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WILDFIRE MANAGEMENT IN THE MIDST OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

HEARING BEFORE THE COMMITTEE ON ENERGY AND NATURAL RESOURCES UNITED STATES SENATE ONE HUNDRED SIXTEENTH CONGRESS SECOND SESSION

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WILDFIRE MANAGEMENT IN THE MIDST OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

TUESDAY, JUNE 9, 2020

U.S. SENATE,
COMMITTEE ON ENERGY AND NATURAL RESOURCES,
Washington, DC.

The Committee met, pursuant to notice, at 10:09 a.m. in Room SD-366, Dirksen Senate Office Building, Hon. Lisa Murkowski, Chairman of the Committee, presiding.

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

The CHAIRMAN. This morning we have scheduled a hearing on wildfire management in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic. Just as COVID-19 has altered our daily lives, requiring us to don face masks, practice social distancing and remain in self isolation, the virus has also added a new layer of complexity for our wildland firefighters. This year these heroes will be fighting wildfires while simultaneously working to protect themselves and others from a pandemic that threatens them, their families and communities. I understand the USDA Forest Service and the Department of the Interior had developed guidance on social distancing and other COVID-19 mitigation measures for our wildland firefighters. The health and safety of these individuals is a top priority, and I encourage the agencies to continue these efforts.

The summer fire season is shaping up to be as severe as any. As fire activity increases, we can expect over 20,000 firefighters to be mobilized by the Forest Service, Interior and their state, tribal, local and volunteer cooperators. At a moment's notice, fire personnel will be traveling by airplane and vehicle across state borders. Large concentrations of firefighters, support specialists and private service contractors will be assigned to incident command posts, or fire camps, where they will eat, rest and stage equipment and supplies. What was operationally routine before, may be exactly the kinds of activities that now risk spreading the Coronavirus around the fire services.

First responders at the state and local level are already stretched thin due to COVID-19 response. This year's summer fire season is well underway and adding to the strain. In the State of Alaska, we have seen 179 wildland fires to date: total acres burned—41,000 acres; current number of active staff fires—we are at about three right now. So we are in our fire season. Last week we saw nearly a dozen uncontained large fires that were raging in the West. Several new large incidents were reported over the weekend. It is also

possible that regions like Northern California will see a second wave of fires in the fall if Santa Ana winds pick up and dry conditions persist on the West Coast.

Overall, experts at the National Interagency Fire Center are projecting this year's fire activity to be more active than 2019. Last year, 4.7 million acres were consumed by fire. That was 25 percent below the average acres burned over the past ten years. Some may look at those numbers and say, okay, we were lucky there, but over half of those acres burned were in the State of Alaska. We had one of the largest and most expensive and heavily staffed fires last year. This was the Swan Lake Fire up on the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge which burned off and on for almost four months. There were over 3,000 people that were assigned to that fire, including hundreds of firefighters from the Lower 48. I think it just reminds us that even in a below average year, the fallout from a small fraction of infections on a fire like we saw last year in Swan Lake could result in a significant number of COVID-19 cases this year. We need to do everything possible to prevent that and to ensure that our firefighters don't fall ill or have to self-quarantine.

Through this hearing it is my hope that we begin to understand how firefighting tactics and strategies are being reimaged. I would also like to just very briefly add at the end of my comments here that all of us have a responsibility here. We want to use our great outdoors. In fact, we have the Great Outdoors Act on the Floor right now and a recognition that when we go outside we have a responsibility to be careful as well.

Those who live or work in forest communities, those who will be camping and recreating outdoors this summer, just take precautions, be careful, be vigilant. And as I mentioned, it is our personal responsibility in many ways as individuals, but it is also a responsibility to clear hazardous trees, to deal with overgrown vegetation around your homes and your properties. Pay attention to weather conditions. Put out your campfires. Some of these are not rocket science, but they can make a difference. Drought, a changing climate and management practices have all contributed to our forests becoming dangerously flammable. Each of us can do our part to help our firefighters by creating fire-resilient neighborhoods and communities.

With that, I turn to my friend and Ranking Member, Senator Manchin.

**STATEMENT OF HON. JOE MANCHIN III,
U.S. SENATOR FROM WEST VIRGINIA**

Senator MANCHIN. Thank you, Chairman Murkowski, and thank you for holding the hearing today on the summer's wildfire season which is now upon us.

Before I get into my remarks, I also would like to take a moment to thank all the firefighters who do a really very, very difficult, tough job. These men and women bravely serve our country day in and day out as they work long, grueling hours in a very dangerous job. We all owe them a debt of gratitude. I also recognize that by simply coming to work they are putting themselves at increased risk of contracting COVID-19 and possibly spreading it to their families. I am humbled that, despite the risk, they choose to con-

tinue to serve. In order to ensure members of the public and their livelihoods continue to remain protected, I want all the firefighters to know that I and all my colleagues are working to make certain that they have the proper PPE and the equipment necessary to do their jobs as safely as possible and guarantee that they will be supported if they do contract COVID-19 this fire season.

Madam Chairman, I understand that last week the meteorologists at the Department of the Interior and the Forest Service released the National Wildfire Forecast for this summer. Starting next month, pretty much the entire Western U.S. is predicted to have more wildfires than they usually have. Combined with the current COVID-19 pandemic, a lot of fear exists among both the public and firefighters. I believe a lot of that fear is simply fear of the unknown. There are questions circulating among the public about the use of evacuation centers this summer. There are questions circulating among firefighters about workers' compensation coverage should they contract COVID-19, but knowledge is the surest way to quickly dispel fears. I cannot think of a better forum than this morning's hearing to enable the witnesses to educate everyone as to what we should expect this summer.

I understand the agencies have been planning for this since March, and we are all excited to hear your plans to keep both firefighters and communities safe. While planning and preparations have been underway for this summer, Congress has been also doing our part. The CARES Act included an additional \$270 million for the firefighter agencies to better prepare for this summer. And last month I joined Chairman Murkowski and Ranking Member Udall in sending a letter to Vice President Pence asking for his assistance as the head of the Coronavirus Task Force to remove any red tape that had been hindering firefighters' ability to acquire PPE. I understand that by and large that has now been done.

Just yesterday I introduced a bill with Ranking Member Udall to ensure that any firefighters that contract COVID-19 will be supported. Our bill simply does two things. First, it requires all firefighters to be tested for COVID-19 before coming onto work this fire season. Second, because of the unique living and working conditions that wildland firefighters undertake, if a firefighter contracts COVID-19 during the fire season, they will be presumed to have contracted it in the course of their job duties, ensuring their eligibility for workers' compensation coverage. We have heard the firefighters are worried about whether they will be adequately covered should they fall ill. Our bill ensures that firefighters can have one less thing to worry about as they go about doing their very tough, dangerous jobs.

My colleagues and I want everyone to be safe as possible this summer, and I understand that different agencies that are represented here are each taking slightly different approaches in order to ensure everyone's safety. I look forward to hearing from the witnesses about the various approaches they will be taking this year. Through our discussion today, we can learn from each other what is working well and then have those practices that are proving to be the most effective to be adopted more broadly.

Thank you again, Madam Chairman, for holding this morning's hearing, which is so important.

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you, Senator.

We will now turn to our witnesses and, as members note, we are doing a hybrid hearing today. So we have, kind of, a split screen. We have two of our witnesses that are here with us today, and we have two witnesses that are joining us remotely.

First, I will introduce Mr. John Phipps, who is the Deputy Chief for State and Private Forestry at the USDA Forest Service. We welcome you here, Mr. Phipps.

Mr. Phipps is joined at the table by Amanda Kaster. Amanda is the Acting Deputy Assistant Secretary for Lands and Minerals at the U.S. Department of the Interior. Welcome.

On our video or our remote screen, we are joined by Mr. Norm McDonald. Norm is the Director of Fire and Aviation at the Alaska Division of Forestry. Norm, I know it is very early there in Alaska, so we appreciate you joining us at about six a.m. to do your business. This is going to be a long day for you, but we are kind of used to these long days when we are dealing with Alaska fires. Thank you for your work.

At this time, I would like to turn to Senator Cantwell for her introduction of Mr. Geissler.

**STATEMENT OF HON. MARIA CANTWELL,
U.S. SENATOR FROM WASHINGTON**

Senator CANTWELL. Thank you, Madam Chair, and thank you for holding this important hearing. I know that when we see the map and hear the details, this is not going to be the most pleasant hearing for us, but the early warning system helps us do a lot.

I am so glad that Mr. Geissler is here with us today to testify on behalf of the National Association of State Foresters (NASF). He is the Past President of the National Association of State Foresters, the current Chair of the NASF Wildland Fire Committee and a member of the Wildland Fire Leadership Council. His primary and most important job, for me, anyway, I'd consider, is as Washington State Forester and Deputy Supervisor for Wildfire. The Washington State Commissioner of Public Lands appointed him to that position in 2018, and he came from Oklahoma where he served as the Director of Forestry Services with the Oklahoma Department of Agriculture. Prior to that role he worked in private management, wildland firefighting and as a forester in the U.S. Forest Service in Idaho.

I look forward to hearing what his comments are today about a critical time for all of us in the Pacific Northwest and throughout the nation.

The CHAIRMAN. Right. Thank you, Senator Cantwell.

With that, we will begin with our panel. We will go in the order that I have introduced. First, Mr. Phipps, then Ms. Kaster, then Mr. McDonald and then, Mr. Geissler. We would ask that you try to keep your comments to about five minutes so that we can have an opportunity for questions and your responses at the end. Mr. Phipps, welcome. Give it a try. You may be on.

**STATEMENT OF JOHN PHIPPS, DEPUTY CHIEF FOR STATE
AND PRIVATE FORESTRY, USDA FOREST SERVICE**

Mr. PHIPPS. Thank you, Madam Chairman, Ranking Member and members of the Committee. Thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today. My testimony outlines the current status of USDA Forest Service wildfire preparations, the protocols put in place to keep communities and our firefighters safe and the ways the Forest Service is working with its many partners to improve forest conditions and how communities prepare for wildfire.

This last fall and winter have been dry across Western U.S. and many states have lower than average snowpack. We have already seen fire activity in the Southeast and Southwest. The seasonal outlook from the National Interagency Fire Center tells us that there is potential for above normal fire activity as fuels continue to dry and cure in the Northwest, Northern California and the Great Basin. Given this outlook and the pandemic, we are focused on being prepared to protect our responders and respond to fire. The Forest Service stands ready to respond to wildland fire with up to 35 air tankers, 671 helicopters, more than 900 engines, 300 pieces of heavy equipment and about 10,000 firefighters.

This year with COVID-19 we are focusing more than ever on aggressive initial attack of wildland fires using local area resources from all parties. Our goal is rapid containment to minimize the number of large wildfires. Through work with the National Multi-Agency Coordinating Group, we have developed wildland fire response plans for each geographic area that provide guidance during the Coronavirus pandemic for maintaining fire response, continuity and enhancing firefighter safety. We are relying on the medical expertise we receive from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health and the National Wildfire Coordinating Group's Interagency Emergency Medical Committee and have established interim standard operating procedures and protocols for screening and quarantine of firefighters. We are relying on the CDC guidance for PPE and continue to build inventories to meet current and future national needs for wildland fire incidents. We have also modified aviation and logistical contracts to better meet this new environment.

We are not in this alone. We have strong relationships with federal, state, local and tribal partners. We are working closely with our interagency partners to issue guidance. The Forest Service continues to focus on reducing wildfire risk to communities and natural resources through prescribed burns, timber harvest and other mechanical treatments. We continue to move forward with our shared stewardship approach to improving the conditions of our nation's forests, and we are on track to meeting our targets. We are actively working with states, tribes and other partners to share decisions, risk and create mutually beneficial outcomes.

Thank you for the continued support of our wildland fire management mission. We appreciate the fire funding fix, the 2018 Omnibus, 2018 and 2014 Farm bills, the Dingell Act and passing the recent funding for additional PPE. I will conclude by recognizing the 50th anniversary of the National Interagency Fire Center in Boise this year. This partnership continues to demonstrate that we are all in this together.

After sharing my testimony, I want you to remember three things. One, given the challenge of fighting fire in this pandemic, we will continue to do everything we can to protect our people and the public. We understand that the uncertainty ahead will require our best efforts to learn and rapidly adapt. We greatly appreciate your continuing interest in helping us successfully respond to wildland fire. I welcome any questions you may have.

[The prepared statement of Mr. Phipps follows:]

**TESTIMONY of
JOHN PHIPPS
DEPUTY CHIEF FOR STATE and PRIVATE FORESTRY
UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE—FOREST SERVICE
BEFORE THE
UNITED STATES SENATE
COMMITTEE ON ENERGY AND NATURAL RESOURCES
JUNE 9, 2020
Concerning
WILDFIRE MANAGEMENT DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC**

Madam Chairman, Ranking Member and Members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today to discuss Wildfire Management during the COVID-19 pandemic. My testimony today will outline the current status of USDA Forest Service preparation for the wildfire year, the protocols put in place to keep communities and our firefighters safe, and the ways the Forest Service is working with its many partners to improve forest conditions and help communities prepare for wildfire.

WILDFIRE MANAGEMENT

This is an unprecedented year. We will adjust, as necessary, how we fight fire to protect our firefighters, but these adjustments will not alter our commitment to protect the American people and the public lands that we manage. The Forest Service, together with tribal, federal, state and local partners, stand ready to respond to wildfire during the 2020 fire year.

We will continue our focus, using local area resources from all partners, on aggressive initial attack where we can be most successful. Every wildfire response will be based on a careful evaluation of human safety and risk to other important values to ensure smart decisions are made as we determine how to attack each fire. Our goal is rapid containment to minimize the number of large wildfires.

To identify issues related to how the COVID-19 pandemic will affect wildland fire response in the United States, the National Multi-Agency Coordinating Group has tasked the three national area command teams and one incident management team to coordinate with federal, state, county, and tribal officials. This group has worked directly with each geographic area coordination group, the National Multi-Agency Coordinating Group, and appropriate external affairs staff to develop a Wildland Fire Response Plan for each geographic area. They worked in concert with the geographic area coordination groups and member agencies to develop a standardized national template that tiers to local units. Each of these plans provide guidance for maintaining wildland fire response continuity, continuing to sustain the highest degree of resource availability, and enhancing the safety and protection of all wildland fire response personnel at all levels across the country. The plans are considered living documents the geographic areas can continue to update as we collectively learn more about our current operating environment.

Specific areas of focus among the plans include maintaining capability for initial attack, extended attack and large fire response, and coordination and support function capabilities such as dispatch and supply caches. These plans provide general strategies, implementation considerations, and best practices that are useful at all levels and across multiple disciplines.

Based on long-term weather forecasts and expected dry conditions, 2020 is projected to be a higher than average year for wildland fire. Aggressive initial attack, supported by airtankers and helicopters, will be used wherever possible to extinguish wildfires quickly and minimize the need to bring large numbers of firefighters together. The Forest Service will have up to 35 next generation airtankers, more than 200 helicopters, more than 900 engines, and about 10,000 firefighters available to manage wildfires. The Forest Service has restructured 50 call-when-needed aircraft contracts to ensure we have additional guaranteed availability periods. These contracts include helicopters, water scoopers, airtankers, and aerial supervision aircraft. This will guarantee 90-day availability periods from existing vendors. Approximately half began their 90-days on June 1, 2020, with the other half starting on June 15, 2020. Additional staffing will also be hired to manage these resources.

We know there will be wildfires that will escape initial attack due to unfavorable conditions. Gathering and supporting large numbers of firefighters into concentrated fire camps will not be practical for this fire year. Large fire camps will not be the norm. Most firefighting efforts will be in small groups and dispersed into isolated camps to enhance social distancing among our firefighters. When large fires require firefighters to travel from outside the local area, crews will be mobilized and supported in a manner that provides social distancing and protection for local communities. Agencies will work with community leaders and local law enforcement to ensure that community needs are being met, and wildfire threats and capacity are clearly understood when planning firefighting strategy and evacuations.

Wildfire smoke is an unfortunate but inevitable part of the fire year. We will work closely with communities to assist with forecasting and preparation for wildfire smoke. The Interagency Wildland Fire Air Quality Response Program is developing approaches for early warning of wildfire smoke impacts with the Pacific Northwest Research Station and other partner agencies. A community that may be at risk will be able to plan in advance to mitigate potentially adverse smoke impacts on vulnerable individuals and facilities.

As we continue through the fire year, land managers across the country are constantly assessing fire conditions and risk factors, which may impact our ability to respond to wildfires. In some cases access and fire restrictions may be implemented to reduce the likelihood of human-caused fires.

Through the National Fire Capacity program, the Forest Service supports and assists State Foresters and local communities in building capacity for the prevention, mitigation, control, and suppression of wildfires on non-federal lands. The program helps state agencies create more fire-adapted communities by implementing pre-fire prevention and mitigation programs described in State Forest Action Plans. The program emphasizes pre-fire planning in the wildland-urban interface and hazardous fuel mitigation near communities at risk of catastrophic wildfire. We are

urging the public, now more than ever, to do their part during the 2020 fire year to prevent human-caused fires.

A new public service advertisement campaign developed by the Forest Service, the National Association of State Foresters, and the Ad Council will promote safe and responsible outdoor recreation. This new campaign includes wildfire prevention and safe recreation tips for families and individuals to keep in mind while enjoying public lands or their own backyards. The new campaign will also encourage viewers to visit BeOutdoorSafe.org for additional safe recreation resources, including tips to consider *before* taking a trip outside – like checking for park and trail closures, packing soap or hand sanitizer and confirming that the destination park or trail offers enough space for social distancing. BeOutdoorSafe.org also highlights the ways we can all help prevent wildfires while recreating, including by following fire restrictions, properly extinguishing campfires and avoiding parking on tall, dry grass – even if the parking lot is full.

HEALTH AND SAFETY

The interagency wildland fire community is committed to promoting and protecting the health and wellness of all wildland firefighters and support personnel. The Fire Management Board has the responsibility for formulation of federal wildland fire response policy to protect life, property, and resources. The Fire Management Board has carefully analyzed the risk of responder exposure to COVID-19 and the medical, physical, and training requirements of wildland firefighters as part of annual fire management preparedness. Our goal is to reduce impact and exposure to our employees while maintaining our ability to respond to incidents and carry out mission critical wildland fire activities.

The wildland fire community's greatest resource is our personnel, and ensuring our personnel are healthy is the first step in meeting the wildland fire mission. We have established interim standard operating procedures and protocols for screening of wildland fire personnel at duty stations and during wildfire incident management activities to identify and insulate individuals with potential COVID-19 infection and thereby reduce exposure. Consistent and continual monitoring of personnel will be a crucial step in preventing the movement of potentially infected individuals and the spread of COVID-19. A "Module as One" approach is being used for crews and modules to insulate as one unit and reduce exposure to the public and other crews.

When social distancing is not possible, fire personnel wear cloth face coverings that cover their mouth and nose. Based on guidance from the CDC, the personal protective equipment needed for wildland firefighters includes cloth face coverings, nitrile gloves, cleaning and disinfecting supplies, hand sanitizer, and soap and water. We continue to build inventories in the cache system to meet current national needs for wildland fire incidents throughout the 2020 fire year. In addition to the Cache system, we are building up an additional inventory of N95 and surgical masks and gloves, to cover normal operations for a 120-day period. This personal protective equipment has been provided for Forest Service law enforcement, firefighters, and frontline employees while we continue to order these supplies into the future. These remain high demand items, as deliveries are being prioritized to hospitals and other treatment facilities on a national level.

As we move further into the 2020 fire year and active wildland fire response across the country increases, we must be able to allow the current coordination system to work as it is intended. To help ensure this, the National Multi-Agency Coordinating Group has produced the Interagency Checklist for Mobilization of Resources in a COVID-19 Environment focusing on interagency mobilization, and pre-positioning of fire response resources. Additionally, we are working with the National Wildfire Coordinating Group's emergency medical committee to develop guidance and protocols for the care and transport of firefighters who exhibit COVID-19 symptoms while at a wildfire incident.

IMPROVING FOREST CONDITIONS

We continue to move forward with our shared stewardship approach to improving the conditions of our Nation's forests. Actively working with states, tribes and other partners is a priority to share decisions, risks and mutually beneficial outcomes. In 2019, the Forest Service sold 3.3 billion board feet of timber, the most in 22 years. That same year, we were able to conduct hazardous fuels treatments on 2.7 million acres. Over the last 5 years, more than 700,000 acres were treated annually with mechanical treatments, and more than 2.1 million acres were treated annually through prescribed fire or natural wildfires. Over the last 5 years, approximately 1.7 million acres have been treated annually within the wildland-urban interface. To date, we have treated more than 1.15 million acres to reduce hazardous fuels and continue to work towards our 2020 target of 3.4 million acres. While there is much work to be done, we remain committed to doing the right work, in the right places, at the right scale.

Last March, regions placed a pause on prescribed fire projects. These regional decisions were made in collaboration with partners amidst the concerns around COVID-19. These types of projects are key to reducing wildfire risk and improving firefighter safety. Regions are now beginning to lift the pause and are working closely with states and other partners on the right time and places to restart prescribed fire operations. Since March, the agency has shifted some resources from prescribed fire projects to mechanical thinning projects to reduce wildfire risk. We continue to take aggressive action to maximize opportunities to reduce wildfire risk to communities.

Forest Service hazardous fuels management continues to focus on reducing wildfire risk to communities and natural resources through prescribed burns, timber harvests, and other mechanical treatments. The principal aim is to mitigate uncharacteristically severe wildfire, and promote resilient ecosystems. Hazardous fuel management utilizes vegetation manipulation, removal, or modification to restore ecosystems to their natural range of variation and encourage fire to resume its natural role in the ecosystem. Our focus in treating hazardous fuel around communities is to reduce the potential wildfire risks to life and property, and to increase opportunities for wildland firefighters to safely and effectively engage wildfire. Since 2006, over 5,800 fuel treatment effectiveness assessments have been completed on National Forest System lands, and these assessments indicate that about 87% of the fuels treatments have effectively changed wildfire behavior and assisted with fire control efforts.

CONCLUSION

We are confident that we are ready to face the challenges of this fire year as a result of an extraordinary level of engagement and planning by our outstanding employees and partners.

I will conclude by recognizing the 50th anniversary of the National Interagency Fire Center (NIFC) this year. NIFC, located in Boise, Idaho, is the nation's support center for wildland firefighting. It houses eight different federal and non-federal agencies and organizations, and provides unified guidance for effective wildfire response. It definitively demonstrates that we are all in this together.

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you, Mr. Phipps.
Let's now turn to Ms. Kaster.

STATEMENT OF AMANDA KASTER, ACTING DEPUTY ASSISTANT SECRETARY, LAND AND MINERALS MANAGEMENT, U.S. DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR

Ms. KASTER. Chairman Murkowski, Ranking Member Manchin and members of the Committee, I am Amanda Kaster, the Acting Deputy Assistant Secretary for Land and Minerals Management. I am pleased to join you today to discuss the Department of the Interior's diligent, ongoing efforts to maintain an effective wildfire response. While mitigating the risk of COVID-19 to our firefighters and the public, we are actively managing fuels and vegetation to limit wildfires.

Every year the Department and its interagency partners are faced with unique challenges in preparing for the wildfire season. This year is no different. The onset of COVID-19 requires that the interagency wildland fire community be thoughtful about the way it traditionally manages wildfires and protects firefighters, communities and resources from that risk. This year we have strategically planned for wildfire suppression during the pandemic including sending wildland firefighters across state borders. Our firefighters are working as family units to protect people, property and themselves while advancing safe and efficient fire suppression operations. Thanks to your support, the CARES Act provides additional critical resources to ensure that firefighters have the equipment they need to fight wildfires this season.

Our coordination with our interagency, state and tribal and local partners are vital to the Department's success in carrying out its stewardship responsibilities, particularly fuels management work and essential restoration efforts. Of the nearly 4.7 million acres of land that burned in 2019, over half occurred in Alaska which saw fire activity that far exceeded the state's ten-year average. This season we are seeing increased levels of wildfire activity in the Great Basin, Southern and Rocky Mountain geographic areas. The most recent outlook shows potential for above normal fire activity in 2020 with long-range forecast data showing overall warmer and drier than average conditions this summer for the West. The President and Secretary Bernhardt are committed and focused on active land management efforts to reduce wildfire risk.

In 2019, the Department completed a total of 1.4 million acres of fuels management treatments, including targeted grazing and prescribed burns. So far in 2020, the Department has completed 620,000 acres of treatments which is approximately half of all planned treatments for this year. The Department recently approved fuel breaks in the Great Basin which would support the construction of up to 11,000 miles of fuel breaks to control wildfires. Further, Under Secretary Bernhardt's leadership, the Department is prioritizing the streamlining of its processes through the creation of categorical exclusions, and it has also begun the process of updating its forest management rules to increase efficiency and to improve the agency's ability to conduct active forest management on public lands. These management efforts will continue long after the fire season concludes.

While we cannot fully eliminate the risk associated with COVID-19 to the firefighting workforce, experts throughout the wildland fire community are actively collaborating on how to limit firefighter exposure. The Medical and Public Health Advisory Team consists of an interagency group of medical health experts from DOI, USDA and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. This team has established guidance and protocols including social distancing, cleaning and disinfection, personal hygiene and well-being and the use of personal protective equipment during fire operations. Our priority continues to be aggressive, initial and extended attack.

The Department is on track to have the same number of firefighters this year as last season, including 4,500 temporary-seasonal, career-seasonal and permanent employees. They will be supported by an available mix of firefighting aircraft including access to 100 single engine airtankers, 370 helicopters, 18 scoopers and numerous other support aircraft. The Department stands ready and able to fight fires across the country this season. I'm happy to answer any questions.

[The prepared statement of Ms. Kaster follows:]

**Statement of
Amanda Kaster
Acting Deputy Assistant Secretary
Land and Minerals Management**

**Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources
Oversight Hearing
"Wildfire Management in the Midst of the COVID-19 Pandemic"
June 9, 2020**

Chairman Murkowski, Ranking Member Manchin, and members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony on the Department of the Interior's (DOI) Wildland Fire Management program during the COVID-19 pandemic. I am here today to assure the Committee that, despite COVID-19, DOI is ready, willing, and able to fight wildland fires across the United States, including in Alaska and Hawaii. My testimony will highlight many of the on-going efforts and plans to maintain effective wildfire response and actively manage vegetation to limit wildfires, while mitigating the risks to our firefighters and the public associated with COVID-19.

Each year, DOI and its interagency partners are faced with unique challenges in preparing for the wildfire season, and this year is no different. The onset of COVID-19 requires that the interagency wildland fire management community rethink the way that it traditionally manages wildfires and protects firefighters, communities, and resources from wildfire risk. That is, COVID-19 presents yet another risk, among the many that we face every year, that we must address. Thus, while our operational response will look different this year, our commitment to meeting wildland fire management objectives is no less than what we have delivered in previous years.

For example, every year the DOI sends wildland firefighters across state borders to support our interagency, state and tribal partners in wildfire response. This year we have planned carefully and strategically for wildfire suppression during the pandemic, and are currently implementing safe, efficient fire suppression operations with our firefighters working as "family units" to protect people, property, and themselves. In 2020, the BLM has already sent smokejumpers to Colorado, Nevada, and Utah in response to wildfires; wildland firefighters in New Mexico and Arizona have responded to several incidents; and engine crews from Montana were sent to Arizona on two separate occasions, including to fight fires in a national forest. DOI resources are moving throughout the country from as far away as Lake City, Florida, to Fairbanks, Alaska.

The Department would like to thank Congress for recent action on the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act (CARES Act). Funding from the CARES Act is critical to ensuring that firefighters have the resources and equipment that they need to safely and effectively fight wildfires this season.

As always, the success of our Wildland Fire Management program is predicated on the extraordinary coordination with our interagency, state, tribal, and local partners. These partnerships are vital to the DOI's success in carrying out its stewardship responsibilities, particularly fuels management work and essential restoration efforts. They are also integral to the interoperable approach that is the hallmark of the nation's response to wildfires.

Summary of the 2019 Fire Year and 2020 Outlook

Outside of Alaska, last year was relatively mild for wildfire activity. A total of 50,500 wildfires burned nearly 4.7 million acres of land, with both indicators being well below the 10-year average. However, more than half of the number of acres burned occurred in Alaska, far exceeding the ten-year average for the state. In fact, 70 percent of the nation's largest wildfires occurred in Alaska.

So far in 2020, we are seeing increased levels of wildfire activity in the Great Basin, Southern, and Rocky Mountain geographic areas. Based on the most recent "Seasonal Outlook" compiled by the National Interagency Fire Center's (NIFC) Predictive Services Program, we can expect potential for above normal fire activity in 2020. Following a dry fall and winter, drought has emerged and expanded across California, Oregon, and Nevada. Mountain snowpack has melted at a faster than average rate. Long-range forecast data predicts overall warmer and drier than average conditions this summer for the West. The combination of these factors is expected to lead to an above normal wildland fire potential across the West this year, especially for Northern California and Oregon. While NIFC's Predictive Services specialists closely analyze weather, vegetation, and other factors that affect fire activity, predictions can quickly change if weather and other factors alter current conditions.

The DOI's support of wildfire response in 2019 and early in 2020 extended beyond the nation's border to Australia, where 149 DOI personnel were deployed to support operations in one of the most devastating bushfire seasons in that nation's history. The United States has agreements in place with a number of international partners, including Australia, where reciprocal fire support provides a valuable backstop when activity increases and resources are limited; likewise, Australia and New Zealand deployed nearly the same number of firefighters to the United States in 2018 to support firefighting operations across northern California and the Northwest.

Reducing Wildfire Risk

While the interagency wildland fire community continues to plan for the challenges presented by COVID-19, DOI is also maintaining its focus on priority work to reduce wildfire risk. Last fiscal year (FY), DOI completed a total of 1.4 million acres of fuels management treatments, nearly double the benchmark required by the President's Executive Order (E.O.) 13855, and the Secretary's Order (S.O.) 3372 on promoting active land management to reduce wildfire risk. So far in FY 2020, DOI has completed

620,000 acres of treatments, which is approximately half of all planned treatments for the year and more than 80 percent of the benchmark established in the E.O.

In support of the E.O., the DOI has adopted more aggressive fuels management practices, moving to a risk-based approach to increase fuels treatments. Fuels treatments decrease invasive species, create strategic fuel breaks, and reduce threats near communities. Furthermore, the Administration has proposed new categorical exclusions (CX) under the National Environmental Policy Act to streamline routine timber salvage and pinyon juniper removal from sagebrush habitats, which will reduce future wildfire fuels loads on public lands.

The Bureau of Land Management (BLM) also recently released the Record of Decision for the Final Programmatic Environmental Impact Statement for Fuel Breaks in the Great Basin, which would support the construction of up to 11,000 miles of fuel breaks to control wildfires within a 223 million acre area spanning six western states (California, Idaho, Nevada, Oregon, Utah, and Washington). As part of the implementation, the BLM plans to use manual, chemical, and mechanical treatments, including prescribed fire, seeding, and targeted grazing, to construct fuel breaks along roads and rights-of-way on BLM-managed lands. The BLM recently initiated a planning effort which aims to complement these fuel breaks with future fuels reduction treatments.

The BLM also recently began the process of updating its forest management rules to increase efficiency and to improve the agency's ability to conduct active forest management on public lands. Active forest management contributes to reducing fuel loads and the potential for catastrophic wildfires that can devastate forests and surrounding communities. The proposed amendments streamline the procedures governing forest management decisions by eliminating the unnecessary post-decision protest period and allowing a single forest management decision to cover all forest management activities addressed in an environmental review document. This will help identify any issues earlier in the environmental review process, enhancing the BLM's ability to resolve them before implementing forest management activities.

In further support of the E.O. and S.O., the DOI Office of Wildland Fire is working with the National Association of State Foresters and the U.S. Forest Service to develop and implement the "Shared Wildfire Risk Mitigation (SWRM)" geospatial platform. The SWRM facilitates cross-jurisdictional mitigation planning through the collaborative identification of completed mitigation actions, planned mitigation actions, and values-at-risk. This synchronization enables a unified approach to reducing wildfire risk, having a broader and more impactful bearing on communities-at-large.

Additionally, the Wildland Fire Leadership Council (WFLC), an intergovernmental committee of Federal, state, tribal, county, and municipal officials, is assisting efforts to support the increased use of prescribed fire. While prescribed fire is an effective tool for reducing wildfire risk, the effects of the smoke from prescribed fires is not well-understood vis-à-vis the smoke generated from wildfires. In collaboration with the Centers for Disease Control and Protection and the Environmental Protection Agency,

WFLC is supporting a Health Impact Assessment to better understand this relationship and to help communicate the lower health risks of controlled prescribed fires compared to uncontrolled wildfires.

Finally, we continue to take meaningful steps to improve DOI's Wildland Fire Management program and have included a comprehensive workforce management proposal in the FY 2021 President's Budget request. *DOI's Plan to Transform the Firefighting Workforce* includes an increase of \$50 million to build a stable, professional, and permanent federal wildland fire workforce that is better aligned with the challenges of prolonged fire seasons and the need to more aggressively address fuels management to reduce wildfire risk. The proposal would benefit firefighter recruitment and retention across all DOI fire bureaus; it also supports tribal workforce development that is critical to protecting the economic stability of tribal lands and assets.

Planning for COVID-19

A critical element of wildland fire management is the continual assessment of risks and the development of durable mitigation measures. While we cannot fully eliminate the risks to the firefighting workforce associated with COVID-19, or with firefighting more generally, experts throughout the wildland fire management community are collaborating on guidance for how best to limit firefighter exposure to COVID-19 so that wildfires can be managed safely and effectively.

The planning to mitigate the spread of COVID-19 is being informed by broader coordination within the wildland fire management community and various standing interagency management organizations, including the Fire Executive Council (FEC), the Fire Management Board (FMB), the National Wildfire Coordinating Group (NWCG) and the National Multi-Agency Coordinating Group (NMAC). Each of these organizations play a critical role in assessing risk and developing recommendations for how best to limit the exposure of firefighters to COVID-19 before, after, and during operational periods.

Early in the COVID-19 response planning, three Area Command Teams were tasked by NMAC to coordinate with Federal, state, local and tribal health officials to develop Wildland Fire Response Plans for each geographic coordination area. The plans recommend strategic and tactical protocols to mitigate the potential impacts and exposure of firefighters to COVID-19. They consider key actions specific to those regions in order to maintain a continuity of operations for all aspects of wildfire response. The plans also include the potential effects of smoke emissions on COVID-19 on both firefighters and the public, which is an extension of the requirements for Air Resource Advisors on incidents, pursuant to the Dingell Act P.L. 116-9. All nine plans are complete and will be updated as new or refined recommendations are adopted, and local units are stepping these plans down to inform their respective operations.

Contributing to the network of COVID-19 mitigation planning is the work of the Medical and Public Health Advisory Team (MPHAT), which is an interagency group of medical

health experts from DOI, USDA Forest Service, and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. The MPHAT is tasked with coordinating with local health officials and providing recommendations on medical and public health measures that are determined to be most effective in protecting firefighters. To date, MPHAT has established protocols on screening for COVID-19 and guidance on the prevention and management of COVID-19 during wildland fire operations. The latter guidance broadly covers public health practices such as social distancing; cleaning and disinfection; personal hygiene and wellbeing; and the use of personal protective equipment.

In consideration of these and other recommendations, practical adjustments are being executed in our operational response. Our priority will remain safe, aggressive, initial, and extended attack. The DOI is on track to have the same number of firefighters as last season, which includes 4,500 temporary seasonal, career seasonal, and permanent employees. We will also have a complementary mix of firefighting aircraft, including access to 100 single engine airtankers, 370 helicopters, 18 scoopers and numerous other support aircraft. Collectively, we will use aircraft and our ground-based assets to the fullest extent to reduce the duration of wildfires and curb the number of wildfires that are managed for resource purposes.

Additionally, we plan to undertake other practical mitigation measures to support social distancing, such as transitioning as many basecamp administrative functions as possible to virtual or telework status; utilizing additional vehicles to travel to and from incidents; designing multiple smaller camps populated with fewer firefighters; limiting interactions between crews; and utilizing additional temporary facilities for crew quarters and staging for initial attack.

Taken together, these preparations and the work of the numerous interagency groups involved in COVID-19 mitigation planning will provide the foundation for coordinated and effective wildfire response. This commitment is essential to achieving overall success.

Conclusion

Thank you for your support of DOI's Wildland Fire Management program and your interest in the planning efforts for the current fire season. I welcome any questions that you may have.

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you, Ms. Kaster.

Let's go up to Alaska, to Norm McDonald, our Director of Fire and Aviation at the Forestry Division in Alaska.

STATEMENT OF NORM MCDONALD, ALASKA TYPE I TEAM INCIDENT COMMANDER AND CHIEF OF FIRE AND AVIATION, ALASKA DIVISION OF FORESTRY

Mr. McDONALD. Good morning, Chairman Murkowski, Ranking Member Manchin, and members of the Committee. My name is Norm McDonald, Chief of Fire and Aviation for the State of Alaska and the Incident Commander (IC) of the Alaska Incident Management Team which is one of 16 national response teams in the United States. The teams are geographically located and support wildland and all hazard management with the majority of the teams on the west side of the country with the primary mission of wildland fire response. Last summer I had the opportunity to meet with Senator Murkowski when she visited our incident command post on McKinley Fire in Willow, Alaska. She and I know many of you have witnessed firsthand the devastation wildland fire can have on our communities and also the scope and response it takes to manage these complex incidents.

What an incident looks like, a normal incident on a typical year, our complex fires will consist of over thousands of firefighters and support staff. The incident command posts are built to support the firefighting efforts, including a large mess hall, dining facilities, where we feed thousands of firefighters a day. We hold daily briefings, consist traditionally of large groups gathered to get assignments, fire weather, fire behavior updates and the safety concerns of the day. We hold cooperators and public meetings that host hundreds of residents gathered to get updates on the incident, to ask questions and share information. And of course, the firefighting effort, boots on the ground, includes our crews, engines, aircraft and heavy equipment. Those incident command posts are designed to support those efforts.

The organizational model we use for incident management is based on large groups of people in close contact settings. That goes against every CDC recommendation that is out there since the start of the COVID pandemic. The fires are dirty. There's limited hygiene. The work is arduous. The days are long. There's often little rest between incidents. Smoke exposure and the grind of the season wears down the immune system, so even in the best of times it's difficult to maintain a healthy workforce. So for us, the concerns of COVID are real, and we're aware of the risks.

Of the questions being asked of what are we doing to reduce risk and adapt to the COVID environment, our priority is always firefighter and public safety, every fire. And this year we're looking at that from two different fronts, both the fire hazards and risks and the COVID hazard and risks. And we're asking what can we do to reduce that risk and reduce exposure. Each team is working to adapt to the new environment. We're developing and sharing best management practices through weekly calls and updates and lessons learned.

Just yesterday we met with the Southwest Team who is assigned to the Sawtooth Fire in Arizona. We share their after-action review

findings, and we just take that knowledge in every fire to improve on where we started. We've conducted simulation training to address COVID-related issues that we may be faced with in fire camps. We've practiced and tested the use of virtual platforms in lieu of our standard, large group meetings and briefings, and we've adopted the "Module of One" concept through the family unit where each section is a stand-alone unit. Part of our strategy in our strategic planning process will focus on development of strategies and alternatives that use tactics with the focus of reducing exposure, not only to wildland fire, but also to hazards of COVID.

Some of the challenges that we're going to be facing this year and one of them is the very real issue of a reduced number of resources and responders that make up our incident management teams. Part of this is due to local government using their responders, who traditionally go with us, as part of the COVID response and there's the fears of if they respond out of their community, the quarantine requirements involved with that. There's high-risk category members on our teams. A lot of our teams are made up of retirees. They come back each season to augment our workforce during busy seasons, and they're evaluating the safety of their response this summer.

This year there's an emphasis on initial attack which is a good practice in this environment, but the results are resources are being held back to support that mission. We have seen some inconsistencies regarding direction when it comes to testing and PPE requirements, and this provides some challenges in messaging of our firefighters. We've seen travel times delayed in Alaska. We're up to four days, so the reduction of flights around the country is a concern.

I'll close out by saying I'm really honored to be here and truly appreciate the opportunity to testify today. I speak for myself and many of the ICs I've worked with this spring, and I'll tell you there's no one saying we can't do this. They're just asking and working on how we can do this safely. So I want to thank you for your support and working with us to ensure we are prepared for this season. I thank you.

[The prepared statement of Mr. McDonald follows:]

**Testimony of Norm McDonald, Alaska Type I Team Incident Commander and
Chief of Fire and Aviation, Alaska Division of Forestry
Submitted to the U.S. Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources
June 7, 2020**

Good morning, Chairman Murkowski, Ranking Member Manchin, and Members of the Committee. My name is Norm McDonald, Chief of Fire and Aviation for the Division of Forestry, Alaska Department of Natural Resources, and I serve as one of the Incident Commanders (IC) on the Alaska Type I Incident Management Team (IMT). I'm a member of the Alaska State Fire Chiefs Association and involved in several national wildland fire committees including the Western State Fire Managers, the Incident Positions and Standards Committee under the National Wildland Fire Coordinating Group, and the Northwest Compact which provides for state and international assistance in fire response. I appreciate the opportunity to speak with you today and submit written testimony as the Committee examines the outlook for the remainder of the 2020 fire year, the complex issues surrounding Incident Management Teams (IMTs) and the management of large fires, and the unique challenges presented by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Incident Management Team Organization and Operation

As you may be aware, there are sixteen national Type I IMTs that are available for wildland fire and all-risk response anywhere in the country.¹ The Teams are on a rotation list and spend seven days at a time as the "ready" Team should a request be made. The next Team on the rotation list bumps into the open lead slot to ensure a Team can always respond when requested. A Team is composed of approximately 50 members and can scale up or down depending on the needs of an incident. The Team has a Command Staff that consists of an IC, Deputy IC, Safety Officer, Liaison Officer, Public Information Officer, and the General Staff consisting of four Section Leads that include: Operations, Planning, Logistics, and Finance (Figure 1). The sections are divided further into Units with specific functions and Unit Leaders. Each section and unit focus on their specific tasks to meet the overall objectives established for the Team. The Team works for a suppression or protection agency with input from the jurisdictional agency (landowner or manager).

A typical fire camp has an Incident Command Post (ICP) and satellite forward operating bases, "spike" camps, aviation bases or helibases and various support functions located near the incident. Often these functions are spread out over a relatively large geographic area, but all are conveniently located to support the incident. The number of firefighters and support staff can swell to several thousand on a large Type I incident. A common description of the operation can be compared to building and running a small city, that sprung up over a few days. With all the issues and challenges you can imagine, while fighting fire.

The typical day starts early with breakfast followed by the operations briefing for all personnel, which utilizes the Incident Action Plan (IAP) that is produced daily. This briefing is commonly held in-person at the ICP and is broadcasted over the radio to all line personnel who may be spiked

¹ Per National Interagency Fire Center (NIFC) webpage. There are additional Type I and Type II Teams that the various geographic coordinating groups sponsor for use in their jurisdictions.

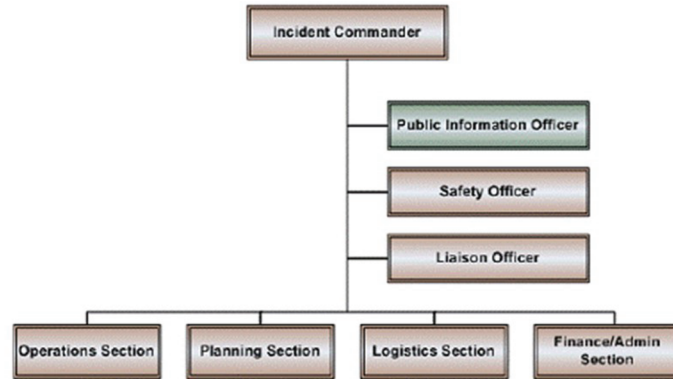


Figure 1. Basic Incident Command Team structure.

at various locations on the fire. A mid-morning there is a coordinator meeting at the ICP that is attended by local government, fire departments, sheriff departments, utility companies, agency administrators and other key partners in the response. Operations on the fire are ongoing and many incidents run a day shift and night shift. Dinner is usually provided in camp and this is another high-risk period for the gathering of many personnel. Public meetings are held as needed, and usually are attended by many people from local communities.

The overlay of the COVID-19 pandemic on this environment creates many new challenges to everything we do, and I'd like to describe some of the concerns that Teams from around the country have been identifying, discussing and encountering as the fire season unfolds.

Resource Mobilization Concerns

Before a Team can engage on a large fire, they need resources, and the mobilization of resources from around the country is a concern. The Incident Command System (ICS) works well in normal times to draw resources from areas of the country not experiencing fire activity, to locations where they are needed. Even with the mitigation measures that have been developed and put in place, mobilization will not be as prompt as in years past. Resources (crews, equipment, single resource staff) move by both road and air, and each of these methods present their own challenges. To help maintain social distancing, the National Interagency Coordination Center (NICC) jet may only transport three 20 person crews at a time as opposed to the normal five. In 2019, Alaska brought 122 crews to the state during a very active fire year. To move the same number of crews into the state this year, 16 more jet trips would be needed to accomplish the task! NICC should consider putting a second jet on contract to help facilitate crew and personnel movement nationwide.²

² NICC has actively been discussing adding a second contract jet to facilitate crew and personnel movement and will have a second jet on Call When Needed (CWN) contract by the same vendor if needed.

A similar concern for Team mobilization is also present. Many IMTs depend on retired fire staff to fill a portion of their rosters, and there is uncertainty if this higher risk demographic will fully participate this year. Participation will likely depend on the location of the deployment, and if it is a high-risk location for COVID-19. Many may opt out and not be available for an assignment. This would degrade Team capabilities if replacements are not available and there is a short supply of qualified and experienced staff for many functions.

Suppression agencies also depend on local cooperator assistance, but some fire department are keeping a tight hold on their staff and there is concern that this workforce will not be allowed to mobilize as freely compared to previous years. Along these same lines, most agencies are practicing the “family unit” concept with crews and modules to limit staff exposure. While this is a good concept, it can be practiced too aggressively and limit the mobility and availability during times of high fire activity or large incidents. No one mitigation measure is enough or the right one every time, and a full range of mitigation protocols will be required to help address these concerns and to ensure resources are available.

To this point, testing is still not widely available in all locations, but it can be an important part of an overall mitigation strategy. In Alaska, all incoming personnel are being asked to take a COVID-19 test upon arrival. For federal employees, this is voluntary, but an expectation memo is attached to each resource order outlining the expectation along with other mitigation measures that are being employed. Testing occurs at either of the two major jetports upon arrival, and results are available in 24-48 hours. The incoming staff are asked to quarantine at their billets until test results are provided. Provisions have been made for urgent demands for resources on the fireline, a test still occurs, but staff deploy as needed. Any positive results will be notified and subsequently isolated and cared for while contact tracing occurs.

Alaska is fortunate to have a turn-key testing arrangement in place that was developed by our state Health and Social Services (HSS) agency and the Unified Command Team that Alaska has deployed to address COVID-19 in the state. This service will also assist with any COVID-19 cases in the fire ranks and will transport, care for, isolate, house and feed any firefighters that come down with COVID-19 while on assignment in Alaska. The medical unit on the fire will provide initial care and transport to a handoff location while following all Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) and related protocols. This is a unique arrangement, but it will help to allow Teams to stay focused on what they know best, fighting fire, while third party medical units care for staff infected with COVID-19. These services are provided at no cost to the sending agencies.

At the national level, the National Wildfire Coordination Committee (NWCG), Emergency Medical Committee has recently published the Medical Unit COVID-19 Concept of Operations Plan to help provide a baseline of information and protocols for addressing this topic.³ Individual jurisdictions can further refine this approach to meet their local needs and capabilities.

³ A copy of this document is available at this link: <https://www.nwcg.gov/committees/emergency-medical-committee/medical-unit-covid19-cop>

Incident Management Concerns

Aside from the mobilization topics, there are specific concerns at the incident level that also need discussion. Here is a running list of some of the most common topics and is by no means a complete list:

- PPE- availability and use
- Team In-Coming and Out-Going Briefings
- Personnel Check-In/Out - at the incident upon arrival and departure
- Camp Life- sleeping areas, feeding, common use facilities
- Vehicle and Aviation Use- fixed-wing and helicopter
- Operations Briefing
- Cooperator and Public Meetings

Mr. Geissler's oral and written testimony, on behalf of the National Association of State Foresters, provides a full discussion of the guidance documents developed at the national level to assist local geographic areas, Teams, and suppression agencies. The goal of this effort was to provide common operating recommendations and protocols that could be further refined to meet specific circumstances and needs of agencies around the country. In Alaska, this work complemented our own efforts to develop more detailed plans and protocols for our specific work environments. My agency established an internal "short" IMT to develop these plans and documents, including a webpage to provide staff and incoming resources a ready list of up-to-date information concerning our approach to COVID-19.⁴ I'd encourage members and staff to visit the site. It is a good one-stop place to find very timely and usable information including the Division of Forestry COVID-19 Handbook⁵ (Figure2).

Incident Management Mitigations and Protocols

Each of the items listed above have been addressed through several different methods which may include: Mitigation Plans, Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs), Best Management Practices (BMPs) and/or Protocols and Continuity of Operations Plans (COOPs). Briefly, here are some of the current mitigations for each of the listed items above, and it should be noted, this is not a complete list of measures:

- Currently the availability of PPE has improved in most locations. The fire caches have been procuring supplies, and training for use has been developed and provided. Many situations will allow the use of cloth masks as opposed to N-95 medical grade masks. These higher-grade masks will be used only in specific situations and in medical response.
- In some situations masks will not be practicable, such as on the fireline in certain circumstances, but when in vehicles, aircraft or other close quarters, they should be worn unless there is an overriding safety concern, such as clear communication over flight

⁴ Alaska Division of Forestry COVID-19 Response Tools: <http://forestry.alaska.gov/covid>

⁵ Division of Forestry COVID-19 Handbook: http://forestry.alaska.gov/Assets/pdfs/covid/DOF%20COVID-19%20Handbook_version%204.pdf

intercoms or radios. Each situation will need personnel to use their judgement and training to determine the best actions for the situation.



Figure 2. DOF COVID-19 Handbook Cover

- In and Out briefings for Teams will be conducted using Microsoft Teams or other similar virtual meeting platforms to limit contact. Documents such as the Delegation of Authority, Leaders Intent and the Wildland Fire Decision Support System planning tool can be communicated and signed electronically. When in-person meetings are needed, social distancing and appropriate use of PPE should occur.
- Checking in/out of incidents can also be accommodated via remote methods and will limit contact between personnel.
- Camp management has several challenges but spacing out staff and resources will be a key method for limiting contact outside of “family units”. Sleeping areas will be spread out, individual tents and the use of more spike camps will be utilized to keep staff from congregating in base camps or the ICP area. Food vendors will provide meals in single serve containers and the standard mess tent area will not be used. Units will eat as family groups and practice appropriate protocols for hygiene and social distancing. Extra wash stations and shower units will be provided where feasible.
- The various types of meetings that occur daily will use a variety of protocols to reduce person-to-person gatherings. Many public meetings are already webcasted live, and various social media platforms will be utilized to provide timely and accurate information. The daily morning briefing can be webcasted, broadcasted on the radio net

(already a SOP) and the IAP downloaded by scanning a QR-code as opposed to distributing paper copies.

- Incidents always have several safety officers and it has been suggested that extra safety officers be put in-place to focus solely on COVID-19. They can help remind personnel to utilize the mitigations and protocols established and provide specific COVID-19 safety messages during the daily operations briefing and in the IAP.
- IMT staff will also spread out between and within their work sections and units. Some functions may be accomplished by telecommuting.

Adaptability and Continuous Improvement

A range of tools and options exist to help mitigate and manage in the COVID-19 environment, however even in the best of circumstances, this will be a challenging task. The key to successfully managing this issue will be adaptability and learning from others. To this end, there is an aggressive sharing by suppression agencies through After-Action Reviews (AARs), during action reviews, and lessons learned of what is working, and what is not working. There is a national website for posting these informal and formal recommendations and reports to rapidly share this information to peers, managers and personnel working at all levels and functions. This includes staff in our dispatch centers, warehouse and fire caches, administrative offices, aviation units and frontline firefighters. It takes a team to successfully respond to wildland fire and it will take a team to accomplish the same for COVID-19.

Conclusion

Thank you for the opportunity to appear before the Committee today on behalf the Alaska Division of Forestry, Alaska Type I Team, and other Incident Management Teams from around the country. I have tried to provide you with a good representation of the issues being discussed and raised by team members, fire managers and leaders and the rank and file employees that comprise our agencies. We all appreciate the support and work this Committee has accomplished to help us manage this fire season and look forward to working with you to continue to address these important topics.

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you, Mr. McDonald. We certainly appreciate those words.

Let's now wrap up the panel with comments from Mr. George Geissler from the Washington State Forestry Division.

STATEMENT OF GEORGE GEISSLER, WASHINGTON STATE FORESTER ON BEHALF OF THE NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF STATE FORESTERS

Mr. GEISSLER. Good morning, Chairman Murkowski, Ranking Member Manchin and members of the Committee. I appreciate the opportunity to speak with you today and submit written testimony as this Committee examines the outlook for the remainder of the 2020 fire year, the complex issues surrounding wildland fire management and the unique challenges presented by the COVID-19 pandemic. NASF represents the state forestry agencies in all 50 states, eight U.S. territories and the District of Columbia. These agencies provide a significant portion of the overall wildland fire suppression effort nationally in terms of resources, personnel, capacity and funds. As was stated earlier, just last year there were 50,477 wildland fires that burned nearly 4.7 million acres across all jurisdictions. State forestry and local fire service responded to the majority of those wildfires, 79 percent.

This year emergency responders across the U.S. are impacted by COVID-19. Many state forestry agencies have been engaged to varying degrees since early March supporting response efforts alongside of our state emergency managers, health departments, fire service and National Guard. Some of these state agencies were also involved in fighting wildfires during this same period. COVID-19 is posing significant challenges for wildland fire professionals. Local and volunteer firefighters have been overwhelmed by COVID-19 response. Some wildland fire agencies struggled to hire and training for firefighters has been difficult. We lost valuable time to conduct hazard risk reduction work and initially there was a lack of understanding regarding how to manage wildland fires during the pandemic. State and federal agencies have developed operating procedures for suppressing wildfires while reducing wild-fire exposure to COVID-19.

You have heard from the previous speakers and can find in my written testimony how an effort managed by the National Multi-Agency Coordinating Group has established a foundation of baseline protocols and best management practices. This has not been easy, nor is it complete. Protocols have been laid out as living documents and are expected to be improved throughout the year as we learn what is working and what does not through after-action reviews done by our firefighters. We are building a bridge as we cross it.

On the fire line we cannot be distracted and must maintain our focus on the ever-present danger and risk of wildland fire. COVID-19 does not change these dangers and we cannot jeopardize safety in attempts to lower COVID risk. If something changes one risk for another, we must figure out better protocols. There are literally hundreds of best management practices developed relating to the logistics of fire alone such as camps, firefighter feeding and care. We're implementing strategies such as physical distancing on fire

lines and in camps and we've identified COVID-19 PPE requirements. We've also worked to evaluate suppression strategies to further limit firefighter exposure. We look to the potential of more dispersed, strategically placed crews but we also know that rapid detection and initial attack to keep fires small is the best way to minimize the number of personnel assigned to a specific fire. To accomplish this, aviation resources are critical. Both state and federal agencies are increasing their number of on-call and exclusive-use fixed wing and motor aircraft.

We appreciate the Committee holding this hearing and the opportunity to highlight the coordination and cooperation of the inter-agency planning efforts to address wildland fire amidst the COVID-19 pandemic this fire year. We're encouraged by this Committee's leadership and advocacy efforts with the Administration to help secure PPE for federal, state and local wildland firefighters. NASF continues to advocate that emergency supplemental funding to state fire assistance and volunteer fire assistance is the ideal mechanism for ensuring that this need is met quickly and easily. Because the funding assistance that was provided in the CARES Act is not available for state wildland firefighters and funding available to local and volunteer firefighters is through a competitive grant process—significant time and resources to apply. NASF has also requested funding from Congress to states to assist agencies in securing wildland aviation contracts. Also, in the long-term, we urge you to consider the effects of COVID-19 pandemic is having on state budgets. It's critical that emergency response capabilities that are provided by state forestry agencies for all hazard response is maintained and not diminished by impending cuts to state budgets.

Thank you for your time and the opportunity to speak with the Committee. I look forward to your questions.

[The prepared statement of Mr. Geissler follows:]

**Testimony of George Geissler, Washington State Forester
On Behalf of the National Association of State Foresters
Submitted to the U.S. Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources
Friday June 5, 2020**

Good morning, Chairman Murkowski, Ranking Member Manchin, and Members of the Committee. My name is George Geissler, State Forester and Deputy, Wildland Fire and Forest Health/Resiliency, Washington Department of Natural Resources, Past President of the National Association of State Foresters (NASF), Chair of the NASF Wildland Fire Committee, and member of the Wildland Fire Leadership Council (WFLC). I appreciate the opportunity to speak with you today and submit written testimony as the Committee examines the outlook for the remainder of the 2020 fire year, the complex issues surrounding wildland fire management, and the unique challenges presented by the COVID-19 pandemic.

NASF represents the directors of the state forestry agencies in all 50 states, eight U.S. territories, and the District of Columbia. State Foresters deliver technical and financial assistance to private land owners, along with protection of forest health, water and wildfire for more than two-thirds of the nation's forests, as well as partner with federal agencies through authorities like Good Neighbor Authority in managing and protecting the nation's federal forests. While the duties of state agencies vary from state to state, all share common forest management and protection missions and most have statutory responsibilities to provide wildland fire protection on all lands, public and private.

State Contribution

State forestry agencies contribute a significant portion of the overall wildland fire suppression effort nationally in terms of resources, personnel, capacity, and funds. Collectively, States reported spending \$1.9 billion on fire suppression, prevention, and mitigation in 2018, with \$1.4 billion spent on suppression alone. The overall federal cost of fire suppression for 2018 was \$3.1 billion. In 2018, there were 8,080 State personnel (including overhead and crews) mobilized through the National Interagency Coordination Center. Of those State personnel, 6,026, or nearly 75%, were mobilized to federal wildfires.¹ State forestry agencies also provide local governments and volunteer fire departments with access to fire and emergency response resources, which in 2018, included 93,656 firefighters, 91,940 fire engines, 2,851 dozers, and 620 aircraft. In 2019, 50,477 wildland fires burned nearly 4.7 million acres.² State and local agencies respond to the majority – 79% – of these wildfires across all jurisdictions.²

State Foresters work closely with Conservation Districts, Mayors, local and County Governments, Tribal and Federal partners across the US to deliver forestry programs and wildfire protection on a National scale. NASF is a key partner in the development and implementation of the National

¹ Statistics posted above were gathered from the Interagency Fire and Aviation Management Web Applications (FAMWEB) system, which includes the Situation Report and Incident Status Summary (ICS-209) programs. The statistics presented here are intended to provide a national perspective of annual fire activity but may not reflect official figures for a specific agency.

² National Interagency Fire Center, Historical Wildland Fire Summaries, pg. 8. Last accessed March 4, 2020 at https://www.predictiveservices.nifc.gov/intelligence/2019_statsumm/intro_summary19.pdf.

Cohesive Wildland Fire Management Strategy (Cohesive Strategy), which provides the roadmap for interagency wildland fire management across the country and allows diverse stakeholders to work collaboratively using the best science to achieve resilient landscapes, fire-adapted communities, and effective wildfire response. NASF is also a key partner and member of the WFLC, an intergovernmental committee of Federal, State, Tribal, county, and municipal government officials convened by the Secretaries of the Interior, Agriculture, Defense, and Homeland Security dedicated to consistent implementation of wildland fire policies, goals, and management activities. The Council provides strategic recommendations to help ensure policy coordination, accountability and effective implementation of Federal wildland fire management policy and related long-term strategies through collaboration.

COVID-19 Response

The COVID-19 pandemic has posed significant challenges for wildland fire professionals, including, but certainly not limited to, setting standard operating procedure for suppressing wildfires. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's guidance for social distancing are not necessarily compatible with the existing systems for addressing wildland fire. From training and recertifications, to public evacuation plans, to feeding, sheltering, and transporting firefighters: nearly every aspect of wildfire suppression operations require adjustment in order to avoid COVID-19 exposure and outbreaks. If an outbreak were to occur in a fire camp, for example, it would not only endanger firefighters, their families, and other community members, but it would also impact the nation's emergency response capabilities.

Realizing the need to address this issue, the National Multi-Agency Coordinating (NMAC) Group [activated three Area Command Teams](#) on March 17, 2020 and tasked them with developing COVID-19 Wildland Fire Response Plans for each of the wildfire geographic areas across the country. These plans ensure there is a standardized approach to managing wildland fires on an interagency basis that protects life, property, and resources and reduces exposure to COVID-19. The Area Command Teams worked with the chair of each Geographic Area Coordinating Group and States engaged in this process through the Coordinating Groups.

These [ten geographic COVID-19 Wildland Fire Response Plans](#) were completed in early May and include best management practices and planning tools for State and local wildland fire managers that can be tailored to their specific needs. The plans' general implementation strategies strive to maintain firefighter capabilities for initial and extended attack, coordination and support functions, and safety protocols. Many states and regions, such as my own Region 6 consisting of Washington and Oregon, have taken these geographic plans even further to provide greater, more locally relevant, strategies and practices to aid our firefighters on the ground. Given the constant influx of new information, these plans are considered living documents and will be updated and adapted as needed.

NMAC has also provided an [Interagency Checklist for Mobilization of Resources, assessments on incident feeding options for this year](#),³ and [Airtanker Temporary Home Base Direction](#). Additional

³ Developed by the U.S. Forest Service National Technology and Development Program and interagency experts. See <https://www.nifc.gov/nice/administrative/nmac/NMAC2020-19.pdf>

resources for multiagency use were developed and updated by the National Wildfire Coordinating Group (NWCG) Emergency Medical Committee. The [Infectious Disease Guidance for Wildland Fire Incidents](#) provides recommendations for Incident Management Teams (IMTs) to be equipped to prevent, plan for, recognize, and respond to infectious outbreaks. Guidance and tools such as these are helpful in providing a consistent interagency message while still allowing local and State agencies the space to develop protocols that makes sense for their specific circumstances.

Accounts from those involved in the NMAC COVID-19 Wildfire Response Plan process, as well as other COVID-19 response efforts, have reflected positively on the quality of interagency coordination and communication. In development of these plans, [lessons learned](#) by the Area Command Team members were collected. Notable from their report, was the desire to develop interagency messaging to employees and the public around how the added complexities of COVID-19 are being handled and the potential ramifications of those risk trade-offs. Interagency leadership at the Federal and State level have messaged on the risk management focused tactics for the year, indicating response would focus on strong initial attack to rapidly contain fires and limit firefighter exposure. Managed fire has been largely tabled as a landscape tool due to the potential enhanced dangers to fire personnel and the public caused by the pandemic. It is important to acknowledge and message the realities of COVID-19 may in some ways temporarily impair our ability to further some aspects of the Cohesive Strategy, namely allowing fire to play a natural role and adapting to living with fire. While shifting efforts is necessary this year, communicating to the public those objectives will still be critical to reduce wildfire risk in the future and must be a firm commitment from all in the wildland community and Congress. NASF thanks the Committee for this opportunity to publicly detail the work being done and continued interagency commitment to manage these enhanced risks as well as our nation's forests.

Due to the increased emphasis on aerial resources this year, specific guidance has been released to ensure the safe and strategic use of these resources. NWCG's National Interagency Aviation Committee in coordination with the Fire Management Board and NMAC developed and [released](#) the [NWCG Standards for Aviation Operations](#). NMAC has also released [direction on surge capacity Type 1 and Type 2 helicopter mobilization](#), which details the 36 surge capacity helicopters added by the USDA Forest Service (Forest Service) to the National Exclusive Use Helicopter fleet. They are available for 90-day contracts and will be located at initial host bases identified by the Geographic Areas. Reassignment of these resources will be determined strategically by examining the Predictive Services outlook by Geographic Area, National and Geographic Area Preparedness Levels, National and Geographic Area Priorities.

Since March, wildland fire managers have learned how best to implement COVID-19 protocols and practices. Some initial guidance was found to be impractical or to increase risk. For instance, simple changes, such as driving separate vehicles to an incident, can make parking at an incident difficult and cause response delays. There is also concern that more response vehicles on the road may increase the number of traffic accidents. Translating medical guidance on mask wearing to the field has also been a challenge. Complaints about wearing masks on the fire line was common, due to inhibiting communication, breathing, and situational awareness. Oftentimes these complaints describe personnel functioning within their module, which is similar to a household, where the guidance had not suggested mask use. Clearly communicating these nuances has surfaced as a need based on reports from the field. These post fire reports have been shared widely

across the wildland fire community, including internationally.⁴ It is through this open information sharing across all agencies that improves our management practices.

While some reports have highlighted issues in the application of these protocols, other reports relay that other methods are successfully keeping wildland firefighters safe. A firefighter presented with a fever during screening at the end of an incident in Utah and though the test did eventually come back negative, they were able to successfully test and quarantine the firefighter and isolate their engine module while they awaited the results. In my own state of Washington, DNR has established screening protocols and we have identified a COVID-19 positive firefighter and through tracing and isolation managed to prevent the spread of the virus in that crew module. In Florida, two IMT deployments and a third fire which required the deployment of multiple strike teams resulted in a total of 234 personnel tested, all of which came back negative. These reports highlight the protocols in place are being executed properly, and so far, have appeared to be successful. All agencies need to continue to support these efforts by ensuring firefighters have the proper equipment to implement safety protocols.

We appreciate the leadership from Chairman Murkowski in sending a [letter](#) to Secretaries Bernhardt and Perdue requesting adoption of an aggressive initial attack strategy and ensuring sufficient aircraft are available in the 2020 fire season. Attacking fires early with aerial resources helps minimize the use of personnel on-the-ground, where social distancing becomes increasingly difficult, particularly when reacting quickly in emergency situations. When use of ground resources becomes necessary, it is critical that sufficient inventory of personal protective equipment (PPE) and testing kits are made available to ensure the safety of our wildland firefighters, as recommended in a [letter](#) by Chairman Lisa Murkowski, Senator Tom Udall, and Ranking Member Joe Manchin to Vice President Mike Pence. NASF has submitted similar [recommendations](#) to Chairman Murkowski to provide states support for both PPE and aerial resources for aggressive initial attack capabilities to assist in safeguarding fire personnel, communities, and property through this challenging fire year.

Our Nation's Forests and Wildfire

Fire is a natural phenomenon for nearly every forest ecosystem in this country. Fire has shaped the occurrence and distribution of different ecosystems for centuries, simultaneously impacting the human and natural communities that live in and around those forests. Over the past century, a culture of fire suppression has unfortunately removed the natural role of fire from many fire-dependent landscapes. This culture, combined with less active forest management in many areas, has led to the build-up of hazardous fuels to historic levels. In our attempts to manage wildfires away, we've inadvertently made our forests more prone to catastrophic wildfire.

Federal, State, and local fire managers have learned the critical role of hazardous fuels management in mitigating wildfire impacts. Solely focusing on wildfire suppression and ignoring proactive forest management does not lead to fewer wildfires in the long run; the fuel continues to build up to the point where eventually wildfires become unmanageable. The task for wildfire

⁴ See [Wildland Fire Management under COVID-19, Brief 1, Review of Materials](#)

managers is to manage the risk to communities and ecosystems in both the short- and long-terms by implementing a coordinated and science-based program of fuels reduction, fire suppression, and community planning.

Hazardous fuels reduction has two main components: prescribed fire and silvicultural treatments, such as “thinning.” Both activities have a beneficial impact on mitigating wildfire emissions by reducing combustible material in the forests and allowing fire to play its natural role in the ecosystem. In many parts of the country, especially on federal lands which have not seen regular management, forest stands are too dense to conduct prescribed fire and thus forest thinning is a crucial first step in managing hazardous fuels. Following a harvest treatment, prescribed fire can be an important tool to maintaining the investment of a more healthy and resilient forest and minimizing the risk of catastrophic wildfire.

Wildland fire response is one of the most challenging facets of our jobs. As State Foresters, we believe we need to be doing significantly more hazardous fuels reduction across all ownerships – public and private and across this country. We are committed to continue working towards this goal. Such treatments allow us to put fire on the landscape at times and under conditions that minimize impacts, including smoke emissions. These treatments reduce fuel loading in the forests, so that when wildfires inevitably occur, they burn with less intensity, reduced spread, and fewer smoke impacts on communities and firefighters.

Where forests of different ownerships exist in close proximity to each other, it is critical that decisions about suppression and fuels treatments get made in a collaborative and cooperative way. This is especially true for federal lands on which fire management often has a direct impact to adjacent state and private lands and/or communities.

Fuel Treatments and Active Management

America’s federally managed forestlands face serious threats. Entire landscapes are experiencing deteriorating health and uncharacteristic ecological change as a result of insects and disease, catastrophic wildfire, and other forest health stressors. Forest health threats know no boundaries and there is an urgent need for more active management on these landscapes in order to protect both public and privately-owned forests and the communities that depend upon them. State Foresters are responsible for protecting the health and socio-economic benefits of forest resources within their jurisdictions; what happens on federal forests has a direct bearing on their ability to fulfill those responsibilities.

Intentional management is necessary to improve the resilience of federal forest lands. In regions with a mixture of ownerships, the prerequisite for success is landscape-level coordination, which includes the full participation of federal partners.

A great example of this interagency cooperation leading to on-the-ground decision-making related to wildfire, ecosystems, and hazard risk reduction which was brought to my attention by my State Forester counterpart in Alaska, Chris Maisch, is the Nenana Ridge Experimental Fuels Treatment Research Project, funded by the Joint Fire Science Program. This project was designed to quantify the effects of fuels reduction treatments on fire behavior and post-fire vegetation dynamics in

Alaska black spruce forests. Mechanical (e.g., shearblading) and manual (e.g., thinning) fuel treatments are commonly used by Alaska fire managers and agencies for mitigating fire risk. However, prior to this experiment, there was little documentation of the actual effect of different fuel treatments on fire behavior. The Nenana Ridge project began in 2006 with the preparation of eight 1-acre treatment blocks with two controls. A prescribed burn was conducted on five of the blocks in June of 2009. The primary objective of the project was to characterize the effectiveness of the treatments in reducing fire intensity. Fire-proof digital sensors and video cameras were used to document the burn, in addition to measurements of vegetation, fuel beds, and fuel moistures, which allowed scientists to compare fire behavior between control plots and fuel treatment plots. All treatments that burned resulted in significant reductions in fire intensity and spread.

This study was the first of its kind testing the effect of four fuel treatments on fire intensity in the boreal forests of Alaska. The anecdotal ($n = 1$) evidence suggests that all treatments significantly reduced fire intensity. The thinning treatment modified fire behavior while maintaining an aesthetic that closely matched the original forest stand; it also led to the lowest peak heating rates and was the most effective in stopping fire spread. The shear-blade treatments produced the lowest air temperatures with some indication that grass loads that could develop in years subsequent to the treatment could facilitate fire spread across the entire treatment area.

Subsequent fuels treatments in Alaska were tested by wildfire during the Eagle Trail (2010), Funny River (2014), Card Street (2015), and Nenana Ridge (2015) fires. In all documented cases the Alaskan fuel breaks changed fire behavior as the fire moved through untreated wildland fuels as an active crown fire and dropped to a surface fire in the treatment areas.⁵

I would like to highlight an example of an Alaska fuel break project which resulted in a successful burn out operation on the Shovel Creek fire near Fairbanks in the summer of 2019. The fuel break was created using shear blade by dozers and a windrow/burn treatment. The shear-blade work was done in the winter of 2007. Burning of the windrowed piles was accomplished in late fall 2009 after curing for a few years. The curing of the fuels was a smoke management technique to lessen smoke impacts during the burning as the cured fuels combust more completely and quickly. The line is over 22 miles in length and runs along a ridge between the outskirts of Fairbanks and open country to the north of town.

[This operation secured the north flank of the Shovel Creek Fire](#), which was a Type I incident, and protected over \$187.5 million in private property. This is a conservative estimate as it only includes parcels in the Level III and II evacuation areas. The costs were covered by a combination of State Fire Assistance Wildland Urban Interface (WUI) grants, which are awarded through a competitive process with emphasis on hazard fuel reduction, information and education, and community and homeowner action, American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) stimulus funding and other funds, following the large 2004 and 2005 fire seasons.

And every state has ongoing efforts to improve the resiliency of our forests and provide opportunities for our firefighters by implementing and evaluating effectiveness. In a recently

⁵ Final Report: Evaluating the Effectiveness of Fuel Treatments in Alaska JFSP Project 14-5-01-27
https://www.frames.gov/documents/alaska/docs/little_et_al_2018_EvaluatingEffectivenessFuelTreatmentsAlaska_jfsp-14-5-01-27.pdf

published research paper, scientists evaluating fuel treatments across all lands found that not only was burn severity significantly lower within the footprint of past fuel treatments than in untreated forest but in Washington.⁶

- Fuel reduction treatments that combined mechanical thinning from below with post-harvest broadcast burns were particularly effective.
- Placement of fuel reduction treatments mattered. Burn severity was significantly lower in fuel treatments positioned on leeward slopes (sheltered from wind, and typically drier and warmer than windward slopes).

With each fuel treatment and with each fire, we learn and we get better.

Communities at Risk

More people living in fire-prone landscapes, high fuel loads, drought, and deteriorating forest health are among the factors that led most state foresters to identify wildland fire as a priority issue in their Forest Action Plans. Forest Action Plans are statewide forest resource strategies and assessments of trees and forests within their boundaries, regardless of ownership. Developed in cooperation with diverse groups of stakeholders, these plans serve as roadmaps to implement strategies to conserve working forest landscapes, protect forests from harm, and enhance public benefits from trees and forests.

We now grapple with increasingly expensive and complex wildland fires – fires that frequently threaten human life and property. A community is considered at risk from wildland fire if it lies within the WUI as defined in the federal register (FR Vol. 66, No. 3, Pages 751-754, January 4, 2001). A community is at reduced risk if it has satisfied at least one of the following:

- (1) Recognized as a Firewise community or equivalent, or
- (2) Enacted a mitigation/fire prevention ordinance, or
- (3) Reduced or appropriately maintained hazardous fuels treatments on lands identified as high-priority in its Community Wildfire Protection Plan (CWPP) or equivalent plan.

Although the number of Communities at Risk (CAR) has increased over the years due to more people moving into, and more communities being built in the WUI, there has been significant progress towards reducing the risk of wildland fire for these communities. In 2007, NASF identified 51,612 CAR, with 70,399 identified in NASF's 2018 Communities at Risk Report. Since 2006, the number of CAR covered by a CWPP or equivalent has increased from 3,264 to 17,857, a more than five-fold increase.

National Cohesive Wildland Fire Management Strategy

There is a growing recognition that what was once considered unusual or extreme for an individual fire, or the duration and intensity of a local fire season, is becoming more common place. NASF is a key partner in the development and implementation of the National Cohesive Strategy and its

⁶ Prichard, Susan J., Nicholas A. Povak, Maureen C. Kennedy, and David W. Peterson. 2020. Fuel treatment effectiveness in the context of landform, vegetation, and large, wind-driven wildfires. *Ecological Applications* 00(00):e02104. 10.1002/eap.2104

three primary goals:

- Restore and Maintain Resilient Landscapes
- Develop Fire Adapted Communities
- Provide Efficient and Effective Response to Wildfires

We must remember that it is not only important to lower the risk to communities, but once the risk has been reduced, to maintain those communities at a reduced risk.

State Fire Assistance and Volunteer Fire Assistance

The Forest Service State Fire Assistance (SFA) and Volunteer Fire Assistance (VFA) programs are the fundamental federal assistance programs that States and local fire departments use to develop and enhance preparedness and response capabilities for wildland fire management. They provide crucial financial and technical assistance to support State and local fire management activities, including preparedness, planning, training, hazardous fuels treatments, and the purchase and maintenance of equipment.

Continued support and sufficient funding are needed for the SFA and VFA programs. These programs recognize the essential role of State and local government in responding to and managing wildland fires and help to ensure these entities can respond effectively to wildland fires on all jurisdictions, including federal lands.

In fiscal year (FY) 2019, SFA provided over \$16 million in funding for hazardous fuels treatments, benefiting 1,115 communities in the WUI. This funding led directly to the treatment of 190,635 acres of hazardous fuels, nearly four times the acreage treated in FY 18, with another 112,579 acres treated with leveraged funding from partners. Additionally, roughly \$3 million in assistance was provided to conduct risk assessments and complete fire management planning projects, supporting 5,248 communities. Over \$6 million in funding was provided for the purchase, maintenance, and rehabilitation of needed firefighting equipment, and nearly \$7 million in funding enhanced suppression and support operations. Also in FY 2019, SFA funding assisted 13,294 communities through a variety of different activities, including funding for the training of 30,344 firefighters.

The VFA program provides technical and financial assistance to qualifying local volunteer fire departments that protect communities with populations of 10,000 or fewer. There are over 26,000 rural and predominantly volunteer fire departments nationwide, and State forestry agencies provide wildland fire training to over 57,000 local fire department personnel each year. This capacity is critical because these state and local resources are the first responders to more than 80% of wildland fires – whether on state, federal or private lands. According to the Forest Service, during FY 2019, the VFA program aided communities by providing training for 20,647 firefighters, expanding or organizing 23 fire departments, and purchasing, rehabilitating, or maintaining over \$10 million in equipment for volunteer fire departments.

Combined, SFA and VFA trained over 50,000 firefighters in 2019, provided over \$16 million in funding to rehabilitate existing equipment or purchase new equipment, and assisted over 15,000

communities with increased suppression capacity.

Attacking fires when they are small is the key to reducing fatalities, injuries, loss of homes, and cutting federal fire-fighting costs. The wildfire funding fix passed by Congress as part of the 2018 Omnibus appropriations bill addressed the need to increase funding for fire suppression on federal lands. The need to increase fire suppression funding for State and private lands, where roughly 80% of wildfires occur, is just as urgent.

The Federal Excess Personal Property and Firefighter Property Programs

There are two additional programs critical for supporting the capacity of state and local agencies; the Federal Excess Personal Property (FEPP) program and the Firefighter Property Program (FFP). Over a five-year period (2014-2018) these programs delivered on average over \$170 million annually in equipment used to fight wildfires.

The FEPP program loans federally owned property to state forestry agencies and their cooperators for use in responding to wildfires. This includes equipment such as trucks, fire tools, hoses, vehicle parts, nozzles, generators, air compressors, fire protection clothing, aircraft, and aircraft parts. The FFP gives firefighters access to Department of Defense property for use in firefighting and other emergency services and allows ownership to pass from the federal government following a specified period of use.

These two programs are crucial to rural communities and small fire departments, as federal excess equipment may be the only affordable equipment available to them. States and local fire departments are often the first responders to wildfires – they utilize the equipment these federal excess property programs provide to keep wildfires small and contained, providing major cost-savings and critical protection for communities.

Continued federal assistance is needed so that all these programs will continue to help the many thousands of communities at risk to prepare for, and mitigate the risks associated with, wildfires.

Conclusion

Thank you for the opportunity to appear before the Committee today on behalf of the Washington Department of Natural Resources and the National Association of State Foresters. Wildland fire response is one of the most challenging facets of our jobs. The COVID-19 pandemic has presented a unique set of challenges to wildland fire operations and the interagency wildland fire community has responded accordingly. We appreciate the work of this committee to address these issues today and for its continued support of wildland firefighters across the nation. The suite of federal programs discussed today support state and local capacity that is critically important to the nation's wildland fire response capability. NASF and I stand ready to assist the Committee in finding ways to address the challenges we all face as the wildland fire problem continues to grow and consume larger and larger portions of our state and federal budgets. Finally, I would like to thank the Committee for its continued leadership and support of efforts to both respond to wildland fire and to take the necessary actions to address the underlying causes of catastrophic wildfire with more active forest management on all ownerships.

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you, Mr. Geissler, and thank you to all of our witnesses here today.

You have all spoken to the challenges that we are dealing with. Firefighting on our public lands and our wildlands is challenging enough, and then you interject the COVID pandemic and the challenges that we face. How is it possible to even do social distancing when you are out battling a fire on the lines there? How do you transport our firefighters when you have to move them in small aircraft or if they are on a road in vehicles? These are challenges that are daunting to say the least.

I want to ask a question that goes to the heart of the testing issue because I have long maintained that the way that this country is going to get back to work, the way we are going to get our kids into school is when we can really have the ability to test and give some certainty and certainty means that more than one test and you are done. In Alaska we have been pretty tough with our quarantine requirements to this day. We have a 14-day quarantine policy when you fly into the State of Alaska. They just changed that mandate last Saturday, I believe it was, to allow that if you have tested negative within 72 hours before you land in Alaska, you can come in and you are free to move about, but you are required to get a secondary test within a short period after you have arrived in the state. If you are not able to get a test before you come, there is a testing station at our major airports and you will get a voucher then for a second test. We are taking this very seriously.

For many of our rural communities the seriousness is more than just following CDC guidelines. They are still motivated by the fear that they saw in 1918 and are still retelling the stories of whole villages that were literally wiped out. Many of our wildland fires in Alaska are out in these rural areas where you have these communities that have effectively locked themselves in. They have said, we don't want anyone coming in from not only the outside of Alaska but within the state to the point where mail supplies and grocery supplies—they are saying hold off on them. We are hunkering down because we are concerned for our safety.

So this has been a very, very significant issue for us in our communities where they are fearful of the virus, but now they are fearful about firefighters who may be coming into the region who may be carrying the virus. The question that I have, and I will direct this to you, Norm. In Alaska, we have the testing requirements that we have put in place and I appreciate in your testimony, you didn't note it necessarily in your oral testimony here but in your written testimony, you talk about the protocols. If you can just briefly address some of the issues that you have faced as you have put these into place working with your federal partners to establish this protocol. Then I would like to turn to you, Mr. Phipps, and you, Ms. Kaster, about what can be done outside of the State of Alaska to encourage more testing, whether we have legal considerations that play into this. I would like to understand why what we are doing in Alaska can't be replicated in other parts.

Mr. McDonald, if you can just speak to what you are doing, how you are doing it and the challenges that you have faced in getting these protocols in place.

Mr. McDONALD. Okay and yeah, you addressed a lot of the reasons why we work so hard to initiate testing protocol in Alaska and a lot of that credit goes to our Department of Health and Social Services. They're doing that, not only for fire, but for our fisheries industry, oil and mining. So they've worked very hard to set up this process.

On the fire side of it, so what that would look like is an individual's resource order attached to an order will be the requirements to check in and do a self-screen before they depart. There's an app which puts your departure time and where you're flying into. At both airports in Alaska, both Fairbanks and Anchorage are testing facilities through a contract where firefighters will get tested as they get off the airplane. We're putting them into a quarantine for the 24 hours it takes to get a test result back and we're seeing faster times now. They've got new technology where we're seeing results back within five hours which is, for a fire response, even better.

Once there's a negative result on that test, that firefighter will go about their assignment. It's just part of the process. So the testing is just one part. We're still following social distancing, the hygiene, CDC requirements. We're still wearing PPE, the masks, but that's just a very important part of what we're doing to help reduce that risk to our firefighters. You brought up some of the challenges we've had, I mentioned it, is the inconsistency with some of the guidance or direction some of our partner agencies are receiving on the federal side.

So we, for Alaska, we call that, we have that a requirement and some of the other agencies are feeling they cannot call that a requirement, they can say, strongly recommend which contradicts our feeling of what we need to do to provide for firefighters and public safety in Alaska through testing.

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you, Mr. McDonald.

I am well over my time, but Mr. Phipps or Ms. Kaster, if you can just very quickly speak to why you have this inconsistency in guidance here and what more can be done to ensure that we are able to encourage a level of testing.

Mr. PHIPPS. I think the interagency community is highly interested in pursuing a robust testing capacity. And as we know, it's very decentralized to local health units and varies from state to state but for the purposes of an average fire, like he said, in a rural area, we're going to need more of a mobile capacity that could come to the fire, screen people on entry. There's a lot of people that go back and forth and during and on exit, before they go home and we just haven't seen that capacity even though we are highly interested in it because it's—and I think one of the—it's a strength, but also a constraint that the testing assumption is it's all local and local varies.

The CHAIRMAN. So as I understand, you are not averse to doing the testing, it is a matter of capacity at this point in time.

Mr. PHIPPS. Yes, and we're very interested in whatever the Committee could do to help make that national robust capacity a reality.

The CHAIRMAN. Let me turn to Senator Manchin.
Thank you.

Senator MANCHIN. Thank you, Madam Chairman.

Yesterday evening I introduced a bill with Ranking Member Udall to make the workers' compensation process less onerous for firefighters. I understand often several thousand people live closely together in large command posts that usually pop up to staff and support operations on a large wildfire. It creates a unique scenario for these firefighters and would increase the risk of transmission. Our bill would make sure that these firefighters are covered. I understand the Department of Labor has not made it possible for most firefighters to meet the current Department of Labor requirements to receive workers' compensation should they contract COVID-19 during this fire season. So it has been a big concern of firefighters.

Mr. Phipps and Ms. Kaster, do you support our efforts to ensure that medical expenses of firefighters would be covered should they contract COVID-19 this fire season?

Mr. PHIPPS. Yes, Forest Service, I know the Interagency Environment supports that. We are concerned about the—it's not exactly clear from the firefighters, looking through the firefighter's lens, but we're highly interested in anything the Committee could do to help strengthen or add clarity to the expectations because we're, we clearly think that if somebody comes down with COVID-19, they ought to be covered under the Department.

Senator MANCHIN. All we are saying is basically during this period of COVID-19 pandemic going on and fire season going on that people should basically have access to workers' comp which sometimes they don't because of the stringent requirements they don't meet. But with this unusual situation, you are saying you need clarity. You cannot do that by just Executive Order or—

Mr. PHIPPS. Well, we, right now, we've been told by DOL, Department of Labor, that they will consider each case on a case-by-case basis, that's our current understanding.

Senator MANCHIN. Okay. Well, we are going to do what we can in this Committee to make sure we have clarity on that, that these people do not have to wait and they do not have to struggle and the families do not have to worry. It is ridiculous.

Mr. PHIPPS. We appreciate that.

Senator MANCHIN. And you are told by DOL so, maybe we can get to DOL. We will get them here.

Also, Ms. Kaster, can you tell me how you all came to the decision on what you are using instead of testing? As I understand you are not mandating testing, but I know in Alaska, they test twice coming in.

Ms. KASTER. Thank you for that question, Senator.

So the Medical and Public Health Advisory Team guidance at this time has contemplated that question and a lot of it comes down to, you know, in the State of Alaska they are using their resources for the purposes of testing. What I will say is firefighter safety is truly paramount to the Department and as the fire season continues, we're going to continue to explore ways to better protect our firefighters. So that guidance will continue to evolve over time.

Senator MANCHIN. So you are saying because of cost you don't have the resources to do the testing?

Ms. KASTER. That's not accurate, Senator. It's just at this time because of some CDC guidance, the testing of asymptomatic employees is not recommended.

Senator MANCHIN. That does not make any sense at all. We are asking people to go into a work environment and not knowing if they are going to be associated with people that have been infected or not.

Ms. KASTER. So we do temperature checks and other recommendations consistent with CDC guidance.

Senator MANCHIN. Can you do testing? Would you all change your requirement to do that? We are asking you because these people are put in very, very difficult situations.

Ms. KASTER. We agree, Senator, that firefighter safety is critical, and so we'd be happy to have further discussions. As I said, we're going to need to continue to be vigilant and active——

Senator MANCHIN. I mean, the fire season has already started.

Ms. KASTER. Absolutely. And we have seen, you know, outbreaks in various areas including in the Southwest and we're taking those lessons learned to adapt——

Senator MANCHIN. So you are the Acting Director, right?

Ms. KASTER. I'm the Acting Deputy Assistant Secretary, Senator.

Senator MANCHIN. Okay. So who do we need to get to?

Ms. KASTER. We're happy to work with you at the Department. I stand ready.

Senator MANCHIN. I think you are going to find out if we had a vote today it would be unanimous, bipartisan unanimous, mandatory testing.

Ms. KASTER. We look forward to working with you.

Senator MANCHIN. What do you mean by working with us?

Ms. KASTER. We'll be happy to——

Senator MANCHIN. If we are telling you to test, can you test?

Ms. KASTER. We do have testing available, yes, Senator.

Senator MANCHIN. We are saying that we want mandatory testing for every firefighter going into fire season.

Ms. KASTER. We'd like to discuss that further with the medical professionals at CDC as well. It's an interagency effort, Senator.

Senator MANCHIN. Okay, well, that is not acceptable, but I understand. I do not want to put you on a point. We have to work this out. This is ridiculous.

I want to go to one more thing, real quick. Western University, my alma mater, received an emergency National Science Foundation Grant to design and manufacture personal equipment, personal protective equipment, PPE, from wood derivatives. I am happy to report last week the team finalized its design, acquired the needed material and announced that they are ready to begin making these PPEs. They will be using 3D printers to make locally-sourced, biodegradable, medical grade face masks. They are aiming to have the manufacturing process optimized later in the year.

I know the Forest Service Forest Products Lab has a group that specializes in commercializing new products. So, Mr. Phipps, is it possible or can you or will you, with the Forest Products Lab, be able to come alongside the team at WVU and what they have been able to accomplish and be ready to go with this?

Mr. PHIPPS. Yes, it's very possible, and we'd be glad to do it.

Senator MANCHIN. Have you all heard about this process, what they are doing?

Mr. PHIPPS. Yes, I'm not familiar with the specifics, but I've heard—

Senator MANCHIN. Can I connect you all?

Mr. PHIPPS. Yes.

Senator MANCHIN. Okay. Okay.

With that, let me just further—Madam Chairman, if I may?

The CHAIRMAN. Go ahead, Senator.

Senator MANCHIN. The testing for the firefighters, is this—I mean, at this horrible time that we are going through, I think that every member up here would like to have that happen. What can we do so they have clearance and clarity to what we want done as a Committee?

The CHAIRMAN. Well this is something that I do think we need to really drill down on. It was my understanding that when you have designated, specifically designated, critical workers and our firefighters are definitely critical workers, that that does put them in a different category because the very demands of their job limit their ability to follow those other CDC guidelines which is social distancing, washing hands. You go out fighting fires, there is no place to be washing your hands. You can put as much hand sanitizer on as you want.

Senator MANCHIN. Let us ask Mr. McDonald because in Alaska they are testing twice. They must think it is, I mean, the living conditions in a forest fire environment. Mr. McDonald, I know I am over my time, but can you explain to us what you all do and tell us about the living conditions people are in and why you think it is imperative to know if a person has been affected or not before you put them in that condition, in that situation?

Mr. McDONALD. Yeah, the living conditions are like I described. They're very rustic, limited hygiene facilities, social distancing is difficult, although we are working toward that. For myself and the health people I work with in Alaska, we just felt this was a very important step in the firefighter safety and public safety process. We use a lot of tools in this job to keep our firefighters safe. I look at this as just another piece of the puzzle for this year during the COVID.

Senator MANCHIN. So you all thought it was imperative that, basically, you tested before you put workers together working in that type of environment?

Mr. McDONALD. That is just one part of the process, correct.

The CHAIRMAN. Senator Manchin, your time is up.

Senator MANCHIN. I know.

The CHAIRMAN. But I do think that this is an important discussion for us. Alaska is a pretty big state. We had half of the forest fires last year. We have learned that very often in order to fight our fires we have to bring our own resources to bear, but we do bring in, and thankfully so, so many crews from the Lower 48. I understand the challenges of interagency and the fact that we do have our respective states that might have different views on testing, but it does seem to me that if I am going to agree, volunteer to be a firefighter, I want to know that I am going to be as safe

in Arizona and Washington as I am in Alaska when I am putting my life on the line.

Senator MANCHIN. I think we need to get a letter. We need to get with Dave Bernhardt. We need to get Rob Wallace, and we need to make sure this is cleared up. This is ridiculous. It really is. I am not chastising anybody, but for Alaska—firefighting is firefighting. Living conditions are the same everywhere no matter where you go, and for them to take a position that is so, I think, more beneficial to the firefighters themselves and protecting them and for these officials saying, well, CDC guidelines . . .

CDC guidelines are based on when we have not had enough tests. This government will not pay for the testing that needs to be done. They won't mobilize. They won't basically commercialize the Defense Production Act in order for us to have the tests that are needed. We are asking people to open up and go back to business and there is not a person in West Virginia that wants to go back to the workplace unless they know the person they are working with is not affected.

It is just very difficult. It is very difficult. But we will get with it. We will clear this up, not to put you—thank you very much, and I did not mean to put you on the spot.

The CHAIRMAN. I don't know whether Senator McSally is still on the line, but if you are, Senator, you are next.

[No response.]

Is she there, Darla? Okay, it does not appear that she is there. If she comes back on, we will put her into the queue, but let's turn to Senator Wyden.

Senator WYDEN. Thank you, Madam Chair. Madam Chair, I want to begin by saying I think you and Senator Manchin are making a lot of extraordinarily important points. I have been listening to what the agencies are saying in Washington, DC, this morning, not the folks out in the field, and they are talking about exploring these critical issues. They are using the words "considering," "consulting." I do not see the urgency needed to respond in a uniform, a practical way to what you and Senator Manchin are talking about. So I really appreciate you are trying to point out the fire season is happening now. COVID is happening now and the idea that we are going to hear about a lot of considering and consulting just is not going to protect our courageous firefighters nor is it going to protect folks in the rural West.

Obviously, getting to my remarks, because of this unprecedented one-two punch to the rural West, a pandemic virus and a potentially brutal wildfire season, on April 30th I joined ten other Western Senators asking for specific answers to the kinds of questions that are being raised here. We have to have answers for rural residents. We have to have answers for these courageous firefighters. And late yesterday, the agency responded.

Now I am glad that they decided they would respond to 11 United States Senators, but they used much of the same language that we have heard, Madam Chair, this morning. We heard, for example, that they wanted to coordinate with state and local partners. So back again to these kind of word salad kind of ideas that really don't go to whether you are going to actually get the work done that my colleagues are talking about. In fact, I was recently

briefed in Oregon by the local partners and they did not give me any indication that there is direct, on-the-ground coordination between DC health and emergency services programs and the front lines of Oregon forestry.

In fact, Madam Chair, Ms. Kaster, at your agency, the Department of the Interior, when asked to commit to maintaining long-standing cooperation with the Oregon Department of Forestry in fighting fires, Secretary Bernhardt just said, "no."

Madam Chair, I would like to make that written response a part of the record——

The CHAIRMAN. It will be included.

Senator WYDEN. ——at this point.

[Written response from Secretary Bernhardt follows.]

**Committee on Energy and Natural Resources
Hearing on FY 2021 Budget Request
March 10, 2020 Hearing**

Questions from Sen. Wyden

Question 1. Despite direction from Congress, the Bureau of Land Management continues to reconsider renewing fire funding agreements with the Oregon Department of Forestry. Western Oregon has some of the most complex public lands in the country -- the checkerboard ownership pattern of O&C lands creates over 14,000 miles of jurisdictional boundaries between federal, tribal, state, county and privately owned timberlands. This nightmare scenario for land management requires seamless efforts for fire protection, and for over 100 years, the federal government has worked cooperatively with the state of Oregon for fire protection on the O&C lands. In the fiscal year 2020 Interior funding bill, Congress stated that:

“A departure from the existing agreements with O-D-F to provide fire protection services would neither be in the interest of lands managed by B-L-M in western Oregon, nor the significant interspersed communities and timberlands adjacent to those federal lands.”

Will you commit to continuing BLM's long standing wildfire protection agreements with the Oregon Department of Forestry?

Response: No.

Senator WYDEN. So my first question then is for you, Mr. Phipps. What specifically is the Forest Service going to do to really address these issues, these issues of testing and protection for the firefighters in rural communities using the Centers for Disease Control and the Federal Emergency Management Agency and do it with people on the ground quickly—I am talking about within the next couple of weeks? What is going to be done to get that help to folks on the ground quickly?

Mr. PHIPPS. Thank you for the question. I think it's a great question.

To date, our Interagency Medical Committee has actually advised against testing. I know that runs contrary to a lot of people's understanding of why that would be the case, and they're concerned that testing is a snapshot in time so that's why you have to do it multiple times and its accuracy is——

Senator WYDEN. Mr. Phipps, we know that argument. So what then is going to be done to protect the firefighters and these communities, specifically?

Mr. PHIPPS. We're relying on the social distancing and personal protective equipment, hygiene—moduling is one concept that had been mentioned. To date, without having this, what I had mentioned, a robust capacity that's actually mobile that can come to a fire camp, you know, we're concerned that that could easily overwhelm local health facilities. So we have to do something, as the Interagency, more——

Senator WYDEN. You need to tell us what that something is within a week, and you need to get it to the Chair and the Ranking Member because to just hear about “exploring” and “doing something” and “maybe we will look at this” is just not acceptable to the people who give us an election certificate.

[Information regarding plans for firefighter and community protection during the fire season follows.]



United States
Department of
Agriculture

Forest
Service

Washington Office

1400 Independence Avenue, SW
Washington, D.C. 20250

File Code: 5100 (8638335)

Date: June 8, 2020

The Honorable Ron Wyden
United States Senate
221 Dirksen Senate Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20510

Dear Senator Wyden:

Thank you for your letter of April 30, 2020, cosigned by your colleagues, expressing your concerns about the COVID-19 pandemic's impact on wildland fire management. I apologize for the delayed response.

I agree with you that the 2020 fire year is different than any we have previously experienced. Enclosed is a detailed response to your questions.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture's Forest Service is committed to improving the wildland fire system during these challenging times. To support our incident response strategies and tactics, we will have up to 35 large airtankers and will exercise the full use of call-when needed aircraft to boost our initial attack capabilities. We will commit responders to operations where we understand both the risks of the fire environment and the virus, and we will deploy our responders only where we have a reasonable expectation of success in protecting life and critical property and infrastructure.

Maintaining a healthy and safe environment for wildland firefighters is paramount. During this fire year, we are committed to minimizing COVID-19 and smoke exposure to firefighters and communities. We are considering steps related to social distancing by unit, alternatives to traditional fire camps and quarantine procedures both before and after fires. Additionally, we will prioritize the use of local suppression resources, with the predominant strategy being rapid containment.

The pandemic and the wildfire season will require us to confront many unknowns and rapidly changing situations in the months to come. Emergency response while managing risk in a pandemic will require new ways of getting the job done on behalf of the people we serve. We are trained to continually assess risks when confronted with the unexpected and will evolve, learn and adapt as the situation changes.

Thank you for your continued support. As always, we will focus on the safety and welfare of our wildland firefighters and the communities we serve. We remain committed to helping sustain communities and conserving the land and we will adjust to meet this unprecedented challenge.

Sincerely,



For

Signed by: KATHERINE ARMSTRONG
VICTORIA CHRISTIANSEN
Chief

Enclosure



Caring for the Land and Serving People

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Enclosure

1. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), people who suffer from heart or lung diseases, like asthma, are at increased risk for adverse health effects due to wildfire smoke exposure. This is also the case for older adults. Both of these populations are also particularly vulnerable to COVID-19.

a. How do you plan to coordinate with CDC, the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), and State and local health departments to ensure communities impacted by wildfire smoke have access to health care and related supports, like air filters, in light of COVID-19 coupled with the upcoming wildfire season?

A. The Forest Service has been coordinating with the Environmental Protection Agency, Centers for Disease Control, and the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health since early in the pandemic. This collaboration has included the Interagency Wildland Fire Air Quality Response Program and their efforts to build an approach for early warning of wildfire smoke impacts. The Forest Service has recently signed a Memorandum of Understanding with Centers for Disease Control to collaborate on research efforts and utilize trained Forest Service and Centers for Disease Control personnel as Air Resource Advisors who can be dispatched to support large wildfire incident management teams. Air Resource Advisors are technical specialists in smoke monitoring, modeling, forecasting and messaging on smoke impacts. Coordination with State and local health departments is part of typical Air Resource Advisor's duties. In our efforts to address mutual concerns about wildfire smoke impacts, we are working through the Federal Emergency Management Agency Emergency Support Function #4 national and regional coordinators to build awareness of the challenges and establish appropriate communication and response efforts.

b. How will you inform communities about the severity and duration of wildfire smoke impacts?

A. The Interagency Wildland Fire Air Quality Response Program is developing approaches for early warning of wildfire smoke impacts along with other Federal and State partner agencies. Air Resource Advisors will be dispatched with Incident Management Teams to monitor smoke impacts, model smoke and forecast smoke projections for communities potentially impacted. The development of smoke outlooks, that can be/are made available to the public, is a routine function of the Air Resource Advisors.

Additionally, in close coordination with state and local partners, Federal wildland fire agencies have developed Geographic Wildland Fire Response Plans to help protect firefighters and the public during the COVID-19 pandemic. The plans

which identify issues related to the COVID-19 pandemic and wildland fire response in the United States, guide wildland firefighting efforts throughout the country.

The plans outline general wildland fire suppression strategies and recommend best practices for all levels of wildland firefighting operations. They also provide guidance to maintain wildland fire response and enhance the safety and protection of all wildland fire response personnel. Additionally, they outline initial fire response efforts, large fire response, and coordination and support functions. Smoke management guidance is included in the appendices. These plans can be found at: <https://www.nifc.gov/fireInfo/covid-19.htm>

c. Are there additional resources the Department may need to work with their local, state, and federal partners to reach these communities?

- A. The Interagency Wildland Fire Air Quality Response Program, authorized under the Dingell Act, will be actively providing Air Resource Advisors to incidents that need smoke impact forecasting. Additionally, the agencies have been working with the Environmental Protection Agency to develop a joint “Smoke Ready Community Program” which can play a key role in promoting the preparation of communities for wildfire smoke impacts. The Air Resource Advisors will work closely with communities to assist with forecasting smoke impacts and promoting community preparedness for wildfire smoke. Early community preparation for wildfire smoke will allow public health officials to be aware of potential risks and help prepare for effects on individuals and facilities vulnerable to smoke impacts

2. What behaviors, internal policies, and modifications are you proposing across wildfire management staff during active wildfire events that will allow you to maintain core operations, while limiting exposure to and transmission of the virus to agency employees and non-agency personnel?

- A. Social distancing among firefighters wherever possible, spreading out fire camps, issuing personal protective equipment such as masks and gloves, screening firefighters, leveraging best available communication and detection technologies, and enhancing our logistical support contracts to meet COVID-19 requirements are among the considerations built into our firefighting plans.
 - a. **Given the demand for increased precautions, we would also like to determine what additional resources you may require to respond to and manage wildfire given these circumstances, social distancing recommendations, and potential staffing and supply chain disturbances.**
 - A. Just as in any fire year, we are not in this alone. Responding to wildland fire in this country is a partnership – across all levels of government. Agencies are using all available tools to bring on additional capacity to help reduce risk and we are shifting

our workloads to respond to COVID-19, protect the public and safely manage wildland fire throughout the fire year.

b. How are you working with state, federal, and local partners to ensure consistency of response and COVID-19 related precautions are consistent, realistic, and implementable on multi-jurisdictional fire responses?

- A. Federal agencies stand together, ready to respond to wildfire during the 2020 fire year, and through existing coordination mechanisms and agreements, our agencies are working together with our state, local and tribal partners. Wildland fire personnel are emergency responders across Federal, State and local jurisdictions have worked together for many years and will quickly adapt to changing situations. We will continue our focus on aggressive initial attack where we can be most successful, with the goal of fast containment to minimize the number of large fires during the year. Geographic Wildland Fire Response Plans with guidelines and best practices for each geographic area of the country have been developed and are available at: <https://www.nifc.gov/fireInfo/covid-19.htm>

3. What is the agency doing to continue planning and implementing forest management and hazardous fuels reduction activities to reduce the risk of catastrophic wildfires, and what opportunities exist to increase the pace and scale of these efforts?

- A. The Agency continues to move forward with our shared stewardship strategy. Actively working with states, tribes and other partners is a priority to share decisions, risks and mutually beneficial outcomes. There is much work to be done and we remain committed to do the right work, in the right places, at the right scale. This March, all regions placed a pause on implementing prescribed fire projects. These regional decisions were made in collaboration with partners amidst the concerns around COVID-19. These types of projects are key to reducing wildfire risk and improving firefighter safety. Some regions have lifted the pause on prescribed fire operations and are working closely with states and other partners on the right time and places to implementing prescribed fire. Since March, the agency as shifted some resources from implementing prescribed fire projects to mechanical thinning projects to reduce wildfire risk. We will continue to take aggressive action to maximize opportunities to reduce wildfire risk to communities.

Limited field operations have been possible, however, there have been hiring delays for seasonal work crews. Our employees and contractors have been limited to local work in an effort to limit the spread of COVID-19 to rural communities. Most of the impacts of these delays and restrictive working conditions have been associated with out-year work. After following stay-at-home orders and maximum telework direction, the Agency is transitioning back to full field operations in coordination with States and local jurisdictions.

Timber sales are still being offered, although market uncertainties are a concern for industry. Appraisals associated with recent timber sales are extremely challenging given these uncertainties. In response, the Forest Service is adjusting timber sale appraisals to align with market conditions and modifying timber sales packages to ensure timber sales are financially viable.

The Under Secretary for Natural Resources and Environment, Department of Agriculture published a Finding of Substantial Overriding Public Interest to extend certain National Forest System timber sales, sale of property stewardship contracts, and forest product permits on April 15, 2020. The Finding of Substantial Overriding Public Interest provides for an extension of timber sale contracts and permits for up to two years, and Alaska contracts for up to three years. This is in combination with contract relief already provided in some contracts under Market Related Contract Term Additions.

On April 23, 2020, the Forest Service provided field units with updated guidance related to impacts on the acquisition community. It focused on the maximum use of flexibilities within each acquisition contract to address potential impacts due to COVID-19, including Integrated Resource Stewardship Contracts, which are tied to the forest products market.

The Forest Service continues to monitor and examine the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on our mission delivery, including the impacts COVID-19 is having on our timber purchasers and contractors. We will strive to make modifications within our existing authority when necessary.

a. What additional resources do you need to get ahead of hazardous fuels reduction projects?

- A. The Forest Service appreciates the support and innovative authorities that Congress has recently provided. We will continue to use all available authorities to make a positive impact to the 63 million acres of National Forest System lands and 70,000 communities which are at risk from uncharacteristically severe wildfires.

b. What additional resources do you need to accomplish delayed maintenance of Forest Service lands and properties?

- A. The Forest Service has a total deferred maintenance backlog of over \$5.2 billion in infrastructure repairs (roads, trails, bridges, facilities, and dams). The backlog of deferred maintenance for forest roads and bridges is \$3.6 billion which includes over 6,000 road bridges and 65,000 passenger-car accessible miles. The agency estimates an additional \$400 million of deferred maintenance for 200,000 miles of high clearance roads that are used for public access, firefighting, emergency access and forest management.

Lastly, there is a \$1.2 million backlog of maintenance for Forest Service owned buildings.

- c. How are you working with state, federal, and local partners to ensure funding is allocated across jurisdictional boundaries, in mutually selected areas of high priority, and that equipment/staffing/contractors are being utilized for the best cost to all agencies?**

A. Using the shared stewardship strategy, the Forest Service will work together with partners to develop mutually defined, cross boundary priorities. The Agency continues to use the tools Congress has provided, including the Good Neighbor Authority, the Collaborative Forest Landscape Restoration Program projects, and the Reserve Treaty Rights Lands program to work with State, Federal, local and Tribal Partners to identify and treat high priority areas across jurisdictional boundaries. We continue to prioritize investments to reduce wildfire risk across boundaries using quantitative wildfire risk assessments. In addition, the Agency is also investigating using a scenario planning investment strategy.

- 4. In your letter to U.S. Forest Service officials, entitled "Chiefs Letter of intent for Wildland Fire - 2020," dated April 3, 2020, you mention that the agency would commit resources "only when there is a reasonable expectation of success in protecting life and critical property infrastructure." This has led to some confusion about how quickly and aggressively the Forest Service will respond to wildfires. Please expand on how you and the agency define a "reasonable expectation for success" referenced in your April 3 letter.**

A. We will continue our focus on aggressive initial attack where we can be most successful, with the goal of fast containment to minimize the number of large fires during the year. Every wildfire response will be based on a careful evaluation of human safety and risk to other important values to ensure smart decisions are made when deciding how to attack each fire.

- 5. With FEMA relying on federal firefighters from the USFS, BLM, and other agencies to provide qualified incident management expertise for the COVID-19 response, what coordination has been undertaken with their home agencies to ensure that such personnel are ready for their primary mission come wildfire season and to reduce their risk of COVID-19 infection during their service under the FEMA-led pandemic response?**

A. The Forest Service coordinates support to FEMA from wildland fire agencies. Over the course of the COVID-19 response, nearly 60 personnel have provided support in eight states and six FEMA regions through the mobilization of five incident management teams and numerous individual incident management personnel. As the fire year progresses,

many of these same resources that supported FEMA activities will transition to their primary purpose of responding to wildfires. The Forest Service will continue to work with FEMA to leverage personnel appropriately to support vital COVID and other natural disaster related actions while not diminishing our ability to maintain robust wildfire response capability.

While Forest Service personnel are assigned to FEMA activities, it is with the condition that specific mitigation and protective measures are in place to ensure the best possible protection from COVID-19 for the mobilized personnel.

- 6. As some agency discussions have already noted, preventing the spread of COVID-19 may require a radical new approach to transporting, provisioning, and sheltering fire crews while on assignment. Large fire camps and logistical support from outside of the area pose serious threats, increasing the risk of viral transmission. According to the Agency's Quantitative Risk Assessment, the worst-case scenario gives a six percent "cumulative mortality rate" at large fire camps.**

- a. What measures and training protocols are the agency implementing to mitigate COVID-19 virus exposure and response in the event of transmission during wildfire season?**

- A. COVID-19 presents a new type of infectious disease risk in fire camp. Along with following Center for Disease guidelines, the wildland fire agencies will use the [Infectious Disease Guidelines for Wildland Fire Incident Management Teams](#) plan, developed by the National Wildfire Coordinating Group's Emergency Medical Committee. Large fire camps will not be the norm. Most firefighting efforts will be in small groups and dispersed into isolated camps to provide our firefighters and the public better social distancing and safety from spread of COVID-19. Wildland fire agencies are also identifying support functions that can be done virtually to maintain social distancing. Interagency teams made up of seasoned responders have developed Wildland Fire Response Plans with guidelines and best practices for each geographic area of the country.

We use the Quantitative Risk Assessment to help quantify the risk of COVID-19 and inform decision-making. Part of the analysis explores "what if" scenarios, which vary assumptions about underlying infection and mortality rates, and the percent of people arriving on fire that were infected. The mortality rates in the "what if" scenarios are 0.2 percent, 2 percent, and 6 percent. The 6 percent figure is not a finding, it is a worst-case assumption accounting for unknowns regarding the degree to which fatigue and smoke exposure may exacerbate COVID-19. Newer evidence suggests more widespread infections than previously thought and subsequently mortality rates are likely lower and may even be lower than 1 percent.

- b. How are you communicating the level of risk to field staff and local leaders,**

and how are you setting national guidance for prioritizing firefighter safety?

- A. The Forest Service and interagency partners have developed and published a number of COVID-19 response materials. Additionally, the wildland fire agencies will use the [Infectious Disease Guidelines for Wildland Fire Incident Management Teams](#) plan, developed by the National Wildfire Coordinating Group's Emergency Medical Committee, which includes recommended guidelines to be followed by an Incident Management Team when confronted with a potential infectious disease outbreak during a wildland fire response; the Chief of the Forest Service has issued the 2020 Letter of Intent for Wildland Fire; and three Area Command Teams were engaged and developed Geographic Wildland Fire Response Plans with guidelines and best practices for each geographic area of the country.

- c. **Given the various state-level stay-at-home orders, will national crews and assets be able to move between regions to respond to wildfires?**
 - A. Yes.
 - i. **What is the specific guidance Forest Service headquarters is giving crews?**
 - A. In addition to following the Center for Disease Control guidelines, the Forest Service and the interagency community have developed and published a number of COVID-19 response materials available at: <https://sites.google.com/a/firenet.gov/fmb/home/information/memorandums/fmb-memorandums-2020>. Geographic Wildland Fire Response Plans with guidelines and best practices for each geographic area of the country have been developed and are available at: <https://www.nifc.gov/fireInfo/covid-19.htm>.
 - ii. **What are you doing to communicate the scale of risk?**
 - A. The Forest Service and interagency partners are working with the wildland fire Medical and Public Health Advisory Team made up of medical professionals. They are determining specific risks to firefighters to ensure we are accurately communicating developments as the situation continues to evolve. The Interim Guidance for Prevention and Management of COVID-19 During Wildland Fire Operations is available at: <https://sites.google.com/a/firenet.gov/fmb/home/information/memorandums/fmb-memorandums-2020>

- 7. **Given that large fires will increase fire crew interaction and demand for outside assistance, what steps are the agency taking to plan for these scenarios and appropriate**

precautions to protect fire-fighter health and safety, while prioritizing strategic use of limited resources?

- A. The safety of the public, communities and all front-line responders remains the highest priority for all wildland fire agencies. The primary response strategy for 2020 continues to be aggressive initial attack using local area resources from all partners. Our goal is rapid containment to minimize the number of large wildfires. Aggressive initial attack, supported by available airtankers and helicopters, will be used wherever possible to extinguish wildfires quickly and minimize the need to bring large numbers of firefighters together. For larger fires that could not be stopped during initial attack, it is very apparent that gathering and supporting large numbers of firefighters into compact fire camps will not be practical for this fire year. Firefighters will respond to every wildfire, but how they are mobilized and supported will be different this year. Additionally, we are conducting simulations across Forest Service Regions to prepare for managing COVID-19 related scenarios that could occur during wildfire response operations.

The National Multi-Agency Coordinating Group has produced an Interagency Checklist for Mobilization of Resources in a COVID-19 Environment. The checklist is designed for interagency mobilization (ordering and/or sending) for severity, pre-position, and fire response resources while working in the COVID-19 environment. The checklist available at: https://www.nifc.gov/nicc/administrative/nmac/NMAC2020-17_Attachment.pdf

8. Effective wildfire responses require a coordinated approach with private businesses and other partners to ensure initial attack and sufficient capacity, which may be increasingly important this season given precautions to control the transmission of COVID-19. Local nonprofits and contractors can bolster fire suppression capacity, and rural restaurants and hotels provide essential services to support fire crews and agency operations, while helping to support rural economies. Do you anticipate working with local partners and businesses to help bolster capacity, supply meals, and offer temporary housing, and if so, how are you communicating agency direction to prevent transmission of COVID-19?

- A. We are working closely with local communities, at the field level in the Forest Service and through interagency coordination efforts. The safety of the public, communities and all front-line responders remains the highest priority for all wildland fire agencies. The primary response strategy for 2020 continues to be aggressive initial attack using local area resources from all partners. For larger fires that escape initial attack, gathering and supporting large numbers of firefighters into compact fire camps will not be practical this fire year. Large fire camps will not be the norm. Most firefighting efforts will be in small groups. We will be using dispersed isolated fire camps to provide firefighters and the public better social distancing and safety from spread of COVID-19. Additionally, the Forest Service contracts with small businesses to meet mobile catering and shower requirements. When these resources are depleted, call-when-needed caterer and shower small businesses are used. In this manner, firefighter nutritional needs and health code

requirements are assured. Lodging or local/rural restaurant capability can be used on an as needed basis.

9. **It is our understanding that the agency has not yet issued Exclusive Use contracts for Type 1 helicopters, and is currently offering short-term call-when-needed contracts. Additionally, fixed wing air tanker contracts have been protested and may not be resolved until July.**

- a. **Has the agency considered adding more exclusive use contracts for rotor and fixed-wing aircraft?**

A. Yes, the Forest Service is restructuring 50 call-when-needed aircraft contracts to ensure we have additional guaranteed availability periods. These include helicopters, water scoopers, airtankers and aerial supervision aircraft. These contracts will guarantee 90-day availability periods to vendors. Approximately half will start their 90-days on June 1, 2020, with the other half starting on June 15, 2020. Additional staffing will also be hired to manage these resources.

- b. **Would additional aerial suppression assets assist in this year's prioritization of initial attack and reducing smoke for vulnerable populations?**

A. Yes, additional aerial firefighting resources will increase initial attack capability which can reduce the overall amount of smoke produced when we are successful. Fire and aviation managers are ensuring aircraft are deployed to support aggressive initial attack trying to minimize the occurrence of large wildfires. In addition to the existing exclusive use fleet of airtankers and helicopters, the call-when-needed aircraft referenced above will increase initial attack, extended attack and large fire support capability and response. Additional air tankers can be called upon through state agreements and Modular Aerial Fire Fighting Systems (MAFFS) airtankers are also available through agreements with the Department of Defense.



Forest Service

Washington Office

1400 Independence Avenue, SW
Washington, D.C. 20250

File Code: 5100 **Date:** June 22, 2020
Route To:
Subject: Learning and Updates for the 2020 Fire Year
To: Regional Foresters, Station Directors, IITF Director, Deputy Chiefs and WO Directors

In the Forest Service we strive to be a learning organization. That means we challenge ourselves to build a shared vision, embrace systems thinking and learn together as a team. In the 2020 fire year it is more important than ever before that we model these behaviors and adapt and update our processes and protocols rapidly.

Firefighters are adapting every day as they train and deploy together every year and this year it's especially important to share what we are learning as close to real-time as possible. After Action Reviews conducted by crews and research conducted by our Human Performance team are encouraging open conversation and highlighting gaps we need to address, learn, adjust and make course correction as we go. I could not be prouder of this agency and the way we are living our core value of Service during these extremely challenging times.

In the two months since I issued the Chief's 2020 letter of intent for wildland fire we have established with our partners nine Geographic Area Plans: <https://www.nifc.gov/fireInfo/covid-19.htm> to guide firefighting during the COVID-19 pandemic; the interagency Fire Management Board has issued over 20 memos: <https://sites.google.com/a/firenet.gov/fmb/home/information/memorandums/fmb-memorandums-2020> with updated protocols and procedures; an interagency team of medical experts has been established to guide us in this uncharted territory; we have initiated an interagency peer sharing process for incident management personnel to share best practices for managing large fires specific to adjustments due to COVID-19; and as of June 19, 2020 we engaged 1,908 fires on 945,827 acres of National Forest System lands as well as supported our partners on their fires. We are anchoring to our intent, as laid out in my letter, to "evolve, learn and adapt as the situation changes" and to hear "what works and what doesn't directly from firefighters." To that end, we have heard from line officers, firefighters, and our partners that some of our key objectives need to be further clarified and updates shared.

As such, I want to be clear that this year our objective on all fires is the safety of our firefighters. To that end and to minimize the spread of COVID-19, we will **aggressively initial attack** all fires using local resources to the maximum extent possible. When local resources are not adequate to staff all ignitions, priorities will be set to address fires with the most values at risk. To best ensure availability of local resources for high priority ignitions, fires with few values at risk may have a minimal response. When fires escape initial attack we "commit resources only when there is a reasonable expectation of success in protecting life and critical property and



infrastructure.” In other words, we won’t put firefighters in harm’s way unless we know they can be successful in their objectives. We will move resources across the country to respond to fires, especially those that escape initial attack - just as we do any other year. Should fire conditions become severe, interagency assessments and coordination processes will serve to bolster local forces in preparing for initial attack with prepositioning of ground based and aviation resources. We are also investing in enhanced data analysis to better prioritize resources where we have the greatest chance for success containing fires that threaten the highest value assets and most critical infrastructure.

We also know best practices when it comes to testing and Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) continue to be updated the more we learn about the COVID-19 virus. We depend on the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) and the interagency Medical and Public Health Advisory Team (MPHAT) made up of doctors from across the interagency community to advise us. We know that testing is an important component of our COVID-19 strategy but it cannot supersede the practice of physical distancing and face coverings we have already recommended. We are evaluating a strategy recommended by the CDC where we prioritize testing for those who are symptomatic and have had direct exposure. Let me assure you that as CDC testing recommendations and guidance change we will incorporate those changes into our strategy.

Working with the Department of Agriculture and our interagency partners we have stocked the fire caches with PPE, including sanitizers and masks. We are committed to ensuring that all of our firefighters are properly equipped before they go to work on a fire and will continue to build up our reserves of PPE using all procurement flexibilities available to us and working with the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA).

We remain committed to protecting the health and safety of our employees and the American people we serve and while considering the additional hazards presented by the COVID-19 pandemic, we will strive to carry out our core wildfire mission responsibilities. Thank you for all you do.

X 

For

Signed by: KATHERINE ARMSTRONG



Forest Service

Washington Office

1400 Independence Avenue, SW
Washington, D.C. 20250**File Code:** 6100**Date:** July 2, 2020**Route To:****Subject:** Guidance on COVID-19 Testing and Subsequent Action**To:** Regional Foresters, Station Director, IITF Director, Deputy Chiefs and WO Directors

I extend my thanks to each of you for your contributions and commitment to live our value of Service to the American people during this unprecedented pandemic. This letter serves to document the U.S. Department of Agriculture Forest Service's guidance and policy regarding COVID-19 testing and providing alternate housing, until we can provide further direction. This includes follow up actions that may be necessary after a test occurs. We want to ensure we continue to equally live our value of Safety and focus on our foremost priority, keeping our employees safe,

You work each day to provide customer service to the public at our recreation sites; deliver our conservation mission through active management; and perform essential activities like timber sales, wildland firefighting and law enforcement. As part of our commitment to maintain safe workplace conditions during this pandemic, we are putting into place many changes to maintain proper social distancing; provide Personal Protective Equipment (PPE); and make certain there are ample supplies of hand sanitizer and more robust cleaning schedules. When it comes to our increasing needs for COVID-19 testing and alternate housing, we ask you to please follow the subsequent guidance:

COVID-19 Testing:

1. Any employee who is required to be at a Forest Service duty station, is in travel status, or on a Forest Service work assignment such as a fire incident or other remote assignment may be required to be tested. Our mission requires that we ensure we have enough personnel to carry out our functions.
2. Instances where an employee will be required to be tested are when any employee is experiencing COVID-19 symptoms while performing their duties or when any employee has had direct exposure while performing their work assignments to an individual who tests positive for COVID-19.
3. During an assignment, daily symptom screening for COVID-19 will be performed. COVID-19 symptoms are found at <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/symptoms-testing/symptoms.html>.
4. To obtain tests, employees will leverage local testing capacity as available. If free testing is not available, employees will work with their local line officers or incident management teams to pay for testing at time of service. If this is not feasible, then employees will use



Form FS-6500-229 to seek reimbursement for expenses not covered by the employee's insurance, regardless of the final diagnosis.

5. While using state or local testing capacity is the primary and preferred option, in instances where Regional Foresters, Station Directors, IITF Director, or Deputy Chiefs determine mission requirements necessitate additional testing capacity, they must work with Business Operations to facilitate the ability to contract for testing services to be administered at no cost to the employee if feasible. Contracting additional testing capabilities will require 1) test supplies, which could vary in market availability; 2) credible lab analysis; 3) a certified medical professional to interpret lab analysis; 4) data management, including protection of privacy; and 5) test disposal management.

Alternative Work Location or Alternative Housing Locations:

1. If an employee is awaiting required test results; is required to be quarantined after receiving required test results based upon local government guidelines; or tests positive as a result of their mission assignments, the employee should attempt to self-isolate at their residence. If this is not feasible due to the inability to comply with Centers for Disease Control (CDC) guidelines or due to exposure of those with significant risk factors in the home, the Forest Service will offer and pay for alternative housing or an alternative work location in accordance with State and local health official guidance for up to 14 days.
2. For employees who are not in travel duty status and are unable to self-isolate at their residence, local line officers may provide alternative housing or alternative work location in accordance with State and local health official guidance using GSA's Emergency Lodging Services program for quarantining purposes.
3. Employees in travel duty status will coordinate with their supervisor to either extend their travel authorization to use hotels in accordance with State and local health official guidance, or to use other approved lodging provided by the Forest Service, such as lodging acquired via the Emergency Lodging Service. This may be at the travel duty location, a location in route to or from a travel duty location, or at their normal duty location. In addition, in accordance with State and local health official guidance, the Forest Service will work with the affected employee to assist with travel back to their residence as soon as practicable. No employee shall report to work duty station if presumed or confirmed positive with COVID-19.

Duty Status while in Alternate Housing or Alternative Work Locations:

1. If an employee is able to perform work at the alternative work location while they are symptomatic, during a required quarantine period, in isolation, or while they await test results, they will be paid their standard salary. If during the required isolation or quarantine period or while awaiting test results from a required test, an employee is unable to perform remote work, they may take Weather and Safety leave.
2. If the employee is symptomatic, the employee may take emergency sick leave as provided by the CARES Act for up to 80 hours, take accrued sick leave, or take other leave in lieu of sick leave.

This is a constantly changing situation. This guidance is aligned with current CDC guidelines and best practices as recommended by medical advisors. We recognize this fluid situation may change, and we will update this guidance and direction if it becomes necessary to do so. We remain committed to protecting the health and safety of our employees and the American people we serve. We will continue to base our actions on the guidance provided by the CDC to ensure we can perform all of our essential mission functions as safely as possible. Thank you for all you do.

A handwritten signature in blue ink, reading "Victoria Christiansen", is written over a horizontal line. To the left of the signature is a small "X" mark.

For

Signed by: KATHERINE ARMSTRONG
VICTORIA CHRISTIANSEN
Chief

Senator WYDEN. I have one last point that I am going to make on my way out. It is for you, Ms. Kaster. Americans have come from every corner of our country to demand justice for the murder of George Floyd by the Minneapolis Police. Last week the country looked on in horror as the Park Police and other federal law enforcement unleashed brutally excessive force on peaceful and lawful demonstrators. This was, of course, to clear the way for the President to have this photo op at St. Johns.

My question is I can't find anybody who will take responsibility for what was done. I would like to have you, the Department, tell me by the end of the week whether Secretary Bernhardt gave the order to clear the protestors out of the park. I would like to have that to me, in writing, by the end of the week.

I am over my time, Madam Chair. Thank you.

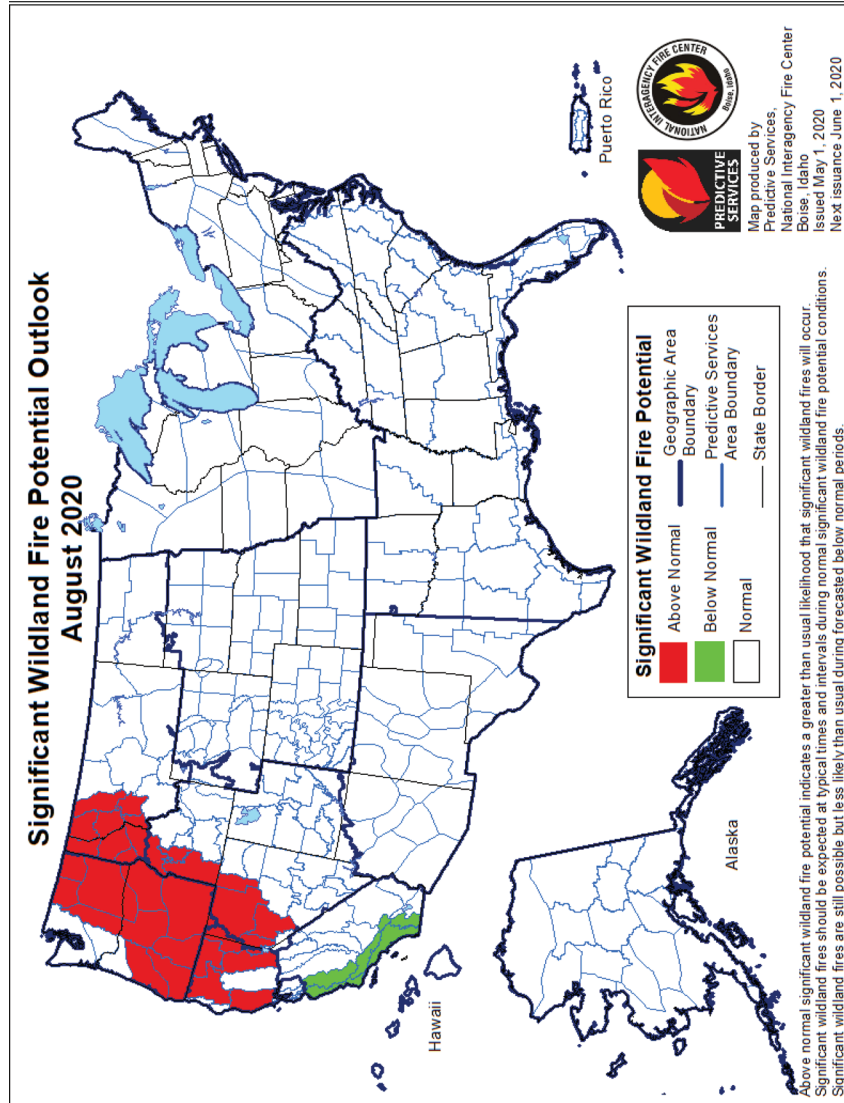
The CHAIRMAN. Thank you, Senator Wyden.

Next, Senator Cantwell.

Senator CANTWELL. Thank you, Madam Chair, and thank you to the witnesses for being here in such an important time. I definitely want to join in on the concerns both the, well actually, everybody has voiced so far—the Chair, the Ranking Member and Senator Wyden. There is a lot to be done to get ready for this fire season. The reason why we want to get the issues ironed out, particularly as it relates to COVID but also as to what are we going to use in the best and greatest technology, is that the National Interagency Fire Center issued the Significant Wildland Fire Potential Outlook for the fire season and for the State of Washington, and I would say the whole Pacific Northwest, we are in the bullseye of what is likely to be a very challenging fire season.

Now, the map shows, basically, most of the Pacific Northwest, maybe not including Puget Sound, as being the epicenter of this year's fire season.

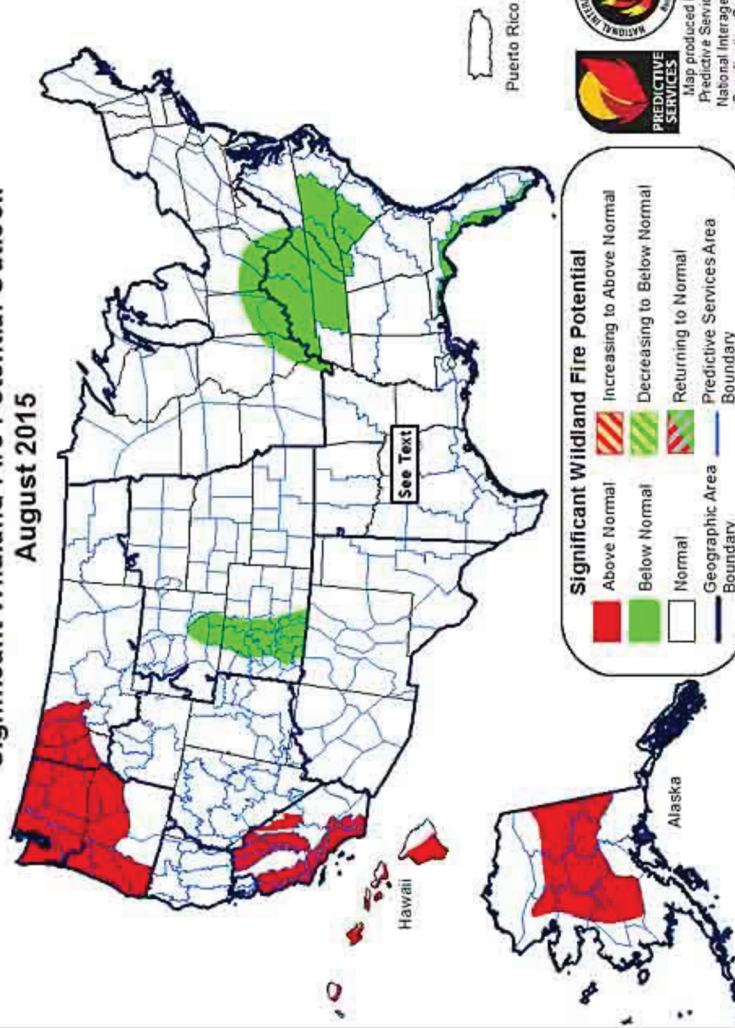
[The August 2020 map follows:]



Senator CANTWELL. So the only worse map that I think I saw on that is the map that is next to it, and maybe it could be pulled out a little bit, is the 2015 fire season map and we know that that ended up being one of the worst fire seasons in the history of our state.

[The August 2015 map follows:]

Significant Wildland Fire Potential Outlook August 2015



Map produced by
Predictive Services
National Interagency
Coordination Center
Boise, Idaho

Issued August 1, 2015
Next issuance September 1, 2015

Above normal significant wildland fire potential indicates a higher than usual likelihood that wildland fires will occur and/or become significant events. Wildland fires are still expected to occur during forecasted normal conditions as would usually be expected during the outlook period. Significant wildland fires are still possible but less likely than usual during forecasted below normal periods.

Senator CANTWELL. Those two maps look very similar as it relates to the Northwest being in the epicenter.

So we need to get ready. We need to get ready. We need to continue the focus that the legislation that myself and Senator Gardner passed related to technology that is used so that we can detect fires earlier, and we need to use the satellite technology that is there and available but I am not sure is being processed through the Forest Service. So I want to know what is it going to take for us to get that information and technology used?

I guess, Mr. Geissler, I will start with you. The National Weather Service satellite technology can detect fires at an early stage and that is one of the ways, but a very good way, for us to find fire starts right away.

And Deputy Chief Phipps and Deputy Assistant Secretary Kaster, is the Forest Service and Department of the Interior aware of this weather service satellite technology and are states using it? Is there something else that the Forest Service needs to take this technology and get it deployed for this fire season? I can just tell you, those two maps with basically the Pacific Northwest, of Washington, Oregon, Idaho and Montana at the epicenter, we already know what happened in 2015. It was horrific. And if that is where we are headed, we need to get this fixed and we need the best technology to stop fires as soon as they start.

I don't know who can help by jumping in with this satellite technology.

Mr. PHIPPS. I'm aware of the satellite technology, but I'm not aware of how it's being currently used. There's something that is, that we're developing that should be available in the next couple weeks. It's called WildfireSAFE to try to get a better idea on the conditions, how much potential an individual fire would have so we can better triage putting resources, putting them in the right mix at the right time and the right place to keep the fires that have the potential from getting large. But I will check into the new satellite technology and get back with you.

[Information regarding satellite technology for fires follows.]

From: [Hall, Thomas B -FS](#)
To: [Thompson, Megan \(Cantwell\)](#)
Cc: [Jackson, Noah - OSEC, Washington, DC](#); [Crandall, Doug - FS](#); [Donnav, Jacob S -FS](#); [Ripchensky, Daria \(Energy\)](#); [Matiella, Nick \(Energy\)](#); [Petit, Bryan \(Energy\)](#)
Subject: Response - 6/9/20 Senate Committee on Energy & Natural Resources Hearing
Date: Friday, September 4, 2020 8:59:34 AM
Attachments: [image001.png](#)
[image002.png](#)
[image003.png](#)
[image004.png](#)

Megan,

In the June 9,2020 Senate Committee on Energy & Natural Resources Hearing, Senator Cantwell asked Deputy Chief John Phipps how weather service satellite technology is being used for wildland fire management. Mr. Phipps also referenced the WildfireSAFE platform that was being developed.

The inter-agency wildland fire management community leverages near real-time satellite observations from multiple meteorological and Earth observation satellites operated by NASA and NOAA. These high temporal, synoptic view sensors provide observations of wildfire activity multiple times daily. Satellite imagery is processed as quickly as possible using the latest science-based algorithms to detect and characterize fire activity at the time of each satellite overpass. Derived active fire detection data gleaned from these satellite observations range in spatial resolution from 375 meters (1230 feet) to 1 kilometer (0.62 miles). These satellite-derived fire activity measures are provided through the WildfireSAFE app to afford quick assessments of new fire activity, existing fire growth and to contrast wildfire activity between regions. These continuously updated wildfire environmental data and mapping products are being used to support agency and interagency incident prioritization and resource allocation decisions at the geographic area, guide short-term resource triage and inform wildland fire suppression strategies that can protect communities and minimize risk to responders.

WildfireSAFE is a platform for delivering incident-specific fire environment information to inform situational awareness and risk-based decision making. It uses real-time fire reporting collected across federal and state agencies to deliver spatial analytics for every fire currently burning across the Continental United States. These data include weather-driven metrics of fire potential derived from the US National Fire Danger Rating System such as the Severe Fire Danger Index (SFDI) as well as summarizations of fuel type and condition, terrain characteristics and communities threatened. SFDI leverages daily spatial forecasts for the next 7 days from the US National Weather Service assess the potential for quickly spreading and high intensity wildfires. WildfireSAFE also provides access to real-time, satellite-derived observations of wildfire activity.

Please let me know if you have any further questions.

Regards,
Tom



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Senator CANTWELL. Mr. Geissler?

Mr. GEISLER. Senator Cantwell, I will say that that is actually a project that's very near and dear to my heart, because the early use of that was actually through the National Severe Storms Lab while I was still State Forester in Oklahoma and it's being used very effectively with the Oklahoma Forest Service right now. It is technology whereby the Weather Service can detect the fires and notify the state fire folks where they're located or where the potential is and it happens every five minutes that they're looking at it. And basically, funding toward the National Weather Service to pull this out would probably not be that substantial in order to be able to bring it to bear further across the country.

There are other states that are utilizing this technology and, in fact, I believe, Colorado is one of those states that has just brought that online.

Senator CANTWELL. Thank you.

Ms. Kaster?

Ms. KASTER. Senator, I'd be happy to get back to you as to DOI's use of the technology.

But what I will say is that the Department has made it a priority to implement the Dingell Act which includes other technological requirements for DOI, and we're going to continue to do so.

Senator CANTWELL. Well, I just cannot emphasize this enough. We know that we are in the bullseye. We know what is coming. We want to be better prepared, and we want the technology to help us put out fires as soon as they start.

Thank you.

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you, Senator Cantwell. You mentioned the improvements within the Dingell Act and one of those that we have been engaged in is the federal smoke monitoring which, again, is important from a health/safety perspective.

Let's go to Senator Daines next.

Senator DAINES. Thank you, Chair Murkowski, and I want to thank you all for testifying and your leadership to protect the health and well-being of Americans while still meeting land management objectives during this pandemic.

This pandemic coincided with the season dedicated to vegetation management, and wildfire preparation has now bled into wildfire season. Emergency response are already mobilized and exhausted so fighting the pandemic will be stretched thin this wildfire season. The COVID-19 pandemic has introduced new risks and challenges to wildland fire management, and I look forward to this timely discussion.

In Montana 6.3 million acres of forest is at high or very high wildfire hazard potential—1.6 million of those acres are in close proximity to populated areas. To make matters worse, as Senator Cantwell just showed on the map there, Montana is expecting above average wildfire conditions this summer.

Mr. Phipps and Ms. Kaster, I understand that COVID-19 restrictions delayed fuel treatment projects. What are your agencies doing to make up for lost time and reduce fuel loads before we get into the middle of this fire season which looks like it may be a tough one?

We will start with Mr. Phipps and then we will go to Ms. Kaster.

Mr. PHIPPS. Thank you for the question. I really agree that all these fuel treatments that the taxpayers have invested in are very critical for reducing risk particular to communities. We're trying to focus our treatments to actually reduce wildfire exposure to communities and yes, it's true that early in the pandemic that we paused some of our treatments, particularly in the Southeast, and now we are ramping up and on track for meeting this year's targets. It'll be challenging with the lost time, but that's what we're endeavoring to do. We believe that we're going to meet our timber target this year.

Senator DAINES. Alright, thanks.

Ms. Kaster?

Ms. KASTER. Thank you, Senator.

The Department of the Interior continued forward its fuel treatments during COVID-19. In fact, in Montana we were able to do prescribed burns earlier this year. And so, we have made it an effort to continue that effort as it is critical to being prepared for the fire season, and we will continue our fuel treatments efforts even after the fire season concludes.

Senator DAINES. Last week the President signed an Executive Order directing agencies to expedite certain projects in response to this. What are your agencies doing to expedite management projects during this national emergency, and what can Congress do to help in that effort?

Mr. PHIPPS. Currently we're under—we're reviewing that Executive Order and looking for opportunities for how to take advantage of it in the pursuit of treating, making our projects easier to accomplish.

Ms. KASTER. We're also reviewing the Executive Order, but what I will say is the Department has already taken some proactive actions that are consistent with that direction including we recently finalized NEPA related to the Great Basin fuel breaks and we've been looking at creating more efficiencies within our existing authorities.

Senator DAINES. Mr. Phipps, in your testimony you write that 87 percent of fuel treatment projects have changed wildfire behavior. Clearly active management is the best tool in our tool belt to reduce the risk of wildfire. I am working on some bipartisan legislation that will ensure the subject matter experts in your agency have the ability to pursue these science-based projects without unnecessary challenge. My question is while some forest management activities were stalled during the pandemic the onslaught of lawsuits were not. There is a misconception that serial litigants only go after commercial timber projects. I am aware of the one Cottonwood-related lawsuit that has held up two time-sensitive hazardous fuel projects for nearly ten years. This is also something I am pursuing in legislation that I will be introducing very soon.

Mr. Phipps, how does the onslaught of litigation make our communities more vulnerable to wildfires?

Mr. PHIPPS. It definitely slows things down. We pursue—it's very challenging to operate at a rate fast enough to make a difference and the lawsuits do slow us down and we're looking at various strategies, including making a better effort at our NEPA and streamlining that to move our work right along.

Senator DAINES. I have one more question I am going to slip in here before I wrap up my time here.

I am encouraged that both agencies are adopting an initial aerial attack strategy to minimize the need to bring large amounts of firefighters together reflecting the challenge, of course, with COVID-19. It is my understanding, however, that bureaucratic processes can limit the agency's ability to respond quickly to national emergencies like the one we face and increase the aerial fleet as appropriate. In fact, there is a Montana company with new resources that could increase firefighting capabilities by 15 percent but was told the contracting timeline will not allow for those resources to be used this season. This is hitting us on two fronts. Without a contract the company will have to let dozens of folks go during a time when the economic conditions are already tough. We won't have these critical resources putting out wildfires, protecting Montana communities this fire season, particularly when you saw the chart that Senator Cantwell put up there in terms of the forecast which does not look very good.

My question is, I want to ensure your agency has the necessary tools to respond and fight fires as emergencies. Does the Forest Service have any flexibilities or the ability to fast-track CWN (Call When Needed) contracts to ensure robust aerial fleet during the pandemic?

Mr. PHIPPS. I believe we do, Senator, and right now, I believe that just about any air tanker that meets performance and safety requirements is under some kind of contract either from the Forest Service or Department of the Interior or the state, but we'd be happy to look at the vendor that you're looking at and look into it further.

Senator DAINES. Ms. Kaster, about that?

Ms. KASTER. I share my colleague's sentiments. We believe we have sufficient air resources, and I'm not familiar of the example that you cite but am happy to look into it further.

Senator DAINES. I can follow up with you on that as well just looking at how we are going to have to have all hands on deck here coming into this fire season, and we would like to chat more with you about that if you would. Thank you.

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you, Senator Daines.

Senator DAINES. Thanks.

The CHAIRMAN. Senator Heinrich.

Senator HEINRICH. Ms. Kaster, going back to Senator Wyden's question, who authorized the use of Park Police to clear protestors?

Ms. KASTER. Senator, I'm here to discuss the Department's management of the wildfire program. What I'd say is that the jurisdiction of the Park Police falls under the National Park Service, and they'd be happy to answer those questions.

Senator HEINRICH. Well, let the record show that was a non-answer. Do you know the answer to that question?

Ms. KASTER. No, I do not.

Senator HEINRICH. Okay.

Mr. Phipps, you said that you were concerned that you could overwhelm local testing capacity, but I would point out that until my office reached out to the Forest Service, the Forest Service had not actually coordinated with the New Mexico Department of

Health to figure out a protocol for being able to manage the testing process as I would point out, six wildfires have now started in the state and are actively burning. So what is the status of the testing guidance between the Southwest Coordinating Group and the New Mexico Department of Health and when will that be finalized?

Mr. PHIPPS. Earlier I agreed to look into it by the end of the week. I would agree, we do need a better, more comprehensive direction about that. We've been following the advice of the Inter-agency Medical Center, a committee that says don't rely on it. It doesn't mean that we can't, on a state-by-state or county-by-county basis, have—try to make something happen.

Senator HEINRICH. Well, I would point out that our Governor has not taken the hands-off approach that you have articulated with regard to testing. It is one of the reasons why our numbers have been manageable, and I think that she would be very interested in making sure that we are not importing cases into the state in the midst of fire season in an environment where community spread is almost assured.

At the end of the week, I would like to know that that guidance has been finalized because we need it now. Fires are burning now, and we are responding to them now.

Mr. PHIPPS. I understand.

[Information regarding finalized guidance follows.]



Forest Service

Washington Office

1400 Independence Avenue, SW
Washington, D.C. 20250**File Code:** 6100**Date:** July 2, 2020**Route To:****Subject:** Guidance on COVID-19 Testing and Subsequent Action**To:** Regional Foresters, Station Director, IITF Director, Deputy Chiefs and WO Directors

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Form FS-6500-229 to seek reimbursement for expenses not covered by the employee's insurance, regardless of the final diagnosis.

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Duty Status while in Alternate Housing or Alternative Work Locations:

1. If an employee is able to perform work at the alternative work location while they are symptomatic, during a required quarantine period, in isolation, or while they await test results, they will be paid their standard salary. If during the required isolation or quarantine period or while awaiting test results from a required test, an employee is unable to perform remote work, they may take Weather and Safety leave.
2. If the employee is symptomatic, the employee may take emergency sick leave as provided by the CARES Act for up to 80 hours, take accrued sick leave, or take other leave in lieu of sick leave.

This is a constantly changing situation. This guidance is aligned with current CDC guidelines and best practices as recommended by medical advisors. We recognize this fluid situation may change, and we will update this guidance and direction if it becomes necessary to do so. We remain committed to protecting the health and safety of our employees and the American people we serve. We will continue to base our actions on the guidance provided by the CDC to ensure we can perform all of our essential mission functions as safely as possible. Thank you for all you do.

A handwritten signature in blue ink, reading "Victoria Christiansen", is written over a horizontal line. To the left of the signature is a small "X" mark.

For

Signed by: KATHERINE ARMSTRONG

VICTORIA CHRISTIANSEN
Chief

Senator HEINRICH. Is there a unified PPE procurement strategy for your departments or is that being done, sort of, region-by-region and team-by-team?

Mr. PHIPPS. We have a national strategy trying to get our caches supplied for distribution and also each region and local area are pursuing PPE as well. So it's both.

Senator HEINRICH. I guess the reason why the hazard of, I think, both is what we saw in the midst of March and April where demand was very high and oftentimes FEMA and individual governors, individual states, were actually, sort of, pitted against each other and ended up bidding up the cost of things like an N-95 mask to unreasonable levels. And so, I would urge you to look at the greatest amount of coordination and, sort of, one-stop approach to that, maybe through the National Interagency Fire Center because I worry that you are going to end up paying more and getting less product if you find yourself in the same situation that many of us found ourselves in just a few weeks ago.

I have also heard from individual constituents who work in wildland firefighting that they are concerned that they and their teams are not being provided with sufficient PPE. Are fire personnel currently limited in the number of masks, for example, that they are allowed per week?

Mr. PHIPPS. I'd say no. We have in our Interagency Checklist for Mobilization—either ordering or receiving—adequate PPE is one of the requirements. And so, if they don't have adequate equipment, personal protective equipment, they're not going to be on the fire.

Senator HEINRICH. Okay. I will follow up, because I am definitely hearing that from some constituents.

Madam Chair, I think I am out of time, but I want to say how much I appreciate this hearing, because I think we have our work cut out for us.

The CHAIRMAN. Yes, I think we do and it is not only looking at the maps and the intensity of what we might see but it is how we balance the other threat that we are dealing with right now that makes it even more challenging. So thank you for that.

Let's go virtually to Senator McSally.

Senator MCSALLY. Thank you, Madam Chair. I appreciate it.

Right now, Arizona is in the midst of dealing with both the pandemic and the wildfire season. The Sawtooth Fire near Gold Canyon, Arizona, is the Southwest region's first Type 1 fire of the season and the first major fire during the pandemic. The fire is now, thankfully, 80 percent contained and I want to say thanks to the firefighters and the first responders who led this effort and developed COVID mitigation strategies that can be implemented around the country. While Coronavirus is a new challenge, for sure, for our wildland firefighters, this is a group of professionals who are well versed in risk assessment and mitigation. Because Arizona's fire season starts earlier than most of the rest of the West, our fire crews have already been successful fighting wildfires while implementing COVID-19 mitigation measures where possible.

As the fire season progresses, I just want to encourage the debriefs and the lessons learned from our crews in Arizona will help those around the West better prepare successfully to battle wild-

fires. I just really encourage the Forest Service to reach out and get those lessons learned so that they can be used for others.

One of the most effective ways to reduce the wildfire risk over the long haul, though, is to improve the health of our forest. In Arizona, the Four Forest Restoration Initiative, or 4FRI, is looking to do just that by mechanically thinning more than a million acres of national forest. But in order to reach this target the project needs to rapidly increase production. At hearings in this Committee more than a year ago I questioned Forest Service Chief Vicki Christian- sen about the delays with the 4FRI Phase 2 RFP and how the For- est Service planned to implement the reforms outlined in my For- estry bill and when we could finally expect a Phase 2 contract award. Since then, we have had nine amendments to the RFP and months and months of delays. I understand the RFP solicitation fi- nally closed on May 12th and the Forest Service is in the review process. I am sure you can see from the bids you received that Ari- zona's logging industry is eager to get to work restoring our na- tional forests and preventing these wildfires.

Mr. Phipps, when can you tell me that the Forest Service will award this Phase 2 contract and when will the forestry work actu- ally begin under Phase 2?

Mr. PHIPPS. Thank you for the question.

As I understand it, it's on track to be awarded in September and the work could, if conditions are appropriate, could begin in the fall.

Senator MCSALLY. Okay. I hope that to be true and the concern on the ground, obviously, is that the work can start before they start to see the winter and the snow up in the area that needs to be mitigated. So September is the hope and you think that it is on track for that timeline still?

Mr. PHIPPS. Yes.

Senator MCSALLY. Okay, thank you.

While much of the focus has rightly been on how the Coronavirus may affect the health of firefighters, the pandemic has impacted the wildfire seasons in other ways. The social distancing orders have reinvigorated America's love for the outdoors. As stay-at-home orders have relaxed, Americans have flocked to campgrounds, na- tional forests and public lands for healthy, socially distant recre- ation. We are seeing this around all the amazing places we have in Arizona. Many campgrounds and outdoor recreation sites in Northern Arizona's Cool Pines reported their busiest days ever over Memorial Day weekend this year. In general, this is a good trend. More people outdoors enjoying public land and rebuilding our rural economies, but more people in the forest also brings increased risk of human-caused wildfires.

Mr. Phipps, what are the federal foresters doing differently this year to encourage safe recreation on public lands which is greatly needed during this pandemic while mitigating the high wildfire risk that of more people, you know, we bring more people to the forest, there is a higher risk of human-caused fires?

Mr. PHIPPS. Thank you for the question.

What we're doing different, we've accelerated our ad campaign with the Smokey Bear messaging to get the word out that it's real- ly important, as always, but more so in the pandemic to be careful

with fire so we can reduce the amount of human starts which are the majority of fire starts, and we're increasing our patrols in the forest and, in some cases, where fire risk is at a particularly high level, we would be preemptively banning campfires, if needed.

Senator MCSALLY. Great. Thank you.

I am out of time. Thank you, Madam Chair.

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you, Senator McSally.

Let's go to Senator Hirono, please.

Senator HIRONO. Thank you, Madam Chair.

Right now, it is my understanding that our fire responders in Hawaii have adequate PPE to protect them from COVID-19. However, forecasters are expecting warmer and drier conditions than average in Hawaii from June through September. During that same time, drought conditions are expected to increase, especially on the leeward side of the islands with above-normal significant fire potential. Last year, devastating fires on Maui burned 25,000 acres, five times the area burned in 2018. Also, according to the USDA Forest Service's Wildfire Risk to Communities Assessment, homes in Hawaii are at greater risk to wildfire than 92 percent of other states. While it is challenging enough to prepare and be ready for another busy fire year across the state, we also have to add on top of that be prepared for COVID-19.

Mr. Phipps, right now we do not know when the next supplemental bill to address the impact of COVID-19 will be signed into law. The State Fire Assistance Program at the U.S. Forest Service has, to date, not received additional funds to purchase PPE. Thinking about Hawaii and how our fire responders will likely need additional equipment in the future, is there a way that you can still help state fire agencies, for example, perhaps by federal agencies sharing excess PPE with the departments that are shorthanded? Could that happen?

Mr. PHIPPS. That's a great question, thank you.

I believe that's possible. Through our Interagency Fire Center we have PPE and it's—we're in it together and if there's an identified need for a particular state, be it Hawaii, I'm sure that that could be arranged.

Senator HIRONO. That answer says to me that if we anticipate the need for more PPEs that we should contact your agency earlier rather than later so that we can be sent additional PPEs.

Mr. PHIPPS. Yes, indeed.

Senator HIRONO. Is that right?

Mr. PHIPPS. Yes, that's right and also the National Association of State Foresters could be helpful in that. We're all very interested in making sure that whatever stockpiles we have go to the right places at the right time.

Senator HIRONO. Yes, and as I mentioned, Hawaii is also one of the places where we are expecting a very busy fire season.

Along the same lines, Ms. Kaster, are there opportunities for Interior to share excess PPE should state and local fire responders find themselves shorthanded?

Ms. KASTER?

Ms. KASTER. Thank you, Senator.

Just as my colleague indicated, we coordinate the—coordinate all this at an interagency level so we'd be happy to discuss that fur-

ther with you and what I would say is we're really committed to supporting our interagency partners, our states, our local entities, as we fight fire this season.

Senator HIRONO. Thank you. I am glad to know that all of our agencies are more than willing to lend a helping hand.

Mr. Geissler, in Hawaii and I am sure all across the nation, the COVID-19 pandemic has hit state and local budgets very hard, and I know that increasing funding for the state and volunteer fire assistance programs through the Forest Service via any future supplemental bill could help fire responders in Hawaii. I also know that the National Association of State Foresters also support this effort. Can you expand on the importance of assisting state and local fire responders, especially amid all of the current constraints presented by the pandemic?

Mr. GEISLER. Thank you, Senator.

Yes, as you brought up, funding through state fire assistance and volunteer fire assistance is actually the easiest mechanism to actually help both state and local responders. The systems and processes are already in place to give those organizations direct funding without putting additional bureaucracy in place, and one thing we can do is that we work together in order to identify between states as well as within states what the need is, working with our own state departments of health. And as you heard earlier, the states are connected. We do talk and try to determine how one state can help another through our interagency agreements as well as through state compacts where we can move firefighters, if necessary, to various locations around the U.S., including Hawaii.

So again, I appreciate your thoughts with regard to where the funding should go and that will be a direct impact on the local fire service who would need critical PPE.

Senator HIRONO. Thank you very much. It is reassuring to know that it is a coordinated effort and, of course, all the states are probably going to see a pretty big budget shortfall. That is one of the reasons that we need to push for another COVID bill that will provide funding for state and local governments with their budget shortfall. Of course, all that kind of funding can go toward the fire-fighting resources that we need. Thank you very much.

Thank you, Madam Chair.

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you, Senator Hirono.

Is Senator Hoeven with us? He is next in the queue. Let's see if he pops on.

[No response.]

The CHAIRMAN. If not, we will turn to Senator Barrasso, who is definitely in the queue here.

Senator BARRASSO. Well, thank you, Madam Chairman. Following up with Senator Hirono who gave us the weather report from Hawaii, I will tell you that the interstate between Cheyenne and Laramie is closed. We had six inches of snow last night. So there are lots of differences from state to state. It is an astonishing thing.

Madam Chairman, last June you convened a hearing on the Wildfire Outlook for 2019. You do it every year. This year, as in most things, the wildfire season looks quite a bit different. Senator Hirono mentioned it. Others have mentioned it as well, Senator

McSally. 2018—truly catastrophic fires; 2019—my home State of Wyoming fared much better; 2020—unprecedented times. Yellowstone National Park is now reopened as is Grand Teton National Park, we reopened May 18th. The fire risk expands beyond the normal outlook because of the concerns for our firefighters and their safety during this pandemic.

Our forests are diverse ecosystems. As you all know, they need immediate attention. I want to talk a little bit about thinning, trying to thin overgrown stands, removing dead and downed timber. Getting this fuel load out of there, I believe, will significantly reduce fire risk. We will also make sure that we are spending federal dollars responsibly. So we need to coordinate action between local government, state government and federal agencies. That is the key to success. I think that requiring coordination among so many skilled partners like the witnesses today is helpful.

So my question, and I will start with Ms. Kaster and then ask a follow-up to Mr. Phipps, is that President Trump issued an Executive Order in December 2018, Ms. Kaster. The order directed the Forest Service and the Department of the Interior to coordinate on a number of activities to increase the treated acres on federal land and then reduce, as a result, the risk of catastrophic wildfire. In your written testimony, you talked about Fiscal Year 2020, the Department of the Interior—

[Feedback.]

—maybe Hoeven is back.

[Laughter.]

In the written testimony you mentioned that in Fiscal Year 2020 the Department had completed about 620,000 acres of treatment, about half of all the planned treatments, and over 80 percent of the benchmark which is established by the President's Executive Order. The National Interagency Fire Center updated their "Significant Wildland Fire Potential Outlook." That is their map for August. Thankfully this year, Wyoming is only at normal risk for catastrophic wildfire. Could you just share with us how reports from groups like the National Interagency Fire Center and data from state agencies factor into your Department's planning for future fuel treatments?

Ms. KASTER. Thank you for that question, Senator.

We do rely on our state agencies and other entities to provide helpful data and what I will say is that for the Department of the Interior, it yields results. As you noted, we treated 1.4 million acres last year, 620,000 acres to date and we're going to continue to prioritize those efforts moving forward. They are critical. Like in Wyoming, we, this year, have planned some treatments of existing fuel breaks and we're going to build some new fuel breaks. So it's something we are definitely focused on, and we're going to continue to be focused on that effort moving forward.

Senator BARRASSO. And then, could I ask you for your follow-up as well, your recommendation, sir?

Mr. PHIPPS. That's a great question.

We factor that in in our risk assessment work which includes not only vegetation condition but weather patterns across different parts of the country to prioritize and there, even within any given state, there's a lot of variability. So to the extent we can we're try-

ing to focus our treatments in a pattern and amount and intensity where it can really make a difference to reducing exposure to communities and other highly-valued resources.

Senator BARRASSO. You mentioned vegetation. I just want to follow up on that because in March, regions placed a pause on prescribed burns and we understand the reason behind that. Can you talk about specific changes in hazardous fuel management that maybe the Forest Service made to address the 2020 fire season from the approach you had in 2019?

Mr. PHIPPS. Well, certainly our efforts are—we know that we’re, we have a backlog. We’re behind and so every—now, particularly given that we had to pause, we’re really going after trying to get these planned treatments done. In addition to that, we’re planning to include an increased effort to focus treatments in a more intentional way than we have done in the past years.

Senator BARRASSO. Thank you.

Thank you, Madam Chairman.

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you, Senator Barrasso.

Senator King.

Senator KING. Thank you, Madam Chair.

First, I want to thank and praise Mr. Phipps for knowing that Smokey Bear does not have a middle name. Our state forester informed me of that some years ago. “The” is not Smokey Bear’s middle name, just for the record.

[Laughter.]

I want to ask a question that is somewhat touchy but I have heard for years that one of the problems with forest fires in the West and particularly in national forests is a lack of forest management, that there is a lot of debris, there is a lot of old growth, rotted trees, dead trees, trees on the ground. And my question is, what do we have for data on that? It seems to me this is something and maybe it exists and I just don’t know about it. But it seems to me, Mr. Geissler, this is a question to you as well. Couldn’t we do apples to apples comparison between relatively low-managed U.S. Forest Service land and privately-managed land and see if there are comparisons that when the climate, you know, you can adjust for the climate and all of those other factors?

It just seems to me this is an area where there ought to be data and that is what we ought to be basing our decisions upon. It worries me that we may be, and of course, once a fire starts, it does not respect the lines between U.S. Forest Service and the private sector. So give me your thoughts on that issue.

Mr. PHIPPS. Another great question. We look at, when we say lack of forest management, that’s true in part. One of the greatest problems is that most of the fire regimes in the West or throughout the country require frequent, low intensity ground fire. Pre-settlement the forests looked really different than they do now. And so, we need forest management to reduce density and then we must return fire to the landscape. You have to do both.

Senator KING. In Maine we call that pre-commercial thinning.

Mr. PHIPPS. Pre-commercial or commercial thinning to reduce density and then run prescribed fire through those areas. That’s what it will take to get more fire resilience on the landscape.

Senator KING. But is part of the problem that we don't harvest enough on federal lands? That there is just—they are just allowed to go by themselves and that creates the undergrowth and the fuel?

Mr. PHIPPS. That's part of the problem given our—a lot of, there's been a lot of settlement into these areas, and we have to suppress fire. Naturally, pre-settlement fire would roam on the landscape doing a lot of the work. But we've been suppressing fire for decades, and that primarily accounts for the buildup in hazardous fuels is the lack of natural fire. And that's why now we really need forest management to open up the vegetation so we can return prescribed fire to the landscape in a very careful and planned way.

Senator KING. Maine is the most forested state in the country, and yet we have relatively, except for a catastrophic fire in 1947, limited problem with fires. But I don't know that we do prescribed burning, as you suggest. It is more intensive management and it is all, virtually all, privately owned. Do you really need fires to prevent fires?

Mr. PHIPPS. Well, it's highly variable by different forest type, different forest ecosystems. The forests in the Northeast are different than the ones in the West.

Senator KING. Sure.

Mr. PHIPPS. And forest management there or fires on the East Coast generally are now more lower probability, wind-driven events where we can get, if you get the right conditions and a wind, you have quite a problem. But it's not the same type of risk than we see in California or Nevada or anywhere in the West.

Senator KING. Well, what I would like to see is comparative studies of 10,000-acre plots, U.S. Forest Service versus private in the same geographic region so that the climate factors are the same and the timber mix is the same. I would urge you to either work on studies such as that, I think that would be very informative, or to collect such studies if they have been done and forward them to the Committee.

Thank you for your testimony.

[Information regarding forest fire studies follow.]

Mr. Phipps Responses to Senator King:

In the June 9, 2020 Senate Committee on Energy & Natural Resources Hearing, Senator King asked Deputy Chief John Phipps if there had been studies conducted in the last 15 years comparing fuel reduction treatments on federal and private lands, and the different types of treatments (e.g. thinning, burning) and effectiveness.

Question 1: Are there studies conducted in the last 15 years comparing fuel reduction treatments on public and private lands?

Response: While no studies explicitly compare the same fuel reduction treatments on public vs. private lands, the Forest Service has done extensive work on fuel reduction treatments across the Regions. Results from treatments conducted on National Forests in similar ecosystems can be applied to both public and private lands because the biophysical effects are expected to be the similar. Forest Service research has also focused on socioeconomic challenges of implementing fuel reduction on private lands. Generally, private forest owners are aware of wildfire risk and knowledgeable about methods for reducing fuels but can be constrained by the costs and technical challenges of implementing hazardous fuel treatments on large acreages of forested land.

The Forest Service is also working across public and private lands to reduce fire risk through the Shared Stewardship Initiative, initiated in 2018. Forest Service work on hazardous fuels management under the rubric of Shared Stewardship focuses on applying sound management practices in the right place at the right scale. Risk-based wildfire management and hazardous fuels treatment on public and private lands is also the focus of the scenario investment planning work that is being conducted under the Shared Stewardship Initiative.

Below are some recent studies that address the issue of public vs. private fuel reduction strategies:

Managing Wildfire Risk in Fire-Prone Landscapes: How Are Private Landowners Contributing?
O'Callaghan, Joan; Fischer, A. Paige; Charnley, Susan. **2013.** Managing wildfire risk in fire-prone landscapes: how are private landowners contributing? Science Findings 154. Portland, OR: U.S. Department of Agriculture, Forest Service, Pacific Northwest Research Station. 6 p

Risk and Cooperation: Managing Hazardous Fuel in Mixed Ownership Landscapes
Fischer, A. Paige; Charnley, Susan. **2012.** Risk and cooperation: managing hazardous fuel in mixed ownership landscapes. Environmental Management. 49: 1192-1207.

Wildfire risk management on a landscape with public and private ownership: Who pays for protection?
Busby, Gwenlyn; Albers, Heidi J. **2010.** Wildfire risk management on a landscape with public and private ownership: Who pays for protection? Environmental Management. 45: 296-310.

Cross-boundary wildfire and community exposure: A framework and application in the western U.S.
Ager, Alan A.; Day, Michelle A.; Palaiologous; Houtman, Rachel M.; Ringo, Chris; Evers, Cody R. **2019.** Gen. Tech. Rep. RMRS-GTR-392. Fort Collins, CO: U.S. Department of Agriculture, Forest Service, Rocky Mountain Research Station. 36 p.

Question 2: What are the different types of treatments (e.g. thinning, burning) and their effectiveness on public and private lands?

Response: There have been many studies examining fuel reduction treatments in different forest types to control wildfire spread. Research has shown that thinning can be an effective treatment for reducing the likelihood of high-intensity crown fires (i.e., tree to tree spread) and is most effective when combined with prescribed burning to reduce surface fuels. Research has also shown that fuel treatments are most effective if applied regularly, are well-executed, and are strategically placed. Timing varies by region of the country. In the southeast, treatments are needed every 1-7 years. In the parts of the West, thinning and prescribed fire should occur every 15 to 30 years. Even in the cooler and wetter northeast, some forest types are fire adapted and pose some wildfire risk. In Maine, for example, the fire-adapted forests are clustered mostly in the southwest portion of the state and studies are ongoing to better understand fire management protocols.

Below are some recent studies that address the different types of fuel treatments:

Fire behavior in masticated fuels: a review

2014. Kreye, Jesse K., Nolan W. Brewer, Penelope Morgan, J. Morgan Varner, Alistair MS Smith, Chad M. Hoffman, and Roger D. Ottmar. *Forest Ecology and Management* 314 (2014): 193-207.

Effectiveness of fuel treatments for mitigating wildfire risk and sequestering forest carbon: a case study in the Lake Tahoe Basin

Loudermilk, E. Louise, et al. **2014.** *Forest Ecology and Management* 323: 114-125.

Simulating the effectiveness of improvement cuts and commercial thinning to enhance fire resistance in West Coast dry mixed conifer forests.

Jain, Theresa B.; Fried, Jeremy S.; Loreno, Sara M. **2020.** *Forest Science*. 66(2): 157-177.

Senator KING. Thank you, Madam Chair.

Mr. PHIPPS. Thank you.

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you, Senator King.

I believe we have Senator Hoeven with us.

Senator HOEVEN. Chairman?

The CHAIRMAN. Go ahead, Senator Hoeven.

Senator HOEVEN. Can you hear me now?

The CHAIRMAN. I can. You are coming in.

Senator HOEVEN. Great. I am sorry, I thought Dr. Barrasso was ahead of me there and so that is why I was not ready to go, but I appreciate you calling on me. Thanks so much for holding this hearing. I would like to start my questions with Deputy Chief Phipps.

The first one is in North Dakota. We do a tremendous amount of work with unmanned aerial systems, UAS, through our test site, the Northern Plains test site in Grand Forks and UND School of Aerospace and Aviation, and our state partners, our Guard, flies unmanned aircraft as well. So we are very deep into the whole UAS world. I would ask, can you discuss the role that UAS have in emergency response and restoration activities in regard to what the USDA Forest Service is doing in terms of not only combating forest fires, but you know, prevention as well?

Mr. PHIPPS. Thank you for the question.

We're actually very excited about new opportunity and, under the Dingell Act, we've recently with the Department of the Interior, made a decision to invest in a robust capability of using unmanned aerial systems. And how we would use them, they're primarily very good for mapping, getting intelligence, going into places that are difficult to access in the fire environment. That's really helpful. It's safer to use a drone most of the time than to use scouts. And in general forest management, it's very helpful for the reconnaissance work gathering information so we can plan new projects.

Senator HOEVEN. Is there a role for them while you are actually fighting the fires as well?

Mr. PHIPPS. Yes. In monitoring what's going on oftentimes we use helicopters but it's lower exposure to pilots and other responders to use a drone than it is any other method and that we're looking forward to using those when we get them in. We can also use them for aerial ignition for prescribed fire.

Senator HOEVEN. Is there something that we can do to interface through our test site in Grand Forks with USDA on that issue? Is there a way that we can, like I say, get involved with USDA in developing that—

Mr. PHIPPS. We would welcome the partnership. We could look into that.

Senator HOEVEN. Would you be the person to contact?

Mr. PHIPPS. Yes.

Senator HOEVEN. Okay, very good, we will do that. We will follow up.

My other question is what about—we are dry in Western North Dakota and we have the grasslands out there as well. What are you doing to work with ranchers to make sure that you are responsive to both in terms of any controlled burns so that you don't have

an issue there, but then also as far as making sure coordination on the firefighting challenges?

Mr. PHIPPS. Thank you for that.

Our direction to our field leaders is to coordinate, coordinate, coordinate—share risk before fire comes and that's particularly true anywhere there's a national grassland or national forest. That's what we do and there's a lot of time spent in developing agreements, doing scenario planning to help get prepared for each fire season.

Senator HOEVEN. Well, I would ask that you be responsive to those ranchers. They are out there on the ground. They are certainly concerned about any controlled burns, particularly when it is dry, but then also in terms of working with them on any firefighting is very important. So I would ask for your commitment to work very closely with—

Mr. PHIPPS. Yeah, we can do that.

Senator HOEVEN. —the ranchers and the grazing associations.

The other question I have is for Deputy Assistant Secretary Kaster and that is in regard to working with the tribes on the reservation as far as firefighting and the coordination effort to make sure that you are responsive to the tribes, to BIA and their firefighting communities.

Ms. KASTER. Tribes are a critical component of our ability to fight fires and we do work with them, both at the reservation level and also, as you mentioned, in coordination with the Bureau of Indian Affairs.

Senator HOEVEN. What are you doing to make sure you have outreach and that you are proactive in terms of areas that may be particularly dry this year?

Ms. KASTER. Senator, I'd have to get back to you on the specifics of what BIA has been doing in terms of treatments with tribes, but I know overarching, the Department has been very focused on ensuring that across all DOI lands, including with tribes, that we are being thoughtful and coordinated in our ability to prevent fire ahead of time.

Senator HOEVEN. Alright. Thank you. And again, thank you, Madam Chairman, I appreciate it.

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you, Senator Hoeven.

Senator Cortez Masto.

Senator CORTEZ MASTO. Thank you, Madam Chair. I appreciate everyone being here today. I have been bouncing between here and the Banking Committee, so I so appreciate the written testimonies as well.

From Nevada, as you know, wildfires and how we address them, manage them in the middle of a pandemic as well, is crucial and important for state. So let me start with a couple of things. I know the Forest Service and the BLM in Nevada have contracted additional air assets to help combat potential loss of ground crews that are currently based in Nevada, and the Nevada Division of Forestry is looking into how they may be able to assist with bolstering contracted air assets to assist in Nevada.

So let me ask a question to the panel. What do you and other states need from federal partners to increase air tanker support, because I know how crucial that is for my state? I will open it up

to the panel and maybe, Deputy Chief Phipps, if you don't mind starting the discussion?

Mr. PHIPPS. Thank you.

We've been working quite diligently. Air tankers, air resources have been a continuing challenge. We believe this year, like in my testimony, I said, we have up to 35 large air tankers. I think it's important to understand that we have also, access to in the inter-agency environment, for example, the Department of the Interior has 100 single engine aircraft or air tankers under contract and depending on the situation and the need, we have access to that and we're well underway for our planning and preparedness for the upcoming Western fire season.

Senator CORTEZ MASTO. Okay. So nothing else that we can do at a federal level to assist you in that space?

Mr. PHIPPS. Not at this time.

Senator CORTEZ MASTO. That is good to hear. Thank you.

In Nevada, as you are well aware, we have—and actually the Chairwoman has been out to Tahoe and she has seen this—we have extensive use of a fire camera network to monitor and detect our wildfires. We have the Alert Tahoe and the Alert Wildfire programs.

Let me ask. In light of the ongoing pandemic, would you say that an expansive fire detection camera network would have an even larger role to play right now among new technology that makes it available to determine where fires may be starting?

Mr. PHIPPS. Yes. Anything that we can do to detect a fire and mobilize resources, the sooner, the better. We believe, as mentioned, that keeping the fire small and it has everything to do with that very early on, after ignition, getting adequate resources to extinguish, contain the fire. And so any earlier detection is an advantage.

Senator CORTEZ MASTO. Ms. Kaster, the Alert Wildfire recently received federal funding assistance from the U.S. Forest Service, but it is also getting assistance from the Department of the Interior as well. Can you tell me the status on the funding of this program? It is the Alert Wildfire program I just talked about.

Ms. KASTER. I'm happy to look into it, Senator, and get back to you.

Senator CORTEZ MASTO. Thank you, I appreciate that, thank you so much.

Let me jump now to both testing as well as vaccines. There is a day when we are going to have a vaccine and I am curious. I know my Nevada Division of Forestry is working closely with the Department of Emergency Management in the state to list their emergency responder staff as priority for these, for these vaccines. I am curious what the Forest Service and the BLM are doing in thinking ahead to the day when we have the vaccine. Are you preparing for that and what is your preparation?

Mr. Phipps or Ms. Kaster?

Mr. PHIPPS. That's a great question. We've been imagining that. To be quite honest we've been somewhat focused on the next few months for the fire season, understanding that we're, you know, we refer to the fire year, but we are very much looking forward to having the vaccine and getting our responders vaccinated so we can

put this particular risk of the pandemic behind us because there's enough risk in the wildland fire environment to begin with, so.

Senator CORTEZ MASTO. Right. So it would make sense for the first responders to have early access to the vaccine. Do you agree with that?

Mr. PHIPPS. Yes, I agree with that.

Senator CORTEZ MASTO. Ms. Kaster?

Ms. KASTER. Senator, CDC guidance has actually, in our coordination with CDC, they have prioritized firefighting staff and we'll continue to work with them to do so as they really are our front line, folks that are really just going to be crucial this upcoming fire season.

Senator CORTEZ MASTO. Thank you. Thank you very much. Thank you to the panelists, I notice my time is up. I will submit the rest of my questions for the record.

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you, Senator. We will look forward to those.

To Ms. Kaster's final point there, recognizing that CDC has recognized the critical nature and the critical status for purposes of early access to the vaccine, one would think that that guidance would then follow through when it comes to testing. So know that that is a great concern of this Committee. I think you heard it repeated by several. I do think that what we are demonstrating in Alaska is a path forward. Now granted, we don't share those common borders with the other states, but I think aggressive testing is one way that can give that assurance when it is just not possible to follow those CDC guidelines related to social distancing and sufficient hygiene. So know that we are going to continue to press you on this.

I am going to ask one, maybe one and a half, final questions here as we wrap.

Recognizing that we do have resource mobilization issues that we have talked through here and you do have other concerns that you don't have in "a normal" fire year, as we see this fire season underway in Alaska and coming now on here in the Lower 48, what is the status of our hiring numbers and working with both state and federal?

I am going to turn to Mr. McDonald in Alaska to talk about what we are seeing on the ground right now. Do we have the folks that we need and able to assist? I know that it is really a moving target as we look to what may come in these next weeks ahead, and then I would like to ask the same question to our federal partners.

Mr. McDonald.

Mr. McDONALD. For state resources we were on target for bringing people back to work. We went through a quarantine period and some remote working, but we are on track with getting our crews ready for this fire season. Our cooperators, the federal agency that we work with, are as well, their crews are on step at this point.

The concerns I do have and for Alaska and specifically as with our village crews, our emergency firefighting crews, those numbers have already been dropping over the last decade for various reasons and then this year with the COVID overstory those are even taking a greater hit. And the concern, as you brought up, is if those crews leave a village or to be in contact with COVID and then re-

turn to that village and reintroducing that into a community like that, that's a real concern that we have in Alaska. We've worked through that process. We'll continue to work through that process. We're working with those village crews and those communities on options and some of that does and will include testing. So I will say, for us, that's probably our biggest hit to availability is with those village resources that we count on in Alaska.

The CHAIRMAN. Well thank you for raising that because that is something that, you know and many of our federal partners know, I have continued to push on the need to ensure that these native fire crews coming out of the villages which are real experts in their region are protected. They know the conditions on the ground better than anybody else out there, and they are true professionals. So it is concerning to me, perhaps even alarming, to think that because of COVID we may be in a situation where we lose the few fire crews, village fire crews, that we have in place now.

We have seen over the years our federal partners relying on them less and less which is not the direction I think we need to go and with this fear, it is not only the great benefit that they bring during active fire season but also what they can do to help us when we are doing off season fuels mitigation work. Know that this is going to continue to be an issue for me in how we can make sure that our village fire crews are stood up every year—that they get the training that they need but also in a safe work environment.

Mr. Phipps, can you speak to what we are seeing with regard to recruitment with our Lower 48 crews?

Mr. PHIPPS. Yes, thank you.

We are, the Forest Service, is on track to hire in most of our regions. We are having a bit of a challenge in Region 5 because of the competitive nature in salaries, but we're hoping to get up to operational levels there. We have heard from some of our partners in the states that some of the inmate crews may not be available this year and so, system, wildland fire system wide, there is some concern that we won't have exactly the same capacity as last year, but the Forest Service is working diligently to try to get all the firefighters we can.

The CHAIRMAN. Well I would like more detail on this. Alaska, as I mentioned, is kind of its own team up there, supplemented by the Lower 48 crews which we greatly appreciate. But when you look at the maps that Senator Cantwell showed, this is going to be a tough year if our predictions are right and usually those predictions are not too far off. To hear that we are not quite sure, in fact, maybe we are sure, that we are not going to be able to get those who have come from other places before—whether it is through our prisons or otherwise—and just to recognize that as a firefighter, again, inherently dangerous work, but now additional threats through COVID, that that is going to impact our recruitment efforts. We need to know what this game plan is to gear up so that when it hits, whether it is Arizona or Washington at the same time things are going off in Alaska, the last year we got lucky. We got lucky because Alaska really went off at a time when the Lower 48 was very quiet, so we were able to cover everything, 3,000 fire workers

up in Alaska. We were able to cover those fires because we didn't have the activity in the Lower 48.

We can't count on luck to be a strategy when it comes to resourcing these wildland fires because we know that wildland urban interface, they don't care. The Santa Ana winds that I mentioned, they push it into the biggest metropolitan area. I know that for our state, our local, our tribal, our federal, we have got to have a better handle on our level of preparedness for this season. So I want to have more conversation on that.

I am going to end with one last question and this may be to Mr. McDonald again, but I am very active with my co-chair of the Arctic Conference, very active with the Arctic Parliamentarians, and we discuss all kinds of matters related to Arctic concerns—infrastructure, climate—but one of the things that has been on our agenda in many meetings of late has been what we are seeing with these northern wildfires. Last year, Russia had significant, significant wildfires. Our friends in Canada have seen increased wildfires. In Norway, in their forests, they are seeing an increased level of fires. And it is not just in the north, we saw Australia that was truly on fire last year and we were able, as a country, to be able to help Australia with their efforts.

I raise this because it is a matter of global concern here, and the question that was raised in a call that I had with Arctic Parliamentarians last week was to what extent are agreements in place to either share fire crews or aviation assets across our international borders whether it is U.S. and Canada, but just an understanding here of these implications of the fires. Right now we have a "no travel" restriction unless it is essential between the United States and Canada. I am certainly hopeful that we would have had conversations between Canada and Alaska, our states along the Canadian border in the Lower 48, about how will we move crews if we need to be moving crews? How will we move the aviation assets if we need to do so?

Can you give me some assurance, or Mr. McDonald, can you tell me if we are at the ready when it comes to these fires that cross beyond our national borders?

Mr. McDONALD. Well, I can speak for Alaska. We are part of what is called the Northwest Compact which includes most of the Western states and a lot of the Canadian provinces where we share resources including aircraft or air tankers or scoopers, and we have a very good relationship with all those Compact members. That's a tool that we use every year to import firefighters and aerial assets to Alaska and then return when it's the Lower 48 season, we send our firefighters too at their request.

I was talking to State Forester George Geissler as well just this morning, and we've got some of his firefighters in Alaska right now helping out through that Compact. So that works very well for us, and we rely on those assets to get us through our seasons like last year. And as you mentioned, the seasons are just continuing to get worse through climate change. Last year was a really good example of the most devastating and the highest fire indices we've ever witnessed in Alaska. And it was an eye opener, I think, for a lot of people but, yeah. So that's, so we do have those Compacts in place and available. Those resources are available to us.

The CHAIRMAN. Yes, I think we got the attention of many in this country. I believe it was a New York Times article about the Arctic zombie fires where the fires can literally continue for years on end. They go underground during the winter into the peat tundra and then in the spring they will just be little poofs of fire that, if the conditions are right, can ignite and these zombie fires in the Arctic, in Alaska and Russia particularly, are getting some attention there.

I am going to end by an acknowledgment of two individuals that have given extraordinary careers when it comes to the forestry community in my state. Chris Maisch is our Alaska State Forester. He has spent 36 years serving Alaska. He has been our State Forester for the past 15 years. He has actually said he is going to retire. I think this time he actually means it, but he has been just an enormous asset for us in the state. And also, Shawna Legarza, who is the Fire and Aviation Director at the Forest Service. Shawna has over 25 years in fire management. She was a hotshot crew member herself. These are exceptional individuals who have really committed themselves to the cause which is providing for the safety of so many, ensuring not only safe communities but that our environments continue and our forests continue in healthy conditions. So I want to acknowledge their considerable work to the effort and to the cause.

With that, I thank you. We have had a good hearing. We have had good participation from Committee members. I think our witnesses have heard very clearly, we are concerned about how we can ensure that the safety of our firefighters out on the line, both from fire as well as from COVID, how we can have access to more testing, the assets that we need to have in place and working with our federal partners, our state partners, our tribal and local to do just that.

This is a little bit concerning, every time we have this fire hearing, because you are never quite sure what the season is actually going to look like. But if those maps don't get all of our attention and kind of kick us in the rear to say, let's make sure that we have these fire crews that are ready and not base this strategy on a hope that we are going to just be hit in a manner and in an order that we can track and stay on top of because Mother Nature doesn't usually care.

With that, we stand adjourned.

[Whereupon, at 12:10 p.m. the hearing was adjourned.]

APPENDIX MATERIAL SUBMITTED

U.S. Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources
June 9, 2020 Hearing: *Wildfire Management in the Midst of the COVID-19 Pandemic*
Questions for the Record Submitted to Mr. John Phipps

Questions from Chairman Lisa Murkowski

Question 1: In your testimony, you indicated that the Forest Service is following CDC guidelines to prevent the infection and spread of COVID-19 among wildland firefighters. Under those guidelines the CDC classifies wildland firefighters *with coronavirus symptoms* as high priority for getting tested for COVID-19, but does not speak to universal testing for COVID-19 of all wildland firefighters whether displaying symptoms or not. Given that federal wildland firefighters travel to fire assignments across the country, I worry that testing after a firefighter is already symptomatic is too late. Do you share this concern? Is the Forest Service willing to work with federal and state partners to set up a program for COVID-19 testing for all federal wildland firefighters with or without symptoms? If not, why not?

Answer: Testing is an important component of our COVID-19 strategy, but it cannot supersede the practice of physical distancing and face coverings that are already being implemented by Forest Service employees. The CDC guidance for critical infrastructure workers as applied to wildland fire is to test firefighters if they are symptomatic. The Forest Service is implementing additional testing of individuals exposed to a positive case.

Given the interagency nature of firefighting, we welcome the opportunity to work with our State partners to expand capacity for testing symptomatic and asymptomatic employees when appropriate and in alignment with relevant CDC guidance.

The following excerpt is pulled from guidance that was provided to the Regional Foresters, Station Directors, IITF Director, Deputy Chiefs and WO Directors within the agency in a letter dated July 2, 2020, and signed by Chief Victoria Christiansen:

1. Any employee who is required to be at a Forest Service duty station, is in travel status, or on a Forest Service work assignment such as a fire incident or other remote assignment may be required to be tested. Our mission requires that we ensure we have enough personnel to carry out our functions.
2. Instances where an employee will be required to be tested are when any employee is experiencing COVID-19 symptoms while performing their duties or when any employee has had direct exposure while performing their work assignments to an individual who tests positive for COVID-19.
3. During an assignment, daily symptom screening for COVID-19 will be performed. COVID-19 symptoms are found at <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/symptoms-testing/symptoms.html>.
4. To obtain tests, employees will leverage local testing capacity as available. If free testing is not available, employees will work with their local line officers or incident management teams to pay for testing at time of service. If this is not feasible, then employees will use Form FS-6500-229 to seek reimbursement for expenses not covered by the employee's insurance, regardless of the final diagnosis.

5. While using State or local testing capacity is the primary and preferred option, in instances where Regional Foresters, Station Directors, IITF Director, or Deputy Chiefs determine mission requirements necessitate additional testing capacity, they must work with Business Operations to facilitate the ability to contract for testing services to be administered at no cost to the employee if feasible. Contracting additional testing capabilities will require: 1) test supplies, which could vary in market availability; 2) credible lab analysis; 3) a certified medical professional to interpret lab analysis; 4) data management, including protection of privacy; and 5) test disposal management.

Question 2: Please provide a full description of the preparedness status of current and expected multi-agency, federal, state, local, tribal, volunteers, contracted, and other wildland fire cooperators this year. Are there regions where there could be fire personnel shortfalls that affect the deployment of resources to other parts of the nation, like Alaska? If so, how should this be addressed?

Answer: We have 10,000 Forest Service federal firefighters available, up to 35 airtankers, and more than 200 helicopters from Forest Service contracts. Through interagency cooperation we have access to additional federal firefighting resources, including 100 single engine airtankers from DOI contracts. In addition, multiple contractors and cooperators from State, Tribal, and local government resources are available.

Firefighters are mobilized throughout the country and throughout the fire year. To date, we have adequate resources to support Alaska firefighting needs. Our Federal agencies, Tribal, State and local partners stand together, ready to respond to wildfire during the 2020 fire year. We may adjust how we fight fire in response to current conditions, but will not alter our commitment to protect the American people and our lands.

Questions from Ranking Member Joe Manchin III

Question 1: I understand that several of the After-Action-Reports from recent wildfires, as well as several recent firefighter surveys, highlight the need for clearer information and direction from agency leadership. Will you commit to providing a clear, simple crosswalk that is one or two pages long for supervisors and for your employees about what is supposed to happen, upon being exposed to or testing positive for COVID-19 (specifically outlining the extent to which your agency will support its firefighters?)

Answer: Yes. The Forest Service is fully committed to providing the most up-to-date information to both supervisors and employees as it pertains to testing and self-isolation policies and procedures. We continue to update our guidance documents as we learn through experience. The Fire Management Board created Medical and Public Health Advisory Team has put out guidance on prevention mitigations regarding physical distancing, "Module as One Crew," cleaning and disinfecting, and face coverings along with a Hazard Assessment and Prevention Toolkit. They put out guidance on laboratory testing for symptomatic, asymptomatic directly exposed, and when testing might be warranted for asymptomatic and no known exposure individuals. A document was also created to instruct the federal agencies on what they can do to assist the state public health departments with contact tracing on a fire.

Question 2: I understand that the Forest Service policy for this fire season is to quickly attack a new wildfire with the minimum number of firefighters needed to put it out, which makes a lot of sense. I also understand that you, personally, have been leading an effort for the past several years to reduce risks and exposure in firefighters. Can you provide us with a status report on those efforts and can us how that work is influencing this summer's policies?

Answer: The Forest Service has continued to invest in and develop its Risk Management Assistance program to provide real time fire analytics to inform risk-based decision making on incidents. These analytical products provide information that can assist fire managers in determining where resources have the highest likelihood of success, reducing unnecessary exposure for firefighters. The intent of Risk Management Assistance is to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of fire management response. Decision makers are provided access to experienced line officers, personnel skilled in risk management and fire operations, and enhanced and emerging fire analytics to assist in developing and analyzing alternative fire management strategies. The resulting fire management decisions are based on an evaluation of risk and cost tradeoffs to protect highly valued resources and assets while seeking opportunities to reduce unnecessary exposure to responders and capitalize on options that have highest likelihood of success.

We are confronting a rapidly evolving situation with COVID-19, and it has and will continue to impact fire operations this year. We will seek to increase the use of our Risk Management Assistance tools to augment existing capabilities. Additionally, new tools are being developed to directly support pandemic-specific decision making in the fire environment, including modeling and organizational learning systems designed to proliferate best management practices throughout the wildland fire system.

Question 3: Please tell us how many wildland firefighters the Forest Service has hired each year for the last four years. Specifically, how many firefighters (permanent and seasonal) were employed by your agency on July 1 of 2017, 2018, 2019, and 2020?

Answer: The Forest Service has maintained 10,000 firefighters annually since 2014. The Agency is finalizing its onboarding of all firefighters for 2020.

Firefighter Positions Onboard by Year				
Year	Temporary	Permanent	Total	Pay Period of Data Retrieval
2017	5,192	7,235	12,428	Pay Period 13
2018	4,967	7,452	12,419	Pay Period 13
2019	4,867	7,182	12,049	Pay Period 13
2020	4,256	7,603	11,859	Pay Period 11

Question 4: In April 2017, an article in the *Journal of Occupational and Environmental Hygiene* about fatalities among wildland firefighters concluded that tracking systems were inconsistent and the use of a common case definition would help to more accurately characterize wildland firefighter deaths, lessen the likelihood for the misinterpretation of wildland firefighter fatality data, and assist with defining the

true occupational fatality burden. Section 1114(g) of the John D. Dingell, Jr. Conservation, Management, and Recreation Act amended the Federal Fire Prevention and Control Act of 1974, to require that a consistent, publicly-accessible database be immediately compiled and maintained, which would assemble all of the injuries sustained by wildland firefighters that were treated by a doctor each year.

What is the status of the database?

Answer: The U.S. Fire Administration operates and maintains the National Fire Data Center pursuant to the Federal Fire Prevention and Control Act of 1974. The John D. Dingell Conservation, Management, and Recreation Act amended the Federal Fire Prevention and Control Act to require specific additional data be maintained in the database. Specifically, the center is to include data on (A) all injuries sustained by a firefighter, and treated by a doctor, (B) all deaths sustained while undergoing a pack test or preparing for a work capacity, (C) injuries or deaths resulting from vehicle accidents, and (D) all injuries or deaths resulting from aircraft crashes.

The Forest Service eSafety system is an internal database for recording, reporting, and investigation of all employee work-related accidents, injuries, and illnesses that has been updated to capture the additional data fields required in the Act. Additional systematic changes are still needed to enable the agency to pull annual reports with the required data elements on the firefighter injuries while protecting employee medical information, as required Section 1114. Accordingly, we are unable to report data to the U.S. Fire Administration broken down by the categories added by Section 1114(g). The Department of the Interior has a similar safety tracking system that it is updating with the additional data fields.

How specifically is your agency providing the information required under this law to populate the database?

Answer: The Forest Service currently reports serious accidents and fatalities to the U.S. Fire Administration and to the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH), which has a publicly accessible database: <https://www.cdc.gov/niosh/fire/investigations/completedinvestigations/completedinvestigations.html>. The Forest Service has also requested that the interagency National Wildfire Coordination Group's Risk Management committee produce the yearly consolidated report from both Forest Service and Department of the Interior systems. Discussions are underway on how to proceed should they take on the task.

Has the authorization for a partnership with the Center for Firefighter Injury Research and Safety Trends been utilized?

Answer: The Forest Service has reached out to the governing body of the Center for Firefighter Injury Research and Safety Trends; however, we have not yet allocated the resources necessary to incorporate the Forest Service data elements.

The Forest Service reports serious accidents and fatalities to the U.S. Fire Administration and to the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH), which has a publicly accessible database:

<https://www.cdc.gov/niosh/fire/investigations/completedinvestigations/completedinvestigations.html>. Beginning January 2021, the Forest Service will transition from the eSafety system and will begin using the E-Comp, Department of Labor's Accident Reporting System.

Questions from Senator James E. Risch

Question 1: Vegetation interference with power lines is a common cause of electrical service disruptions and utility-caused wildfires. In 2018, congress enacted provisions to allow electric utilities to more easily manage vegetation and remove hazard trees along their rights-of-ways on federal lands. The law required your Department's to amend or finalize new regulations by March of this year. Can you please provide the committee with an update on when you expect to release these finalized regulations?

Answer: In coordination with the Bureau of Land Management, and taking into account public comment on the proposed rule, the Forest Service promulgated a final regulation on July 10, 2020, governing vegetation management and maintenance of powerlines on National Forest System lands. The final rule went into effect on August 10, 2020. The Forest Service is also working with a sister agency in USDA, the Rural Utilities Service, to coordinate financial assistance to rural cooperatives for thinning and treatment of fuels to reduce the risk of wildfires associated with powerlines on National Forest System lands

Question 2: The process of securing sufficient resources seems to be well underway, but until Incident Management Teams actually run through a few incident assignments, and the level of PPE resource ordering becomes clear, it is difficult to project how late in the season their ability to supply incidents will last. What is being done to ensure there is sufficient PPE for wildland firefighters and what is the process for forecasting how much PPE will be needed?

Answer: The Forest Service took a strategic approach to ensuring that PPE and related pandemic supplies were appropriate and adequately stocked to address the COVID-19 pandemic. As such, we currently have adequate inventory of PPE and other pandemic support items in the national fire cache system. Forecasting of PPE needs is based on projected fire activity, estimated numbers of assigned personnel, and projected rates of use. Trigger points for reordering are established for each item, and inventory levels are monitored daily.

Question 3: Why have pre-fire season inspections of state aircraft been limited to those secured through exclusive use contracts and not included inspections of key state call-when-needed aviation resources that also help aid in maximizing emergency response capability within states like Idaho? Are there changes needed to federal policy to expedite inspections of state call-when-needed aviation resources and enable more efficient sharing of aviation resources between federal and state wildland agencies?

Answer: The Forest Service contracts for over 700 firefighting aircraft to fill the agency and interagency needs to maintain wildfire response and capability. The Forest Service has advised States that the agency has very limited inspector resources. The Forest Service inspectors cannot

inspect aircraft for States who have contracts with vendors that do not have a contract with the Federal government. This is due to the liabilities involved with inspecting and, in turn, the State using an aircraft that the Forest Service would have no contractual oversight or authority over. The Forest Service only inspects aircraft that meet the interagency inspections standards and are on Federal exclusive use or call-when-needed contracts. Most States include provisions in their aviation contracts with vendors that require that aircraft offered to States be those that are already on a Federal exclusive use or call-when-needed contract, and have already been inspected by the Forest Service. Through these provisions, these aircraft are then allowed to fly on missions involving federal lands.

Question from Senator Martin Heinrich

Question: According to your testimony, the U.S. Forest Service will have up to 35 large airtankers this fire season. Could the Forest Service please provide a list of the 35 contracted large airtanker and very large airtanker aircraft, categorized by vendor?

Answer: At any one time the Forest Service will have up to 35 airtankers.

ITEM NUMBER	CONTRACTOR AGREEMENT NUMBER	AIRCRAFT	TANKER NUMBER
1	10 Tanker Air Carrier (12024B19G5001)	DC-10	T-910
2	10 Tanker Air Carrier (12024B19G5001)	DC-10	T-911
3	10 Tanker Air Carrier (12024B19G5001)	DC-10	T-912
4	10 Tanker Air Carrier (12024B19G5001)	DC-10	T-914
5	10 Tanker Air Carrier (12024B19G5001)	DC-10	T-915
6	Aero Air, LLC (12024B19G5002)	MD-87	T-101
7	Aero Air, LLC (12024B19G5002)	MD-87	T-102
8	Aero Air, LLC (12024B19G5002)	MD-87	T-103
9	Aero Air, LLC (12024B19G5002)	MD-87	T-105
10	Aero Air, LLC (12024B19G5002)	MD-87	T-107
11	Aero Air, LLC (12024B19G5002)	MD-87	T-104
12	Aero Air, LLC (12024B19G5002)	MD-87	T-106

ITEM NUMBER	CONTRACTOR AGREEMENT NUMBER	AIRCRAFT	TANKER NUMBER
13	Aero Air, LLC (12024B19G5002)	Bae Avro 146 RJ85	T-160
14	Aero Air, LLC (12024B19G5002)	Bae Avro 146 RJ85	T-161
15	Aero Air, LLC (12024B19G5002)	Bae Avro 146 RJ85	T-162
16	Aero Air, LLC (12024B19G5002)	Bae Avro 146 RJ85	T-163
17	Aero Air, LLC (12024B19G5002)	Bae Avro 146 RJ85	T-164
18	Aero Air, LLC (12024B19G5002)	Bae Avro 146 RJ85	T-165
19	Aero Air, LLC (12024B19G5002)	Bae Avro 146 RJ85	T-166
20	Aero Air, LLC (12024B19G5002)	Bae Avro 146 RJ85	T-167
21	Aero Air, LLC (12024B19G5002)	Bae Avro 146 RJ85	T-168
22	Coulson Aviation (12024B19G5004)	C-130	T-131
23	Coulson Aviation (12024B19G5004)	C-130	N/A ¹
24	Coulson Aviation (12024B19G5004)	B-737-300	T-137
25	Coulson Aviation (12024B19G5004)	B-737-300	T-138
26	Global Super Tanker (12024B19G5005)	B-747	T-944
27	Neptune Aviation (12024B19G5006)	BAe-146 200A	T-1
28	Neptune Aviation (12024B19G5006)	BAe-146 200A	T-2
29	Neptune Aviation (12024B19G5006)	BAe-146 200A	T-3
30	Neptune Aviation (12024B19G5006)	BAe-146 200A	T-10
31	Neptune Aviation (12024B19G5006)	BAe-146 200A	T-12
32	Neptune Aviation (12024B19G5006)	BAe-146 200A	T-15

¹ This line item was not filled due to the airtanker crash in Australia

ITEM NUMBER	CONTRACTOR AGREEMENT NUMBER	AIRCRAFT	TANKER NUMBER
33	Neptune Aviation (12024B19G5006)	BAe-146 200A	T-16
34	Neptune Aviation (12024B19G5006)	BAe-146 200A	T-40
35	Neptune Aviation (12024B19G5006)	BAe-146 200A	T-41

Question from Senator Martha McSally

Question: One of the biggest challenges to 4FRI is the efficient and economical removal of leftover piles of branches and slash, or biomass. Removing biomass is critical to achieving fire resiliency but it is also one of the most expensive components of a commercial logging operation. Electricity generated from this material currently represents the best option for removing and using this leftover slash. In fact, Arizona's sole biomass facility, Novo Power in Snowflake, takes more than 300,000 tons of logging slash out of our forests annually.

There are multiple streamlining efforts the Forest Service can implement today to improve the economics of slash removal during forest restoration. These proposals are outlined in my bill, S.1849, the Accelerating Forest Restoration Act. In addition, one of the most impactful policies that would jump-start the biomass power industry would be to finally implement the biomass electricity component of the Renewable Fuel Standard that has languished for 10 years.

Mr. Phipps, the EPA has exercised some power over forest policy through its interpretation of fuels that are acceptable under the Renewable Fuel Standard. As a result, many forest-derived biomass fuel producers are unable to participate in the RFS to the detriment of the forestry industry and rural forested areas. Does the Forest Service have plans to work with the EPA to broaden the scope of accepted RFS fuels?

Answer: The Forest Service is working with the EPA to facilitate effective Renewable Fuel Standard (RFS) implementation that advances both of our missions, including expanding market sectors critical to sustainable forest management and reducing wildfire risk. The Forest Service has had preliminary conversations with EPA staff regarding the definitions of forest fuels and is willing to continue to engage with the EPA.

Questions from Senator Catherine Cortez Masto

Question 1: As we are all aware, every second counts when fighting a wildfire. In fact, many federal and state officials have emphasized how critical early evacuations are to limiting wildfire damage. Not only does it help get people out of harm's way, but it also provides firefighters with the opportunity to get in before the blazes and set up fire breaks.

However, these evacuation centers often pack hundreds, sometimes thousands of people together into a school or community center – not allowing for people to properly follow the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention guidelines for social distancing.

- A. Due to the dangers of the current pandemic, what evacuation protocols are being put in place?

Answer: Evacuation protocols are developed and implemented by local authorities, as they are specific to each community. The Forest Service coordinates with local officials to help inform them about expected fire impacts so they are able to make informed decisions.

- B. How do you intend to relay these protocols to the public?

Answer: Local authorities will relay evacuation protocols to the public using emergency notification tools such as reverse 911 calls, community text messaging and if necessary through the contact of residents on site directly with law enforcement personnel.

Question 2: In your ongoing efforts to continue implementing hazardous fuels reduction activities that reduce the risk of wildfires, how are you working with state, federal and local government partners to ensure funding is being allocated across jurisdictional boundaries, in mutually selected areas of high priority, and that equipment, staffing, contractors are being utilized for the best cost to all agencies?

Answer: The Shared Stewardship initiative, in concert with the National Cohesive Wildland Fire Management Strategy, provides a framework for working across boundaries to prioritize hazardous fuels funding using the best available science and mutually determined priorities. The Forest Service prioritizes collaboration with partners to identify high risk areas that cross boundaries and threaten communities. We engage with Federal, State, local, and Tribal governments, as well as stakeholders, in developing quantitative wildfire risk assessments to include all lands in order to prioritize critical treatment needs. In addition, we are using a national investment scenario tool to help inform the places at highest risk of wildfire transmission to communities. We are using all available tools to increase the pace and scale of our active management work. Some examples include Shared Stewardship agreements, Good Neighbor Authority, the Reserve Treaty Rights Land program, and 638 contracts to work with Tribal, State, Federal, and local government partners to shift funding and expand our capacity to get work done across all lands within high risk areas. Through the Collaborative Forest Landscape Restoration Program projects and Joint Chiefs' projects, the agency continues to build relationships with partners to work across all lands, crossing boundaries to address high risk areas.

Question 3: Depending on the number and severity of wildfires this year, additional ground crews may be needed to help extinguish flames.

- A. As in previous years, will inmates be deployed to help fight fires?
 B. If so, what precautions are you taking with inmate crews, in particular, to decrease their chance of infection and transmission to prison populations?

Answer: States manage their inmate crew programs; therefore, the Forest Service does not have this information.

Question 4: In your testimony, you mentioned that the U.S. Forest Service is making a stronger push to urge the public to do their part during the 2020 fire year to prevent human-caused fires.

Specifically, you noted that the agency is launching a new, coordinated public service campaign to promote safe and responsible outdoor recreation. This is something of profound importance to Nevada, as State and Federal agencies recently implemented statewide fire restrictions and protocols in response to current wildfire conditions and projections.

- A. As more and more recreation sites continue to re-open, what else needs to be done to get this message out?

Answer: The Forest Service recently updated our Fire Prevention and Recreation campaign in collaboration with the Ad Council and the National Association of State Foresters. This is now complete and available nationwide as the Be Outdoor Safe campaign, and highlights topics such as planning before leaving home, how to incorporate fire prevention into outdoor recreation, and safe fire practices while at home: <https://www.beoutdoorsafe.org/>. This effort has a wide variety of tools that can be implemented depending on current local conditions and will be translated into Spanish to increase the reach of the message.

The Forest Service is using a number of other communication tools to help keep the public informed of the status of Forest re-openings and how to recreate responsibly. Along with other Federal agencies, partners, and recreation industry representatives, we are using the social media hashtag #recreateresponsibly and www.recreateresponsibly.org to share information with the public. The Forest Service is also developing new mapping and web tools that will help the public locate open areas and applicable restrictions. Updated fire restrictions around the country are also posted on our websites, shared with partners, posted in the field, and distributed through local media.

Through our ongoing partnerships with Outdoor Ethics providers “Leave No Trace and Tread Lightly!” tools are available and shared across the country that provide the public with information to minimize their impacts when recreating outdoors. These efforts include managing campfire impacts, providing safe camping tips, and being fire prevention aware in a variety of outdoor pursuits. Additionally, each partnership provides education, online learning, youth engagement, and, in many states, a collaborative Federal/State approach to responsible use messaging.

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Questions from Chairman Lisa Murkowski

Question 1: In your testimony, you indicated that the Department of the Interior is following CDC guidelines to prevent the infection and spread of COVID-19 among wildland firefighters. Under those guidelines the CDC classifies wildland firefighters *with coronavirus symptoms* as high priority for getting tested for COVID-19, but does not speak to universal testing for COVID-19 of all wildland firefighters whether displaying symptoms or not. Given that federal wildland firefighters travel to fire assignments across the country, I worry that testing after a firefighter is already symptomatic is too late. Do you share this concern? Is the Department of the Interior willing to work with federal and state partners to set up a program for COVID-19 testing for all federal wildland firefighters with or without symptoms? If not, why not?

Response: The Federal Wildland Fire COVID-19 Medical and Public Health Advisory Team (MPHAT) is an interagency group of medical health experts from the Department of the Interior (Department), the Department of Agriculture's Forest Service, and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), and currently recommends against utilizing universal testing as a COVID-19 risk mitigation strategy among wildland firefighters. MPHAT is considering possible protocols and circumstances under which testing asymptomatic individuals without a known or suspected exposure to COVID-19 would be appropriate. The interagency wildland fire community is also implementing key prevention and mitigation strategies, such as the use of protective barriers, screening procedures, and social distancing.

Consistent with the CDC guidelines, MPHAT recently updated its testing guidelines for firefighters and recommended testing individuals with signs and symptoms consistent with COVID-19 and testing those individuals with recent known or suspected exposure to COVID-19. To help mitigate the spread of the virus, standards are in place for social distancing, contact tracing—to be carried out by local public health officials—and the immediate isolation of symptomatic firefighters and others with a recent known or suspected exposure to COVID-19.

Wildland fire personnel must be able to respond to wildfire incidents quickly to limit fire growth and to protect lives, property, and natural resources. Existing screening protocols are in place to prevent and limit the risk of COVID-19 being introduced to incidents. Pre-deployment testing would likely delay fire response given the current timelines to reliably receive results, test accuracy, availability, and the capacity to administer.

Question 2: In your testimony, you alluded to some legal issues associated with COVID-19 testing that may impact your Department's ability to require federal wildland firefighters to be tested for COVID-19. Is that accurate? If so, what are the legal issues that impact the ability of the Department to require such testing?

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Response: The Department continues to work with our Solicitors and the MPHAT to ensure we are following the most appropriate and legal testing procedures for the Department's wildland fire personnel.

Question 3: Please provide a full description of the preparedness status of current and expected multi-agency, federal, state, local, tribal, volunteers, contracted, and other wildland fire cooperators this year. Are there regions where there could be fire personnel shortfalls that affect the deployment of resources to other parts of the nation, like Alaska? If so, how should this be addressed?

Response: The Department and its partners are well prepared for the 2020 fire season. The Department is on track to have the same number of firefighters as last season, which includes 4,500 temporary seasonal, career seasonal, and permanent employees. The Department will also have a complementary mix of firefighting aircraft, including access to 100 single engine airtankers, 370 helicopters, 18 scoopers, and numerous other support aircraft. Collectively, we will use aircraft and ground-based assets to the fullest extent to reduce the duration of wildfires and curb the number of wildfires that are managed for resource purposes.

Questions from Ranking Member Joe Manchin III

Question 1: I understand that several of the After-Action-Reports from recent wildfires, as well as several recent firefighter surveys, highlight the need for clearer information and direction from agency leadership. Will you commit to providing a clear, simple crosswalk that is one or two pages long for supervisors and for your employees about what is supposed to happen, upon being exposed to or testing positive for COVID-19 (specifically outlining the extent to which your agency will support its firefighters?)

Response: The interagency wildland fire community has issued clear guidance in alignment with CDC guidelines for testing individuals with signs and symptoms consistent with COVID-19 and testing individuals with recent known or suspected exposure to COVID-19. This guidance includes recommendations for the immediate isolation of individuals experiencing COVID-19 symptoms or those who may have been exposed to the virus, and the use of contact tracing—to be carried out by local public health officials—in order to mitigate the spread of the virus. The interagency wildland fire community has also issued guidance for screening firefighters, using personal protective equipment, and employing other public health practices that are deemed essential to protecting firefighters and support staff before, during and after wildfire incidents. These guidelines have been made widely available to all Department of the Interior (Department) employees, including wildland fire management personnel, and are available on the Department's online employee portal.

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The National Wildfire Coordinating Group Emergency Medical Committee developed a Medical Unit Concept of Operations plan. The plan is a dynamic document summarizing the roles and responsibilities of medical unit leaders and the function and operational posture of a COVID-19 medical unit during wildland fire suppression operations. The purpose of this plan is to provide a baseline framework for incident personnel to plan for and react to suspected or confirmed COVID-19 infections. This plan also provides several checklists to aid in navigating the complexities of COVID-19. These lists can be updated as needed to meet the best practices and lessons learned of Incident Management Teams and individual suppression modules.

Question 2: Please tell us how many wildland firefighters the Department of the Interior has hired each year for the last four years. Specifically, how many firefighters (permanent and seasonal) were employed by your agency on July 1 of 2017, 2018, 2019, and 2020?

Response: The Department's wildland fire program is composed of permanent and seasonal wildland fire personnel. The Department's Fuels Management program personnel also contribute to wildland fire suppression operations, so their numbers are included below, as well as support personnel who provide all facets of wildland fire support such as fire camp logistics, finance, business, and other critical support functions:

- 2017 – 5,308 personnel
- 2018 – 5,326 personnel
- 2019 – 4,900 personnel
- 2020 – 4,917 personnel*

*Note: This is an estimate, as the 2020 personnel numbers have not yet been finalized.

Question 3: In April 2017, an article in the *Journal of Occupational and Environmental Hygiene* about fatalities among wildland firefighters concluded that tracking systems were inconsistent and the use of a common case definition would help to more accurately characterize wildland firefighter deaths, lessen the likelihood for the misinterpretation of wildland firefighter fatality data, and assist with defining the true occupational fatality burden. Section 1114(g) of the John D. Dingell, Jr. Conservation, Management, and Recreation Act amended the Federal Fire Prevention and Control Act of 1974, to require that a consistent, publicly-accessible database be immediately compiled and maintained, which would assemble all of the injuries sustained by wildland firefighters that were treated by a doctor each year.

- A. What is the status of the database?
- B. How specifically is your agency providing the information required under this law to populate the database?
- C. Has the authorization for a partnership with the Center for Firefighter Injury Research and Safety Trends been utilized?

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Response: The Department's current Safety Management Information System (SMIS) is a database for reporting and analysis of all departmental injuries and illnesses. The Department's agencies are required to input any injury or illness into the SMIS database. The Department and its partners use SMIS to ensure consistent wildland firefighter safety reporting and data gathering. Additionally, the National Wildland Fire Coordinating Group's (NWCG) Risk Management Committee (RMC), a group comprised of state and interagency partners, maintains a database tracking all wildland fire events that meet reporting criteria including serious injuries, fatalities, and significant potential for serious injuries. This database allows the fire community to assess trends nationally.

Additionally, the Department works with the RMC to provide for wildland firefighter risk management, health, and safety. The RMC develops, promotes, and facilitates universal risk management principles that help firefighters and fire managers mitigate or eliminate the conditions that lead to accidents, illnesses, injuries, and deaths of firefighters and other incident personnel.

Questions from Senator James E. Risch

Question 1: Vegetation interference with power lines is a common cause of electrical service disruptions and utility-caused wildfires. In 2018, congress enacted provisions to allow electric utilities to more easily manage vegetation and remove hazard trees along their rights-of-ways on federal lands. The law required your Department's to amend or finalize new regulations by March of this year. Can you please provide the committee with an update on when you expect to release these finalized regulations, and perhaps shed some light on what we might expect to see in them?

Response: Public Law 115-141 added a new section (Title V, 512) to the Federal Land Policy and Management Act (FLPMA) titled "*Vegetation management, facility inspection, and operation, and maintenance relating to electric transmission and distribution facility rights-of-way.*" Per direction in Public Law 115-141, the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) is working on a proposed rule to ensure implementation of Section 512. In the meantime, the BLM is expeditiously implementing vegetation management projects to help reduce wildfire risk.

Question 2: The process of securing sufficient resources seems to be well underway, but until Incident Management Teams actually run through a few incident assignments, and the level of PPE resource ordering becomes clear, it is difficult to project how late in the season their ability to supply incidents will last. What is being done to ensure there is sufficient PPE for wildland firefighters and what is the process for forecasting how much PPE will be needed?

Response: All wildland firefighters are issued standard wildland firefighting clothing and equipment, such as Nomex pants, shirts, gloves, hard hats, etc., to protect them from wildland firefighting hazards. During the pandemic, additional personal protective equipment (PPE) is

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being utilized to protect against COVID-19 exposure.

For example, the Department has distributed N-95 masks for emergency situations, such as an emergency transport of a person who has contracted COVID-19. These masks are not intended for daily operational use but rather as source control for a symptomatic wildland firefighter. For daily use, the Department has been providing cloth face covers for all wildland fire personnel, along with cleaning and sanitizing products to address the increased need for routine cleaning, disinfecting, and hand hygiene efforts.

The interagency wildland fire cache or supply system has also ordered protective medical supplies for trained medical personnel who may experience increased exposure to the virus. The interagency wildland fire cache system also has available ample sanitation and disinfectant supplies, such as disinfectant wipes, hand sanitizer, and other cleaning materials to further reduce the risk of transmission during wildland fire suppression operations. PPE supplies are consistently monitored and evaluated by the interagency wildland fire cache.

The interagency wildland fire management community is committed to mitigating the spread of COVID-19 and continues to assess needs and develop recommendations based on CDC guidelines for social distancing and the use of personal protective equipment on the fireline and in camp. The Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act funding remains available to support these precautionary measures, as needed. As the fire year progresses, the Department will continue to evaluate conditions and respond as necessary to ensure the highest degree of readiness for the wildland fire management program.

Questions from Senator Catherine Cortez Masto

Question 1: As discussed during the hearing, the State of Nevada uses an extensive fire camera network to monitor and detect wildfires. Through its AlertTahoe and AlertWildfire programs, the state currently utilizes thirty-nine total cameras and has plans to add fourteen more this year.

The Alert Wildfire program recently received federal funding assistance from the U.S. Forest Service, but is awaiting additional funds from the Department of the Interior.

- A. What is the current status of these funds?**
- B. What is the timeline for the distribution of these funds?**

Response: The University of Nevada-Reno (UNR) fire camera system is a partnership with the BLM and UNR Seismological Laboratory through an assistance agreement. This system allows for the detection of new wildfire ignitions and the monitoring of existing wildland fires. It also allows wildfire dispatch centers to confirm ignitions and adjust fire resource responses

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accordingly to ensure adequate response and resources. The original assistance agreement, which installed 20 cameras across the state of Nevada, was initiated in 2015 and expired in early 2020.

The 2020 BLM-UNR assistance agreement is for a three-year period, with a total funding amount of \$1.75 million. The fiscal year 2020 amount will install six additional cameras across northern Nevada for a total of \$350,000. The final agreement and fund transfer occurred on June 30, 2020.

Question 2: As we are all aware, every second counts when fighting a wildfire. In fact, many federal and state officials have emphasized how critical early evacuations are to limiting wildfire damage. Not only does it help get people out of harm's way, but it also provides firefighters with the opportunity to get in before the blazes and set up fire breaks.

However, these evacuation centers often pack hundreds, sometimes thousands of people together into a school or community center – not allowing for people to properly follow the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention guidelines for social distancing.

A. Due to the dangers of the current pandemic, what evacuation protocols are being put in place?

Response: Federal wildland fire agencies generally do not have the authority to order the public or communities to evacuate. The authority to order an evacuation and the type of evacuation varies by state and local government. Evacuations are coordinated by local law enforcement with support from the federal agencies or Incident Management Teams that are managing the wildfire or emergency incident.

B. How do you intend to relay these protocols to the public?

Response: Should a Governor order an evacuation, federal wildland fire officials (local agency or Incident Management Team) will work closely with local law enforcement officials within the jurisdiction of a wildfire to ensure that the public is notified through proper channels (including emergency alert systems, social media, and/or news media outlets). Additional coordination with the local Red Cross helps ensure people follow Centers of Disease Control and Prevention guidelines.

Question 3: Depending on the number and severity of wildfires this year, additional ground crews may be needed to help extinguish flames.

A. As in previous years, will inmates be deployed to help fight fires?

Response: Individual states manage and determine the availability of inmate crews; however, wildland fire management agencies work closely with state partners to mobilize inmate crews to

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wildland fire incidents.

B. If so, what precautions are you taking with inmate crews, in particular, to decrease their chance of infection and transmission to prison populations?

Response: The safety of the public and all wildland fire responders is always the number one priority for all wildland fire agencies. Protocols have been integrated into Wildland Fire Response Plans and are available to all Incident Management Teams and fire units to help guide effective wildfire response. The response plans include procedures for potential wildland fire personnel infection, which will be led by the local State Health Department following Centers for Disease Control and Prevention guidance and protocol.

Additionally, the National Interagency Mobilization Guide provides a framework and protocols for potential situations, including the possibility for potential COVID-19 infection throughout a large percentage of the wildland firefighting workforce. To keep firefighters and communities healthy and safe, all firefighters, including state resources, are asked to follow recommendations from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention to reduce the spread of illness.

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No Responses Received as of the Date of Printing

Questions from Senator Catherine Cortez Masto

Question 1: As we are all aware, every second counts when fighting a wildfire. In fact, many federal and state officials have emphasized how critical early evacuations are to limiting wildfire damage. Not only does it help get people out of harm's way, but it also provides firefighters with the opportunity to get in before the blazes and set up fire breaks.

However, these evacuation centers often pack hundreds, sometimes thousands of people together into a school or community center – not allowing for people to properly follow the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention guidelines for social distancing.

A. Due to the dangers of the current pandemic, what evacuation protocols are being put in place?

B. How do you intend to relay these protocols to the public?

Question 2: In your testimony, you stated that: "To this point, testing is still not widely available in all locations, but it can be an important part of the overall mitigation strategy."

You went on to say that all incoming personnel to Alaska will be asked to take a COVID-19 test upon arrival.

A. Does the Alaska sub-region currently have an adequate amount of testing to carry out this protocol for the rest of the year?

B. Has a national strategy been put in place to ensure that all ten geographical sub-regions throughout the country receive enough tests?

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Questions from Ranking Member Joe Manchin III

Question 1: Last year, representatives from the National Weather Service in front of our Committee described a partnership with State foresters whereby meteorologists, as they went about their day-to-day tasks reviewing satellite photos, could report any wildfires they saw. The National Weather Service told us the partnership spanned 25% of its centers across the country. Can you give me an update as to how many States are using this approach today and what would be needed to expand this to every state in the U.S.?

The National Weather Service (NWS) is in consultation with both NOAA NESDIS (NOAA's satellite experts) and the Fire Agencies on defining fire detection roles and responsibilities. NWS works with the Office of the Federal Coordinator for Meteorology for this purpose (OFCM). However, it is not a NWS mission to detect or report wildfires.

The National Weather Service Forecast Office (WFO) in Norman and Tulsa, OK have been conducting satellite fire detection (aka "Hot Spot Notifications") on an experimental basis since 2016. On days where fire danger is high, there is an infrared picture taken of Oklahoma every one or five minutes. If a forecaster in the WFO sees a heat signature show up they will wait for the next pic or two for verification. Once a hot spot is verified, the WFO sends out a text message with the pertinent information. Two examples of recent notifications are shown below:

Hot Spot
 Tue Jun 09 2020 12:59 CDT
 --Subject: Hot Spot
 --Lat: 35.485 / 35 29.125 N
 --Lon: -98.617 / 98 37.023 W
 --Location: 5 miles SSW of Hydro, OK.
 --County: Caddo, OK
 --Fire Weather Level: Near Critical
 --Detection Method: Satellite - 1Min
 --Observation: F101 T: N/A DpT: N/A RH: N/A WDIR: N/A WSPD: N/A WGST: N/A 2.2 miles SSE of point of interest.
 --Comments: Hot spot continues to intensify. Possible head fire location 3 miles south of I40 just east of Custer/Caddo County line.
 --Map: maps.google.com/?q=35.485,-98.617&hl=35.485,-98.617&z=10
 --Preliminary Forecast:
<http://forecast.weather.gov/MapClick.php?w0=t&w1=t&w2=wc&w3=sfcwind&w4=skv&w5=pop&w6=rh&w7=rain&w8=thunder&w17=rfti&AheAdHour=0&Submit=Submit&FcstType=graphical&textField1=35.485&textField2=-98.617>
 NWS Norman
 (405) 325-3816

Hot Spot
 Wed Jun 17 2020 18:50 CDT
 --Subject: Hot Spot
 --Lat: 36.988 / 36 59.260 N
 --Lon: -99.826 / 99 49.547 W
 --Location: 8 miles SSE of Acres, KS.
 --County: Harper, OK
 --Fire Weather Level: Elevated
 --Detection Method: Satellite - 1Min
 --Observation: BUFF T: 94 DpT: 58 RH: 30 WDIR: 155 WSPD: 20 WGST: 31 14.9 miles SE of point of interest.
 --Map: maps.google.com/?q=36.988,-99.826&hl=36.988,-99.826&z=10
 --Preliminary Forecast:
<http://forecast.weather.gov/MapClick.php?w0=t&w1=t&w2=wc&w3=sfcwind&w4=skv&w5=pop&w6=rh&w7=rain&w8=thunder&w17=rfti&AheAdHour=0&Submit=Submit&FcstType=graphical&textField1=36.988&textField2=-99.826>
 NWS Norman
 (405) 325-3816

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Location accuracy has increased dramatically with the use of the new GOES 17 Satellite, typically within ¼-mile. Also included in the texts are the current weather observations from the nearest Mesonet station and comments regarding what the forecaster has observed. One of the State Emergency Management staff familiar with GIS has figured out how to populate a live map of Oklahoma that shows the hot spots as they're sent out.

While this is still experimental, it has been a great tool for Oklahoma and Texas to get early warning on ignitions during critical fire weather days. We are strongly pursuing the use of this tool coupled with Wildfire Analyst to help with 'Fire Warnings' and to prioritize incident resource allocation. Oklahoma has worked to clear the way for this to happen, but is waiting for delivery and installation of the Wildfire Analyst software.

One downside to the notifications is that it can't distinguish (yet) between a prescribed fire or agriculture burn vs a wildfire. We would need to have a statewide database or permitting system to filter those out. The issue with this lack of distinction is one of liability. Who is liable if a hot spot shows up, and the State Forestry agency notifies a Fire Department of the potential incident, they respond Code 3 and while responding they have or cause a serious accident en route, and the hot spot is actually a farmer conducting a small agricultural burn pile?

Question 2: I understand that you have combined teams of firefighters with aircraft and spaced them across the State so that wildfires can quickly be responded to and contained before they have a chance to become large. Almost 20 years ago, fire departments and ambulance services all over the country set goals for the amount of time it should take to arrive at an incident, and those goals have informed staffing needs and staging locations for communities around the country. I am told that establishing goals for responding to wildfires has usually been met with resistance, but it seems like you might have figured it out in Washington. Given the new approaches that have come about this season, do you think there might be a path forward for establishing standards for responding to a wildfire?

Currently at Washington Department of Natural Resources we utilize performance measures established over five years ago which hold us to containing 95 percent of all wildfires to 10 acres or less. This measure is due to the type of event we are responding to. Wildland fires do not lend themselves to be measured only by response time. Response time is only one component of a very complex and varied situation which may have multiple objectives (such as resource protection, community protection, fire utilization, etc.). Our planning and operations teams have looked at the individual components which allow us to make our performance management targets while remaining safety and fiscal responsibility.

Local fire service, state forestry agencies, and federal agencies all have roles in most wildland fires on the landscape. In fact, local fire service and state forestry agencies contain the majority of the wildfires in the United States. It is this interagency cooperation which allows for effective response. It is this interagency cooperation which also makes establishment of goals for responding to wildfires challenging as it is typically ignored and standards are set for only one of the interagency partners or one ownership type. I believe there is a path forward to establish goals for responding to wildfire but only if we acknowledge the interagency nature of the response and include this as a part of standards development.

NASF represents the directors of the state forestry agencies in all 50 states, eight U.S. territories, and the District of Columbia. State Foresters deliver technical and financial assistance, along with protection of forest health, water and wildfire for more than two-thirds of the nation's forests. While the duties of state agencies vary from state to state, all share common forest management and protection missions and most have statutory responsibilities to provide wildland fire protection on all lands, public and private. Attacking fires when they are small is the key to reducing fatalities, injuries,

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loss of homes, and cutting federal fire-fighting costs. In response to the COVID-19 Pandemic, USDA Forest Service Chief Christiansen drafted a letter of Intent for Wildfire Operations on April 3, 2020, addressed to Forest Service leadership. In the letter, Chief Christiansen among other things, directed the agency to, "Prioritize the use of local suppression resources with the predominant strategy being rapid containment." NASF was pleased to see this letter of Intent and agrees with this strategy, not only in response to COVID-19, but as a permanent strategy.

Questions from Senator Catherine Cortez Masto

Questions: As we are all aware, every second counts when fighting a wildfire. In fact, many federal and state officials have emphasized how critical early evacuations are to limiting wildfire damage. Not only does it help get people out of harm's way, but it also provides firefighters with the opportunity to get in before the blazes and set up fire breaks.

However, these evacuation centers often pack hundreds, sometimes thousands of people together into a school or community center – not allowing for people to properly follow the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention guidelines for social distancing.

A. Due to the dangers of the current pandemic, what evacuation protocols are being put in place?

Wildfire Evacuation plans and protocols are carried under the jurisdiction and guidance of local law enforcement operations. State forestry agencies are involved in making the recommendation to local law enforcement to implement an evacuation order.

The following guidance has been distributed by the "Ready Set Go!" Program, which provides practices for Fire Departments and partnering agencies to consider for wildland fire evacuations during the new challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Evacuation Messaging to Community

- Modify Red Flag messaging to emphasize alternatives to traditional evacuation centers, including plans to shelter with family or at a hotel outside the evacuation zone.
- Increase the promotion of notification systems to encourage residents to be registered ahead of incidents.
- Address fears residents might have about evacuating their home during the pandemic by emphasizing smart practices to reduce the exposure to COVID-19 and the life-saving value of early evacuation.
- Encourage residents to prepare 'Go-Kits' well ahead of the fire and increase sanitation supplies (hand sanitizer, masks, gloves, etc.).

Evacuation Routes/Implementation

- Review evacuation plans and modify as necessary when considering facilities with high-risk patients.
- Develop alternatives if your evacuation plans include mass transit.

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- Take measures to protect personnel interacting with the public during evacuations including appropriate PPE, social distancing, and avoiding direct contact when possible.

An important consideration for all agencies and representatives communicating to the public about “stay at home orders” is to avoid the term “shelter in place,” as this could cause confusion to residents in the event of a wildland fire.

Evacuation Shelters during COVID-19 for Your Department and Partner Agencies

- Plan for the diffusion of evacuated community members to accommodate social distancing.
 - Establish more evacuation centers with lower occupancy.
 - With a higher number of shelters, consider the need for increased staffing.
 - Use tape on floors to establish appropriate spacing.
- Use shelters adjacent to open areas such as grassy fields. Encourage occupants to spend time outside the shelter when conditions allow.
- Create a check-in center where evacuees stay in their vehicles.
- Allow only one entry point per shelter.
 - Occupants should be screened before entering.
 - Have an alternate plan for evacuees who present with fever or potential COVID-19 symptoms.
 - Provide all occupants with a facial covering.
 - Establish a hand hygiene station before entering the facility and make hand sanitizer readily available.
- Enforce reduced restroom capacity.
- Increase cleaning frequencies in the shelter.
- Implement rapid de-escalation of evacuation to minimize time in the shelter.
- Plan for modified food distribution, such as prepackaged meals.

B. How do you intend to relay these protocols to the public?

Evacuations plans and protocols are carried under the jurisdiction and guidance of local law enforcement operations. State forestry agencies are involved in making the recommendation to local law enforcement to implement an evacuation order, but it is not a mission of state forestry agencies to communicate these plans and protocols to the public. That is a local law enforcement issue.

The Ready Set Go! Program, managed by the [International Association of Fire Chiefs \(IAFC\)](#), works in complementary and collaborative fashion with FirewiseUSA, and other existing wildland fire education efforts. It amplifies the preparedness messages to better achieve the common goal we all share of fire adapted communities. When firefighters encourage residents to take personal responsibility for preparing their property and family for wildland fire, residents become an active part of the solution.

**Statement for the Record
Submitted By
The Edison Electric Institute**

**Committee on Energy and Natural Resources
United States Senate**

**Hearing On
“Wildfire Management in the Midst of COVID-19”
June 9, 2020**

The Edison Electric Institute (EEI) appreciates the opportunity to submit this statement on wildfire management in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic. EEI is the association that represents all U.S. investor-owned electric companies. Our members provide electricity for more than 220 million Americans and operate in all 50 states and the District of Columbia. The electric power industry supports more than 7 million jobs in communities across the country and contributes \$865 billion annually to U.S. gross domestic product, about 5 percent of the total.

EEI’s member companies invest more than \$110 billion each year, on average, to make the energy grid stronger, smarter, cleaner, more dynamic, and more secure; to diversify the nation’s energy mix; and to integrate new technologies that benefit customers. They are united in their commitment to get the energy they provide as clean as they can, as fast as they can, while keeping reliability and affordability front and center, as always, for the customers and communities they serve.

We appreciate the Committee holding a hearing on this important issue. EEI’s member companies are focused on devising and implementing comprehensive programs to mitigate and manage the risks that electric transmission and distribution equipment may pose in an environment of heightened wildfire threats and to do so safely in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic. With additional safety precautions, including appropriate social distancing and the use of personal protective equipment, our members continue to implement expanded vegetation management cycles, improve emergency response capabilities, and make new infrastructure and technology investments.

As discussed in our [statement](#) submitted to the Committee on December 19, 2019, the electric power sector takes an all-hazards approach to protecting the energy grid. This includes improving resilience in the wake of natural hazards like wildfires, severe weather, and earthquakes, as well as malicious threats like cyber and physical attacks on critical infrastructure.

In every emergency, the electric power industry works together—across the sector, with other sectors, and with government partner—to coordinate its activities and to ensure unity of effort

and unity of message. The Electricity Subsector Coordinating Council (ESCC) serves as the principal liaison between the federal government and the electric power industry, with the mission of coordinating efforts to prepare for, and respond to, national-level disasters or threats to critical infrastructure. The ESCC helps foster a security and resilience partnership between industry and government by focusing on actions and strategies that help protect the energy grid, prevent various threats from disrupting electricity service, and develop capabilities that help the sector quickly respond and recover when major incidents impact the grid.

In the COVID-19 pandemic, unity of guidance is the third guiderail of the industry's unified response. EEI and the ESCC are working in parallel and together on a range of critical electric power sector issues throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. EEI is working to help our member companies by sharing information, lessons being learned in real time, and best practices on issues like operations, communications, and human resources, while the ESCC focuses on broader cross-industry and industry-government coordination.

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the ESCC and the electric power industry have developed and continually update a [Resource Guide, "Assessing and Mitigating the Novel Coronavirus,"](#) that details, among other industry practices, safety recommendations on dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic while engaging wildfire mitigation, detection, and response and recovery efforts. Planning for a health emergency like COVID-19 is unique from other business continuity planning because it requires businesses to prepare to operate with a significantly smaller workforce, a threatened supply chain, and limited support services for an extended period of time at an unknown date in the future.

The business continuity and pandemic plans developed by EEI member companies are designed to protect the people working for them and to ensure energy operations and infrastructure are supported properly throughout an emergency. The ESCC Resource Guide serves as a resource for electric power industry leaders to help them make informed localized decisions in response to the COVID-19 global health emergency.

As part of our broader response to the pandemic, EEI was successful in getting the electric power industry added to a U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS) list of "essential critical infrastructure workers" during the COVID-19 pandemic. According to DHS, "functioning critical infrastructure is imperative during the response to the COVID-19 emergency for both public health and safety as well as community well-being." Promoting the ability of such workers to continue to work during periods of community restriction, access management, social distancing, or closure orders/directives is crucial to community resilience and continuity of essential functions.

The ESCC and EEI developed a structure and organizational framework consisting of member company Single Points of Contacts or "SPOCs" and "tiger teams" to coordinate the industry's response to the COVID-19 Pandemic. SPOCs were designated by EEI member company CEOs and are the lynchpin of the coordinated response. The SPOCs help to organize multi-directional flows of information: *up* from within companies to EEI and to industry peers; *down* from

industry-wide committees and other organizations; and *across* EEl-specific functions. While the SPOCs are playing a lead role in the COVID-19 operational and business continuity response, information sharing is being coordinated across many functions. The ESCC has created tiger teams, which are made up of representatives from investor-owned electric companies, public power utilities, electric cooperatives, and other ESCC stakeholders. These teams are focused on issue spotting and on developing coordinated solutions to address vital issues:

- Control center continuity;
- Power plant continuity;
- Access to restricted/quarantined areas;
- Mutual assistance;
- Supply chain challenges;
- Responsible reentry;
- Internal and external communications.

Notwithstanding the conditions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and the risk and impacts associated with wildfires, EEl and the ESCC continue to make wildfire mitigation and response a priority. Specifically, EEl and our member companies are focused on deploying system hardening and resilience solutions while also improving operations and response processes, including:

- Developing improved practices for wildfire prevention, mitigation, and response through the EEl National Response Event framework and the Association of Edison Illuminating Companies.
- Working with the U.S. Department of Energy (DOE) and Grid Modernization Laboratory Consortium (GMLC) to expedite deployment of technology to mitigate the wildfire risks that electric equipment may pose, including sensing and detection technologies; enhanced situational awareness tools; modeling and analytical capabilities; and spark prevention solutions.
- Leveraging government and private-sector satellite imagery to identify priorities for risk mitigation and wildfire response.
- Expanding the use of unmanned aircraft systems to conduct linear infrastructure inspections, especially beyond the visual line of sight. Given the current COVID-19 safety guidelines, and the impacts that the pandemic has and will have on response and recovery efforts, the expanded use of unmanned aircraft systems can provide a more efficient and cost-effective method to inspect infrastructure, as well as help alleviate safety concerns associated with moving resources and large numbers of personnel for wildfire response efforts.
- Supporting more aggressive vegetation management in rights-of-way, as well as improving access to federal lands to limit contact with power lines.

- Partnering with the federal Power Marketing Administrations, which operate a significant portion of electricity infrastructure throughout the West.

In addition to these industry-wide public-private partnerships, EEI and our member companies also are utilizing existing mutual assistance frameworks to respond to wildfire events. The industry is working with our federal, state, and local partners and others to expedite deployment and integration of system hardening technologies and solutions. These include selective undergrounding of high-priority lines, the use of covered conductor to limit sparking of broken lines, and expanded use of automatic reclosers with more sensitive settings to prevent sparking when debris blows into power lines.

EEI appreciates the opportunity to submit this statement, and we look forward to continuing to work with the Committee to address these important issues.



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Chairperson Lisa Murkowski and Ranking Member Joe Manchin
U.S. Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Chairperson Murkowski and Ranking Member Manchin,

June 9, 2020

Firefighters United for Safety, Ethics, and Ecology (FUSEE) respectfully requests that this statement be included in the record of the June 9, 2020 hearing by the Committee on Energy and Natural Resources regarding Wildfire Management in the Midst of COVID-19. FUSEE is a nonprofit organization whose members include current, former, and retired wildland firefighters, fire scientists and managers, and other interested citizens who support safe, ethical, ecological fire management. Our organization's primary purpose is to envision ways to improve firefighter safety in wildland fire management, so we greatly appreciate the SENR Committee's hearing on this topic. Below are some key points we hope that members of Congress will consider in this and future Committee hearings:

**WILDLAND FIREFIGHTERS ARE ESSENTIAL BUT NOT EXPENDABLE
WORKERS: THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC MAKES IT IMPERATIVE TO CHANGE
FIRE MANAGEMENT POLICIES AND PRACTICES**

This wildfire season will challenge the wildland fire community like never before. The COVID-19 virus pandemic has already caused pre-season firefighter trainings and preparations to be cancelled or delayed, and crew leaders are worried that this year may see increased firefighter fatalities from all the disruptions and distractions in addition to the disease. It is imperative that policymakers understand that, like other first responders, wildland firefighters are *essential but not expendable*. There are no "acceptable losses," and young firefighters' lives should not be sacrificed in order to avoid making long overdue changes in fire management policies and practices. Indeed, the actions taken this season to account for the pandemic should not be seen as a temporary fix for a temporary situation, but rather, should become part of making permanent changes in the way agencies work with and communities live with wildland fire.

**NEED TO BE SELECTIVE AND STRATEGIC IN SUPPRESSION ASSIGNMENTS:
NO RESURRECTING THE OBSOLETE 10:00AM POLICY OF AGGRESSIVELY
ATTACKING ALL FIRES**

Proponents of systematic fire suppression are using the excuse of the COVID-19 virus and desires to avoid wildfire smoke as arguments for resurrecting the obsolete 10 a.m. policy of fire control. There is a reason that policy is obsolete: it is ecologically and economically unsustainable, and is simply not viable in the short- or long-term. Although the temptation to

ban managed wildfires and even prescribed fires may be great as a perceived simple solution for smoke avoidance, there must not be a repeat of the disastrous Hubbard Memo of 2012 that banned all fire use across the country, including wilderness areas and roadless wildlands. Fire managers and line officers should be empowered to make decisions using science-based risk assessment tools that utilize the full range of wildland fire responses, including confinement strategies and fire use tactics to manage fires for resource benefits--and firefighter health and safety.

Aggressive suppression on wildfires in remote backcountry wildlands is not essential duty, often causes more environmental harm than social benefit, and spends taxpayer dollars and resources that are critically needed to defend at-risk communities. Aggressive suppression on backcountry wildfires where there are low values-at-risk should be avoided to the extent possible in order to limit firefighter exposure to the combined safety risks inherent to firefighting and the health hazards unique to COVID-19. Indeed, a new line item should be added to Strategic Risk Assessments to help justify modified suppression strategies and fire use tactics in backcountry wildlands: risk of firefighter exposure to COVID-19. Crew health and suppression resources must be reserved for the times, places, and conditions that matter: wildfires burning near homes and communities during conditions that are likely to yield successful suppression actions. Sending crews to attack all fires in all places at all times will be a recipe for disaster, depleting the workforce and detracting from its ability to protect homes and communities.

FIREFIGHTERS' LIVES SHOULD NOT BE SACRIFICED TO AVOID SMOKE EMISSIONS: THERE ARE MORE PRACTICAL AND ECONOMICAL METHODS FOR CARING FOR PUBLIC HEALTH THAN SUPPRESSING ALL FIRES

There is evidence that polluted air may compromise lung health in ways that make the virus spread easier or make individuals more severely ill. Policymakers are concerned about wildfire smoke impacting citizens in rural communities, but wildland firefighters literally put their lungs on the line! They should not be asked to take on more risk or endanger their health or safety to try to suppress all wildfires in an attempt to stop all smoke emissions. Fires and their smoke will inevitably happen as they have for the last 400 million years on Earth. To continue futile attempts at fire exclusion across the landscape will simply defer those fires and their smoke to future conditions that, given climate change, are predicted to result in more extreme fire behavior and severe smoke events. In particular, mop-up is especially harmful to firefighters' respiratory systems, and standards for mop-up after fire containment should be changed to allow more fires to naturally burn out on their own.

We can mitigate smoke impacts through active fire management techniques, but we cannot fireproof or "smokeproof" forests, shrublands, and grasslands. The best time to mitigate smoke impacts is outside of wildfire season when socially distanced workers can do proactive fuels management work, including controlled burns under conditions where smoke disperses to the upper atmosphere.

Firefighters will pay the price with their health and safety for futile attempts to try to suppress all fires or smother all smoke. But we can take steps to mitigate smoke impacts on

communities and smoke-sensitive individuals. By far the largest wildfire threat to public and firefighter health is when wildfires ignite homes and buildings are incinerated. Burning of modern houses and cars yields toxic smoke and ash. It is therefore imperative to reduce home ignitability and keep fire out of urban areas. Sending crews to chase fires in backcountry wildlands does little to protect communities. Instead, suppression crews and resources should be concentrated in frontcountry rural areas where their labor is more effective and more needed.

Communities will be affected by smoke from distant wildfires (including outside the U.S.) that cannot be controlled by firefighters. Thus, policymakers should be making contingency plans such as installing air filters in key public buildings that could serve as smoke shelters for smoke-sensitive people, and preparing shelters for evacuees that provide filtered air, adequate spacing, and proper sanitation. These practical and focused activities will be much more effective in maintaining public health than attempting total suppression across the landscape.

FIREFIGHTERS NEED PROPER SOCIAL DISTANCING TO PREVENT VIRUS SPREAD: EXPANDING FIRE CAMPS TO GREATER SIZE IS A FALSE SOLUTION

At this point in time while effective cures or vaccinations are not yet available, health screening, personal protective gear, social distancing, and isolation are the best methods for limiting the spread of this highly contagious virus. Traditional fire basecamps are places where the risk of virus spread is especially high, and containment will be virtually impossible. In fact, Forest Service researchers predict that up to 10% of the workforce could become incapacitated from virus contagion in a worst case scenario, and mortality rates from COVID-19 could surpass all other causes of firefighter fatalities. Entire crews and perhaps whole camps could be sidelined if even a few individuals contract the disease. This would be an epic public health disaster with potentially catastrophic consequences for rural communities at risk.

In recent years fire camps have already grown to become excessively large "mini-cities," especially on large wildfire suppression incidents. They should not be expanded further in size in a flawed attempt to provide social distancing for firefighters. The risk of casual contact and contagion is simply too great in large firecamps. Instead, agencies should enable social distancing and isolation by having crews work and travel together in small, cohesive, self-sufficient modules (like professional sports teams), and dispersing them to smaller spike camps, coyote camping, motels or air b&b. Some workers, such as planning staff, could perform their duties from remote stations using teleconferencing for briefings. Managing wildfires with fire use strategies and tactics are especially suited for smaller crews working in dispersed, remote stations. This can provide better social distancing and isolation while avoiding the high costs of large firecamps and Incident Management Teams, and helping prevent virus spread among firefighters.

**AGENCIES MUST FULLY SUPPORT THEIR WORKFORCE: FIREFIGHTERS
MUST BE PROPERLY COMPENSATED FOR THE EXTRA RISKS AND HAZARDS
THEY FACE DURING THE PANDEMIC**

This year the greatest threat to firefighter health and safety may not be the normal accidents associated with fighting fires, but the abnormal risks and hazards of the COVID-19 pandemic. These hazards may be greatest away from the firelines--in firecamp, during travel, while performing project work, etc. All fire management workers and support staff regardless of their assignment should be compensated with hazard pay for the full scope of their services this season. Individuals who test positive or get ill from the virus must be automatically approved for workman's compensation and receive full medical care. They should not have to shoulder the burden of proving they acquired the virus on the job, rather, it should be assumed to be a job-related injury. Crewmembers who face mandatory quarantine must also receive their salaries or unemployment compensation for their lost wages.

Wildland firefighters and other fire management workers must be fully supported and adequately compensated for assuming the extra risks and hazards of performing their duties during the pandemic, and the lost income opportunities during mandatory quarantine periods. Without this solid, upfront commitment from agencies to support their workforce in the face of extraordinary risks this fire season, agencies risk losing a significant number of their employees at the very time the nation needs them the most.

In conclusion, Firefighters United for Safety, Ethics, and Ecology stands behind the right of wildland firefighters and other fire management workers to the best available science-informed policies for ensuring their health and safety. Firefighters are essential but not expendable workers who should not be sacrificed while more practical and economical steps are available to mitigate wildfire risks and smoke hazards during the pandemic.

Respectfully,

Timothy Ingalsbee, Ph.D., Executive Director, FUSEE



Wildland Fire Management in the Midst of COVID-19

Statement of

**Fire Chief Gary Ludwig
President and Chairman of the Board**

presented to the

**COMMITTEE ON ENERGY AND NATURAL
RESOURCES**

United States Senate

June 9, 2020

INTERNATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF FIRE CHIEFS
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Good morning, Chairman Murkowski, Ranking Member Manchin, and distinguished members of the committee. I am Gary Ludwig, President and Chairman of the Board of the International Association of Fire Chiefs (IAFC), and fire chief of the City of Champaign, Illinois, Fire Department. I appreciate the opportunity to testify at today's hearing on wildland fire management amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. This unprecedented pandemic has challenged the fire and emergency service in ways that few have imagined. I truly appreciate your support as fire departments continue to serve our communities and neighbors when they are in their greatest moments of need.

The IAFC represents the leadership of over 1.1 million firefighters and emergency responders. IAFC members are the world's leading experts in firefighting, emergency medical services, terrorism response, hazardous materials (hazmat) incidents, wildland fire suppression, natural disasters, search and rescue, and public-safety policy. Since 1873, the IAFC has provided a forum for its members to exchange ideas, develop best practices, participate in executive training, and discover diverse products and services available to first responders.

The Fire and Emergency Service Community

America's fire and emergency services are the only organized group of individuals who are locally situated, staffed, trained, and equipped to respond to all types of emergencies. There are approximately 1.1 million men and women in the fire and emergency service – approximately 300,000 career firefighters and 800,000 volunteer firefighters – serving in over 30,000 fire departments around the nation. They are trained to respond to all hazards ranging from earthquakes, hurricanes, tornadoes, and floods to acts of terrorism, hazardous materials incidents, technical rescues, fires, and medical emergencies.

Wildland fires are a growing area of operations for local fire departments, located in both the wildland-urban interface and in more developed areas. According to the National Interagency Fire Center, in 2018, wildland fires occurred in all fifty states. These fires burned more than 8.7 million acres and resulted in more than \$3.1 billion in fire suppression costs for the federal government.¹ Local fire departments serve a critical role as the first to respond to, and last to return from, these fires. In fact, local fire departments are the first on scene for 80% of fires, regardless of whether they occur on federal, state, local, private, or tribal lands. It is critical that Congress supports local fire departments in suppressing all fires on the initial attack. Given the close working relationship between local and federal firefighting agencies, the IAFC also recommends expanding efforts to engage national fire service organizations in the planning process for "routine" wildland fire incidents as well as major wildland fire incidents during the current public health emergency.

Wildland Fire Management Concerns Amidst COVID-19 Spread

As our nation prepares for the usual summertime increase in wildland fires, the task is more difficult given the need to also protect firefighters from the SARS-CoV-2 virus and its ensuing

¹ Federal Firefighting Costs. National Interagency Fire Center.
https://www.nifc.gov/fireInfo/fireInfo_documents/SuppCosts.pdf

illness, COVID-19. The IAFC has identified several areas where federal and Congressional assistance is needed:

- 1) Priority Access to Personal Protective Equipment (PPE), Testing, and Vaccines: Given the role of fire departments as the largest providers of emergency medical services (EMS), most agencies already are struggling to procure medical PPE (N95 masks, protective gowns, etc.) In some cases, fire departments have no disposable PPE and must use ponchos and other improvised PPE. Waves of counterfeit PPE also are continuing to enter the country and land in the hands of first responders. The failure to stop the flow of this counterfeit PPE is placing first responders in a perilous position.

Given the austere conditions found on wildland fire incidents and in large “fire camps,” it is even more important that firefighters have authentic PPE. The IAFC fears that if fire departments are forced to source their own PPE, many wildland firefighters may go without PPE due to shortages. This alternative is unacceptable. The IAFC implores Congress to work with federal agencies to ensure that fire departments are on the top priority tier for access to medical PPE from federal and state stockpiles. The IAFC also urges the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) and U.S. Department of Interior (DOI) to supply PPE to all firefighters responding to extended wildland fire incidents on federal lands.

Similarly, the IAFC urges Congress and federal agencies to ensure fire departments have priority access to COVID-19 testing and vaccines (when available). On large wildland fire incidents, thousands of firefighters from across the nation gather in “fire camps” when not actively working. These camps often are located in remote environments with little formal sanitation for the firefighters living in close proximity. As a result, these camps are the perfect vector to spread the SARS-CoV-2 virus. Wildland firefighters must have priority access to rapid COVID-19 testing in order to screen and immediately relocate any firefighters who have contracted the SARS-CoV-2 virus. A prioritized and efficient testing posture is needed to provide the maximum prevention and containment of the SARS-CoV-2 virus in wildland fire camps. In light of the frequent and close contact that wildland firefighters have with each other and the general public, they also must have priority access to a SARS-CoV-2 vaccine when it is eventually available.

- 2) Large Incident Pre-Planning: Type 1 and Type 2 incidents represent the largest wildland fire incidents and require extensive local, state, federal, and tribal cooperation. Local fire departments however are unsure how the federal government plans to balance the need for efficient responses to these incidents with the need to minimize the number of personnel on active fires. The IAFC believes that the federal government should articulate their plans for minimizing the number of personnel when responding to these incidents.

In particular, several agencies have raised the possibility of utilizing remotely-located incident management teams (IMTs). It is unclear how these remote IMTs will function and interface with local fire chiefs. The IAFC urges the USDA and DOI to conduct stakeholder planning sessions with local fire chiefs and national fire service organizations

to ensure local fire chiefs are supported fully by these remote IMTs. Additionally, expanded use of aerial assets, both in the form of traditional aircraft and unmanned aerial vehicles, could be one such tool to improve communication between on-the-ground responders and remote IMTs.

The IAFC also believes that the USDA and DOI should coordinate with local fire chiefs and national fire service organizations to assess how interstate mutual aid responses will occur on Type 1 and Type 2 incidents. Interstate responses by local fire departments may be impeded due to the extensive impact that the SARS-CoV-2 virus and COVID-19 have had on first responders. As we speak, thousands of first responders are quarantined or isolated and unable to respond. Economic impact assessments by the IAFC also indicate that up to 30,000 firefighters and support personnel may be laid off in the next twelve months. The staggering impact of these quarantines and layoffs will undoubtedly reduce the number of available personnel to assist on Type 1 and Type 2 incidents. Future spread of the SARS-CoV-2 virus may result in additional travel restrictions which also may reduce mutual aid response capabilities. Due to these travel restrictions and the need to minimize cross-country responses by wildland firefighters, the IAFC understands that the USDA and DOI may need to limit interstate mutual aid responses to only those fire departments located in the same region as the fire. In these scenarios, the USDA and DOI must begin working with local fire departments immediately to develop alternate response plans. The IAFC encourages local, state, and federal agencies to begin pre-planning regional responses to Type 1 and Type 2 incidents as soon as possible.

Lastly, Type 1 and Type 2 incidents often require a community's residents to be housed in emergency evacuation shelters. These shelters often are located in high school gymnasiums or convention centers. In light of the social distancing guidelines recommended by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the IAFC encourages federal agencies to work with local fire departments and public health officials to re-imagine how these emergency shelters should look in the midst of COVID-19. The usage of alternate layouts and locations, such as vacant hotels, should be considered to prevent the spread of the SARS-CoV-2 virus.

- 3) Congressional Support for Wildland Fire Programs: The IAFC urges Congress to support federal programs that equip, train, and staff local fire departments for wildland fire responses. Expanding support for the following programs is vital to ensuring local fire departments are prepared to protect lives and property from wildland fires:
 - a. Assistance to Firefighters Grant/SAFER Grant Program (DHS): The Federal Emergency Management Agency's Assistance to Firefighters Grant (AFG) program and the Staffing for Adequate Fire and Emergency Response (SAFER) grant program provide matching grants for equipment, training, and staffing to help local fire departments prepare for wildland fires and other emergency incidents. The equipment purchased and personnel hired and trained with these funds may be used in responding to wildland fire incidents and other emergencies. This response capacity is vital to ensuring that an initial attack can suppress as many wildland fires as possible. The IAFC recommends Congress provide \$500 million each for the AFG and SAFER programs in the next COVID-19 relief

package. Furthermore, the IAFC supports provisions in the HEROES Act (H.R. 6800) which make important modifications for emergency COVID-related allocations from the AFG and SAFER programs. For the AFG program, H.R. 6800 would waive the maximum amount of the awards, the local match requirements, and the maintenance of expenditure requirements. For the SAFER grant program, the bill would waive the local match requirements, the maintenance of expenditure requirements, and the requirement that federal funds cannot be used to supplant local funds. These are extraordinary waivers for these programs, but the IAFC believes that they will help local fire departments weather the storm of the pandemic.

- b. Volunteer Fire Assistance Grant (USDA): The Volunteer Fire Assistance (VFA) program is a matching grant designed for fire departments serving communities with a population of 10,000 or fewer. The VFA program typically provides small awards of up to \$5,000 to assist agencies in purchasing wildland fire equipment and in training personnel. In Fiscal Year (FY) 2018, the VFA program assisted nearly 14,000 communities and trained approximately 22,000 firefighters. The IAFC urges Congress to provide \$19 million for the VFA program in FY 2021.
- c. Firefighter Property (FFP)/Federal Excess Personal Property Programs (FEPP): The USDA's FFP and FEPP programs allocate excess Department of Defense vehicles and equipment to local fire departments which ordinarily would have been out of financial reach. From FY 2014 to FY 2018, these programs placed nearly \$1 billion worth of assets in local fire departments. The importance of FEPP and FFP is particularly clear in states such as Wyoming where more than 40% of wildland fire trucks and equipment are FEPP or FFP-sourced.
- d. Ready, Set, Go! (USDA): The most effective way to suppress a fire is to prevent it. The Ready, Set, Go! Program (RSG) was developed in partnership between the USDA and IAFC and is an important tool to assist local fire departments in teaching fire prevention and evacuation planning to the public. The RSG program is currently used by more than 1,500 communities across all fifty states.
- e. Supporting and Improving Rural EMS Needs (SIREN) Program: The SIREN program, housed within the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, provides matching grants to governmental and nonprofit rural fire and EMS departments. The limited tax bases of rural communities leave fire departments struggling to fund their EMS operations. SIREN funds are an important mechanism to help these agencies procure the medications, medical supplies, and PPE needed. Bolstering support for the SIREN program will assist fire departments in responding to breathing and other medical emergencies arising from nearby wildland fires. Additionally, firefighters responding to Type 1 and Type 2 incidents often must supply their own medical "kits" for treating injuries or illness that occur when fighting a wildland fire. SIREN funds thus can be helpful in mitigating medical emergencies impacting firefighters and residents alike. The IAFC asks Congress to provide \$50 million for the SIREN program in the next COVID-19 relief package.

CONCLUSION

Thank you for the opportunity to discuss these important issues. It is not a question of *if* wildland fires will converge with COVID-19, but rather *when*. Wildland fires and COVID-19 are serious public health and public safety risks. If we do not properly prepare, the combination of these threats may lead to unprecedented challenges for public health and safety. It is paramount that we work across local, state, federal, and tribal lines to plan our response for when a Type 1 fire occurs in a community plagued by the SARS-CoV-2 virus. As we prepare for this inevitable circumstance, I urge Congress and our federal partners to engage local fire chiefs and national fire service organizations in considering how we will prevent and contain COVID-19 in fire camps; what our contingency plans will look like as we strive to minimize the volume and geographic diversity of interstate mutual aid responders; and ways we can ensure local fire departments are trained, staffed, and equipped to suppress wildland fires as efficiently as possible. Without question, the best way to fight a Type 1 fire is to suppress it on initial attack. Please stand with local fire departments and ensure that we are ready and able to succeed.



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June 4, 2020

Kent Slaughter, Manager
BLM/Alaska Fire Services
P.O. Box 35005
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Re: Alaska Division of Forestry Memo on "Lower-48 Resource Orders COVID Mitigation"

Dear Mr. Slaughter,

To ensure public safety in our rural communities during the 2020 fire season, Tanana Chiefs Conference (TCC) supports the required testing for COVID-19 for all fire suppression resources that are traveling into Alaska from elsewhere. We also supports the additional mitigation measures, including screening personnel prior to leaving their home units, traveling and arriving with PPE and disinfecting supplies, tracking physical contacts, and adopting PPE and social distancing practices.

TCC is concerned that similar practices are voluntary, rather than required, of wildland fire resources coming into Alaska on federal resource orders, including the screening and testing of personnel upon arrival in Alaska. Mandatory testing is preferred to ensure the safety of rural communities in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic.

TCC recognizes that wildland fire protection is a critical concern and requests all jurisdictions to consult with the Tribal government preceding any deployment to a village in the TCC region. Fire protection agencies (State and Federal) are expected to conform to travel restrictions put in place by individual Tribal communities, in addition to the requirements and restrictions implemented internally by the agencies.

In the interest of protecting our rural communities, TCC stands prepared to assist in any testing and mitigation efforts that is requested by the agencies. Please contact Clinton Northway for any additional information or assistance via email clinton.northway@tananachiefs.org, or phone 907-453-8251 ext. 3379 or 907-978-0075.

Sincerely,
TANANA CHIEFS CONFERENCE

Victor Joseph
Chief/Chairman

CC: Chris Maisch, Alaska State Forester
Pete Wakeland, BIA Chief Forester
Jeff Rupert, Director of the DOI Office of Wildland Fire
Tyler Fish, Counselor to the Assistant Secretary – Indian Affairs

