Designation "LUD" to assure access to, and development of mining claims on the Tongass National Forest (particularly in Remote Recreation and other TUS Avoidance Areas) and on the roughly 9.6 million acres of the Tongass National Forest subject to the 2001 Roadless Rule?

Answer. The current Tongass Forest Plan includes a Minerals Overlay with the stated goal "to encourage the prospecting, exploration, development, mining, and processing of locatable minerals in the areas with the highest potential for mineral development." The proposed Plan Amendment retains the Minerals Overlay LUD with standards and guidelines for lands open to mineral entry that encourage the exploration, development and extraction of locatable, salable, and leasable minerals and energy resources, and also ensures the right of ingress and egress granted by the 1872 Mining Law and other laws and regulations. The Roadless Rule provides that a road may be constructed in an inventoried road less area if the Responsible Official determines that "[a] road is needed pursuant to reserved or outstanding rights, or as provided for by statute or treaty". The Forest Service recognizes the 1872 Mining Law gives a statutory right of reasonable and necessary access related to the exploration and development of mineral properties. This statutory right is subject to reasonable regulation for the protection of surface resources. The Forest Service will work with the project proponent to determine the permissible activities during environmental analysis of a proposed project.

Question. Logging roads support multiple users of the Tongass National Forest, providing access for tourism, hunting, fishing, hiking, boating/kayaking, photography, wildlife viewing, subsistence activities, recreational vehicle use, and more. They also provide access for subsequent timber harvest rotations, access for commercial thinning, and thinning for wildlife and habitat management and even fire-fighting access. The budget request includes an astounding \$22 million cut to road maintenance and improvement.

- A. With so many benefits to so many multiple users of the forest, why has the Forest Service proposed a large cut to roads funding in favor of engaging in the wasteful and extremely costly practice of destroying these roads through water barring, and other destructive activities?

Answer. We agree that roads are important for providing safe and reliable access for recreation, emergency services, and resource management access, including timber harvest. Roads are important for public and management access, including timber harvest, but in an era of constrained budgets, we have to make difficult choices. We are currently faced with the dual challenges of overall budget constraints coupled with the ever-growing burden on our discretionary budget of Fire Suppression expenditures. These expenditures erode funding available to other Forest Service programs—including Roads. Fire now consumes more than 50 percent of the Forest Service budget, up from 16 percent in 1995. Unless changes are made, fire management is anticipated to account for 67 percent of Forest Service budget by 2025, equating to reductions of nearly \$700 million from non-fire programs compared to today's funding levels. The President's fiscal year 2017 budget included a legislative proposal regarding funding for fire suppression to address this issue. Until the issue

of how to fund fire suppression is resolved, funding for other programs such as Roads will be constrained.

- B. There was a study several years ago that called for closing more than 400 miles of such roads on the Tongass. What are the Forest Service's current plans with respect to logging roads?

Answer. The Tongass NF, along with all forests in the country, were required to complete an analysis of the risks, benefits, and costs of the current road system per the 2005 Travel Management Rule, (36 CFR 212.5 Subpart A). The primary objective of this "Travel Analysis" was to help the agency identify and maintain an appropriately sized and environmentally sustainable road system that is responsive to ecological, economic, and social concerns. A second objective was to identify any roads that are no longer needed to meet forest resource management objectives and; therefore, should be scheduled for decommissioning or considered for other uses (36 CFR 212.5(b)).

The Tongass has been implementing recommendations from the Travel Analysis Process. At this time the current Tongass road system consists of 3631 miles of roads under Forest Service jurisdiction. Of these, about 2188 miles are currently open (in use) and about 1443 are closed (decommissioned). If the forest implements the remainder of the recommendations from the Travel Analysis Process, then approximately another 455 miles would be moved from an open to a closed status, and about 40 additional miles that were determined to no longer be needed for resource management purposes would be decommissioned and removed from the road system altogether.

It is important to remember that the roads that were proposed to be closed in the Travel Analysis Process were determined to still be important roads for resource management purposes, but could be better managed as intermittent use roads open and utilized for individual project purposes, and stabilized and put into storage between uses. By putting some roads into storage between project uses, the forest can address and mitigate some ecological concerns as well as make the road system a bit more affordable to maintain with reduced road maintenance funding.

QUESTIONS SUBMITTED BY SENATOR TOM UDALL

Question. I understand that the Gila National Forest is finishing extensive work on the Catwalk National Recreation Trail's flood-damaged hanging walkways. There are several trail connections that are not part of the current project, but are critical to public access of the Catwalk from the hundreds of miles of trails within the Gila Wilderness. It is my understanding that specifically this would involve the reconstruction of a 3/4 mile trail and installation of several bridges. I would like to see funding provided for these ancillary projects so that there is complete access to this terrific asset, one of the most visited sites and largest economic drivers in the Gila. Once funded, how long will it take to complete the trail connections?

Answer. We appreciate the support for our trails, and we understand the importance of the Catwalk to the Gila area. We also understand that there are portions of the Catwalk National Recreation Trail on the Gila National Forest that are not connected. In alignment with our National Strategy for a Sustainable Trails System, we aim to ensure that investments in our trails are financially sustainable and workable within the natural environment of the trail location. Unfortunately, the Catwalk Trail is in a 100-year flood zone. Previous trail connections have been destroyed by floods and rebuilt at increasing costs each time. The U.S. Geological Survey believes that recurring flooding will continue, and we have concerns that these bridges may worsen the effects of flooding and risks for communities downstream.

If fully funded, this major project would take about 2 years to complete and would cost approximately \$700,000. (For context, \$700,000 is about 30 percent of the trails funding available to the National Forest System's Region 3, which includes 10 other National Forests and four National Grasslands as well as the Gila NF). Consequently, cost-effective trail maintenance is the priority in the region at this time. We look forward to working with you and your staff to continue and enhance the benefits that Forest Service Trails bring to the communities of New Mexico.

Question. The Southwest Ecological Restoration Institutes, including the New Mexico Forest and Watershed Restoration Institute at New Mexico Highlands University, do important research related to natural resources, forest restoration, and wildland fire. How does the Forest Service utilize these institutes and how can we work together to expand their role in the future?

Answer. The Southwest Ecological Restoration Institutes (SWERI) provides an important role in the transfer of current scientific information about management of fire-adapted ecosystems in the interior West. SWERI transfers current scientific in-

formation through all types of media, delivers short courses and workshops on ecological restoration and the historic conditions of the landscape, participates in collaboratives, and provides on-the-ground field consultations and rapid assessments to inform treatment designs. The current funding amount (\$1.5 million) is consistent with the levels set by Congress when the Southwest Forest Health and Wildfire Prevention Act (which authorized funding to these Institutes) was passed. The amounts provided to each Institute are meant to align with their capacity and focus areas. The Forest Service has also provided additional funding to the Institutes through other partnerships and competitive processes. The Forest Service meets regularly with representatives from each Institute to discuss funding, upcoming work plans, and outyear planning. We encourage the Institutes to work together to identify the key roles that best leverage each Institute's unique capacities. We will continue to work with the Institutes, including having discussions about funding levels appropriate for each Institutes' outyear work plans.

Question. Will you explain the importance of realigning the firefighting budget to include disaster funding to address the escalating costs, and some of the specific impacts the Forest Service has faced because of past increases in the fire budget?

Answer. The administration's proposal for a new wildfire funding mechanism would allow us to continue to manage most wildland fires as we currently do, but would treat those fires that are most destructive and most costly outside of our budget. Approximately 1 percent of fires result in about 30 percent of suppression costs, and this new wildfire funding mechanism would allow those fires to be considered natural disasters.

This is important for multiple reasons. The practice of fire borrowing, where funds are transferred in season from non-fire accounts to address suppression budget shortfalls, creates major disruption of project planning and implementation throughout the agency. Once fire borrowing is initiated, any funds that are not obligated across the agency are shifted to cover wildfire suppression costs. When funds are withdrawn from the units, some projects are canceled and others placed on hold. Investments that are made in planning and preparation may be lost when projects are not implemented and completed in a timely manner. This disruption affects both long term effectiveness of fire management as well as other projects that are important to communities affected by national forests.

In addition to fire borrowing, the long-term erosion of the agency's capacity due to the need to budget for the 10-year average of wildfire suppression costs limits restoration work across the country. The growth in fire suppression costs has steadily consumed an ever-increasing portion of the agency's appropriated budget, at a rate of roughly \$100 million a year over the last few years. This has meant that the cost of fire management has grown from 13 percent of the agency's budget in the 1990s to 56 percent in 2016—and could rise to 67 percent by 2025. With constrained budgets, this has also meant that other programs have suffered diminished budgets. For example, fire staffing has increased by 114 percent since 1995, but in that same time period staffing levels for those dedicated to managing National Forest system lands has decreased by 39 percent. Both problems—the growth of fire programs as a percent of the agency's budget and the compounding problem of transfers or fire borrowing—need to be solved to allow us to invest further in the restoration and active management programs that will improve the health and resilience of forests and grasslands, including making them more resistant to wildland fire.

Question. What is the schedule for transfer of the 7 C-130H aircraft from the Coast Guard, and what funds in the fiscal year 2017 budget are associated with the transfer?

Answer. The FS plans to take ownership of two C-130s in fiscal year 2018, followed by four in fiscal year 2019 and one in fiscal year 2020. The fiscal year 2017 budget does not include funding associated with the transfers because the timing does not align with that fiscal year. However, in fiscal year 2017 we will use Preparedness funds to continue to establish the necessary support elements for the establishment of airbase(s) and operational capability for the C-130 program.

Question. At what stage is the development of the tanking systems and other requirements in order to utilize the C-130Hs?

Answer. The Air Force awarded the retardant delivery system (RDS) contract May 18, 2016. It is expected that the RDSs will be developed and installed in the first three C-130s in mid-2018.

Question. What is the Forest Service plan for utilizing the \$65 million for acquisition of aircraft provided in fiscal year 2015?

Answer. The Forest Service anticipates the Request for Proposals will be available by early- to mid-October, 2016. Upon the selection of a contractor to build the air-

craft, the \$65 million can be obligated. We plan on awarding a contract in the spring or early summer of fiscal year 2017 and taking delivery in fiscal year 2020.

Question. When will any aircraft acquired with those funds be operational?

Answer. Following award of the contract, delivery of an aircraft will take 2–3 years. We expect to be operational in fiscal year 2020.

Question. In September 2015, the Forest Service used Suppression funding to complete contracts for exclusive-use air tankers, even though long-term contracts and underlying expenses should be paid for with Preparedness funds. What specific steps can the agency take to improve its ability to budget ahead for aviation contracts so this does not occur in the future?

Do you expect to be in a similar situation at the end of fiscal year 2016 with similar contracts?

Will the proposed flat funding for Preparedness cover the known aviation contracting costs for fiscal year 2017?

Answer. Fire seasons are stochastic and unpredictable costs often arise. When this occurs, we have usually had to deviate from our planned business model for aviation contracts, and in 2016, we used Suppression funding to meet contractual obligations for exclusive-use air tankers, even though such long-term contracts and underlying expenses should be paid for with Preparedness funds.

However, now that we have fully executed the Exclusive Use contracts for the Legacy and Next Generation large airtankers, and have begun to finalize the incorporation of the 7 C–130Hs from the military into our fleet, we can better predict the full costs of our airtanker modernization program. We will reevaluate all of these costs and incorporate them, as appropriate, into our out year Preparedness budget requests to minimize future deviation from our business model for aviation contracts.

Question. Will the proposed flat funding for Preparedness allow the Forest Service to operationalize the Government-owned fleet (the C–130Hs and the brand new aircraft)?

Answer. As the military continues to operationalize the C–130Hs for the fire-fighting mission and we bring on new aircraft, which we have not owned or operated before, we expect resource requirements for Preparedness to change. We will evaluate these costs and incorporate them, as appropriate, into our out year Preparedness budget requests.

QUESTIONS SUBMITTED BY SENATOR JON TESTER

Question. Montana has a large backlog of expired or expiring recreation special-use permits. These permits authorize outfitters & guides, concessions, and many other types of organized use. Many forests in the State are slow to issue/reissue special-use permits and some forests have an outright moratorium. The budget request for fiscal year 2017 would fund recreation special-use permits at exactly one-half of the level needed to administer them as they need to be. In Montana the situation is more worrying where only about 25 percent of the recreation special-use permits were administered to standard in fiscal year 2015. What are you doing to clear the backlog of expired and expiring recreation special-use permits in Montana? When do you expect that those seeking new recreation special-use permits will not be turned away?

Answer. We recognize the importance of facilitating recreational access to National Forest System lands. This year, the Forest Service's Backlog Strike Team is working to address currently expired authorizations and to reduce the number of yearly expirations. As expired permits are reauthorized, we will have increased capacity to issue new permits. To both address the backlog and be in a better position to address requests for new special use permits, the Forest Service requested an additional \$2 million in fiscal year 2017 to help modernize its permitting program, as well as workforce Development. All of these efforts will be addressed at different timelines between now and calendar year 2018.

In addition, the Forest Service is implementing a broad effort to modernize Recreation Special Uses, which is focused on enhancing guest services. Currently we are clarifying and simplifying policy around when special use permits would be required for temporary and priority outfitter activities. We are simplifying processes to facilitate access for hosted activities such as youth groups and educational organizations. We are developing standardized national training for Recreation Special Uses. Finally, process improvements are underway for modernization of our internal business tools and creating an electronic permit application process. We are working closely with outfitters and guides and other permittees on these process improvements.

Question. Montana's national forests do not have the capacity that they once had just 10 years ago to provide for forest products. The number of specialists and technical experts has declined significantly over the last decade in Region 1 and in Montana. For example, there are about one-half the number of wildlife biologists in Montana than in 2004. What effect, if any, does this decline in capacity in the region have on slowing the processing of timber sales and making projects more vulnerable to litigation? Does the fiscal year 2017 budget request provide Montana's national forests with enough capacity to help achieve the national goal of 3.2 billion board feet?

Answer. Yes, the fiscal year 2017 budget request provides Montana's national forests with enough capacity to help achieve the national goal of 3.2 billion board feet. The expected timber volume sold target for fiscal year 2016 and fiscal year 2017 is 3,200 MMBF, an increase from 2,867 MMBF sold in fiscal year 2015. The agency recognizes that these are challenging goals and has taken a number of steps in fiscal year 2016 across all Regions to rebuild capacity—including making additional investments in hiring and training needed specialists—to meet our restoration and timber goals for fiscal year 2016 and position us for the future. To complement this rebuilding of personnel capacity, the 2014 Farm Bill Authorities provide valuable tools that help the agency in increasing the pace and scale of forest, watershed and grassland restoration. Region 1 has leveraged these authorities effectively within their work and we are identifying opportunities to increase their use agency-wide. While there are many factors that affect litigation, we don't believe that loss of capacity has had a causal effect on the number of projects litigated.

Question. The Stewardship Program provides assistance through State Foresters to thousands of family owned forests. This assistance often reduces the risk of catastrophic wildfire and insect and disease epidemics from spreading on to public lands, protecting public forests and watersheds. This program creates a win-win situation for family owned forests and taxpayers. Family owned forests provide a significant portion of Montana's wood supply, which is particularly important because of the uncertainty of wood supply coming from the region's Federal forests. Funding for this program is important to the Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation to continue to provide assistance by agency foresters and Montana State University Forestry Extension staff to private forest landowners. Why are you proposing to increase the Agency's hazardous fuels and forest management budgets for Federal lands yet decrease funding to the Stewardship Program in fiscal year 2017?

Answer. The reduction in the Forest Stewardship Program proposed in the President's budget is just one example of how the Forest Service is managing the high cost of wildland fire given a flat budget request. Programs throughout the agency have taken slight to moderate reductions in the President's budget to compensate for increasing wildland fire costs.

QUESTIONS SUBMITTED BY SENATOR STEVE DAINES

Question. The fiscal year 2015 Conference Report contained language that directed the Forest Service to work with State foresters to identify ways to more efficiently deliver the Forest Inventory and Analysis program in all States, including timely inventory updates, and should explore opportunities in how States and their cooperators may be able to accomplish necessary field work at a lower cost. What steps has the Forest Service taken to work with State foresters to carry out this direction?

Answer. Forest Inventory and Analysis (FIA) produces an Annual Business Report which outlines both partner contributions and grants to partners. Currently, about 34 percent of FIA's work, predominantly field work, is contracted to partners. In addition, many research tasks that require specific skills that may not be needed long-term are contracted to universities and administered by FIA scientists. The general rule is, if partners at a lower cost can accomplish an FIA task to the program's rigid quality assurance specifications, FIA contracts the task.

Question. We understand that the overhead the Forest Service takes off of the top of the Forest Inventory and Analysis program to administer this program may be significant? Can you provide how much funding the Forest Service takes from the appropriated amount for overhead expenses along with information on how this amount is calculated?

Answer. The rates of effective indirect expenses for the four Research Stations with FIA field units ranged from 11 to 15 percent across the country (Appendix Table B-2, Financial Statement for the fiscal year 2015 FIA Business Report). This reflects differences in both sources of funding and in Research Station indirect ex-

pense assessment practices. An additional charge for the Albuquerque Service Center assessed at the national-level brings the program's overall indirect expenses to 20.7 percent.

Question. The 2014 Farm Bill directed State foresters to take a comprehensive look at forests in all ownership categories across their States and develop State Forest Action plans. These State Forest Action Plans identify priorities in order to direct limited resources to where they are most needed. Can you provide details on how the National Forests are working with their respective State forester to accomplish the objectives and priorities detailed in those plans to ensure comprehensive forest management within the State?

Answer. The Forest Service has encouraged all National Forests to work with State Foresters to support the implementation of State Forest Action Plans. Some National Forests are working more closely with State Foresters than others, but the agency is working towards collaborating closely with all States.

In July 2014, Montana's Governor Bullock announced his Forests in Focus initiative, which includes a component that focuses on Federal Forest Management. The Montana Department of Natural Resources (DNRC) funded a shared liaison position to assist Region 1 with identifying opportunities for using the 2014 Farm Bill Insect and Disease and Good Neighbor authorities, as well as facilitate and expand partnerships with other State and Federal agencies, local governments, collaborative working groups and other external stakeholders. The Governor also invested \$2 million in Forest Service projects accomplishing work in the priority landscapes (designated areas). The Forest Service-DNRC Liaison manages the distribution and oversight of these funds and works closely with the Forest Service Insect and Disease Project Coordinator to understand where investments will best increase forest capacity.

Additional efforts are occurring across all Regions. For example, the Forest Service's Landscape Scale Restoration program funds innovative, cross-boundary projects that target priority areas in the States' Forest Action Plans as those most in need of forest health improvement. We funded three Montana projects in the past, and are requesting an increase of \$9.5 million in fiscal year 2017 to fund approximately 20 more projects. The agency is also currently conducting a series of meeting in the regions to identify opportunities and challenges to increase the use of the Farm Bill authorities.

Question. Over 80 percent of wildfires occur on non-Federal lands and over one-fourth of the acreage burned is on non-Federal lands. Much of that acreage and many of those fires overlap with Federal lands. A core element of the State Fire Assistance program is to provide critical resources for State and local fire departments to address wildfire suppression with funding for equipment and fire fighter training. As you know, initial attack capability is the key to keeping wildfire impacts to a minimum and State and private resources are critical to that effort. Why is the Forest Service proposing no increase in the State Fire Assistance program funding for fiscal year 2017 while requesting an increase in its suppression funding?

Answer. The requested funding level in State Fire Assistance proposed in the President's budget is just one example of how the Forest Service is managing the high cost of wildland fire given a flat budget request. Programs throughout the agency have taken slight to moderate reductions in the President's budget to compensate for increasing wildland fire costs, so we consider level funding to be a strong sign of support for both State Fire Assistance and Volunteer Fire Assistance.

Question. An estimated two-thirds of the Nation's forests are State and private forests covering approximately 500 million acres. The Stewardship Program provides assistance through the State foresters to hundreds of thousands of individual families in helping them develop plans for managing their forests. Ninety percent of those plans are successfully implemented. Those plans when implemented often reduce the risk of catastrophic wildfire and insect and disease epidemics from spreading on to public lands, protecting public forests and watersheds. As a by-product of those plans, forests owned by individual families provide almost 50 percent of the Nation's wood supply and employment opportunities for over a million Americans. Why is the Forest Service proposing decrease funding to the Stewardship program in fiscal year 2017?

Answer. The reduction in the Forest Stewardship Program proposed in the President's budget is just one example of how the Forest Service is managing the high cost of wildland fire given a flat budget request. Programs throughout the agency have taken slight to moderate reductions in the President's budget to compensate for increasing wildland fire costs.

SUBCOMMITTEE RECESS

And with this, the subcommittee stands adjourned.

[Whereupon, at 12:00 p.m., Wednesday, April 6, the subcommittee was recessed, to reconvene subject to the call of the Chair.]