

**THE PRESIDENT'S BUDGET REQUEST FOR THE
U.S. FOREST SERVICE FOR FISCAL YEAR 2026**

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

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JULY 10, 2025
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CONTENTS

OPENING STATEMENT

	Page
Barrasso, Hon. John, a U.S. Senator from Wyoming	1

WITNESS

Schultz, Tom, Chief, U.S. Forest Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture	1
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ALPHABETICAL LISTING AND APPENDIX MATERIAL SUBMITTED

Barrasso, Hon. John: Opening Statement	1
Cantwell, Hon. Maria: Poster depicting significant wildland fire potential in the Northwest from July–October 2025	21
Schultz, Tom: Opening Statement	1
Written Testimony	4
Responses to Questions for the Record	33

**THE PRESIDENT'S BUDGET REQUEST FOR
THE U.S. FOREST SERVICE FOR FISCAL
YEAR 2026**

THURSDAY, JULY 10, 2025

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

The Committee met, pursuant to notice, at 10:01 a.m. in Room SD-366, Dirksen Senate Office Building, Hon. John Barrasso presiding.

**OPENING STATEMENT OF HON. JOHN BARRASSO,
U.S. SENATOR FROM WYOMING**

Senator BARRASSO. I call this hearing to order of the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee. We welcome our guest, Mr. Tom Schultz, who is in the position now as the head of the Forest Service, and we are happy to have him here to testify in front of the Committee. This is an oversight hearing for President Trump's budget request for the U.S. Forest Service for Fiscal Year 2026.

The Chairman has been unavoidably delayed. He will be here in about 15 minutes, but rather than asking you to delay your time, we would invite you to give your opening statement and then we will start with some of the questioning. And when the Chairman arrives, he will make his opening comments.

So welcome to the Committee.

**STATEMENT OF TOM SCHULTZ, CHIEF OF THE U.S. FOREST
SERVICE, U.S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE**

Mr. SCHULTZ. Howdy. Thank you, Senator Barrasso and members of the Committee. We don't have Ranking Member Heinrich here. Thank you for inviting me to testify today.

I want to begin by remembering the tragic loss of the two firefighters in Idaho who were ambushed and killed by gunfire on June 29, when they showed up to suppress a fire on Forest Service lands. Our heartfelt condolences go out to Kootenai County and the Coeur d'Alene firefighters, first responders, and family members in the Greater Coeur d'Alene community.

The Forest Service manages 154 national forests and 20 grasslands, covering 193 million acres in 43 states and Puerto Rico. The Forest Service also works with communities, state, local, and tribal governments, forest industries, and private forest owners managing for multiple uses. The big picture is that America's forests provide

timber, clean air and water, forage, and energy production. They support local economies through employment, trade, recreation, tourism, jobs, and livestock grazing. Recent analysis shows that in Fiscal Year 2023, Forest Service programs contributed approximately 390,000 jobs and \$45 billion in gross domestic product.

I am grateful to serve as the 21st Chief of the Forest Service. I recognize that I am the first Chief who did not come from or previously work within the agency, but I hope that you will see that as I do—as a strength. I have over 27 years of land management experience and fire experience and I am a lifelong user of public lands. I have worked for the state agencies in Montana and Idaho, and that has given me a perspective on the role of states in managing public trust lands and how that differs from the goals and objectives of managing federal lands. My experience in the private sector with Idaho Forest Group gave me a deep understanding of markets and the role that raw material availability, quality, and price play in being able to support a profitable forest products industry.

The Fiscal Year 2026 President's budget refocuses Forest Service efforts on active forest management, critical minerals permitting, recreation, energy development—basically multiple-use management of a back-to-basics approach. In addition, the budget request emphasizes efficient and effective fire management by consolidating the federal suppression response apparatus into the new U.S. Wildland Fire Service under the Department of the Interior. The Forest Service was founded on and understands the utility of our national forests. The production of timber, lumber, paper, bio-energy, and other wood products is vital for the country's well-being.

The President's Executive Order 14225, Immediate Expansion of American Timber Production, emphasizes the importance of timber production and how forest management can support American lives and communities. The Fiscal Year '26 budget request supports this executive order by maintaining our ability to support the forest products industry and shifting the Forest Inventory Analysis program to the National Forest System. This shift will better align the practical data needs for both public and private forest management.

Livestock grazing on federal lands is integral to ranchers across the United States, especially in the West. Grazing is permitted on nearly 40 percent of the 193 million acres of National Forest System lands across 27 states. We administer permits for approximately 5,500 permittees, with 1.3 million acres authorized for cattle and another 800,000 for sheep. Access to critical minerals is essential to contribute to a stable supply of energy for current and future generations while continuing to sustain long-term ecosystem health and productivity. National forests are a bountiful resource for minerals, and we work hard, along with the BLM, to manage leasable minerals from the National Forest System.

We carry a fiduciary responsibility to the American public. We must steward tax dollars wisely, so we are examining how to best optimize our workforce and our expenditures to ensure that we are focused on field-based operations that are essential to meeting high-priority objectives. To this point, the 2026 budget request re-

duces or eliminates some aspects of federal funding from the Forest Service budget to ensure stewardship of the taxpayer dollars and to better balance the appropriate roles of the federal and the state governments. It is not our intention to degrade the services of states and local governments, but we must change the reliance on the Federal Government to fund the delivery of these services.

In alignment with restoring a federalist approach, we encourage increasing state authority to fund management of state and privately owned forests, community preparedness, and public risk mitigation activities. Communities across the country depend on national forests and grasslands. I work tirelessly to support those communities by partnering to actively manage the National Forest System for multiple uses. We maintain our commitment to strengthening relationships with industries, ranching families, the mining industry, communities, and conservation groups to deliver on the multiple-use mission, as it has been for more than 100 years.

Thank you for inviting me to be here today, and I look forward to your ongoing support. I will be glad to answer any of your questions.

[The prepared statement of Mr. Schultz follows:]

STATEMENT OF
TOM SCHULTZ
CHIEF OF THE FOREST SERVICE
U.S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE, U.S. FOREST SERVICE
BEFORE THE
UNITED STATES SENATE
COMMITTEE ON ENERGY AND NATURAL RESOURCES
CONCERNING THE PRESIDENT'S FISCAL YEAR 2026 PROPOSED BUDGET
FOR THE USDA FOREST SERVICE

JULY 10, 2025 10:00 A.M.

Chair Lee, Ranking Member Heinrich, and members of the Committee, thank you for inviting me here today to testify on the President's fiscal year (FY) 2026 Budget request for the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), Forest Service.

The fiscal year 2026 President's Budget for the USDA Forest Service requests \$2.1 billion in discretionary appropriations for base programs. The 2026 Forest Service Budget is focused and strategic, making trade-offs for efficiency and alignment around the highest priorities for National Forest System lands. The Budget proposes the elimination of multiple programs and significant funding reductions in programs that remain, with the objective of better allocating federal resources and addressing the federal deficit and debt while delivering on our core mission to sustain the health and productivity of our nation's forests and grasslands. These critical changes will put the agency on a sustainable path while ensuring our National Forests and Grasslands provide the goods and services expected by the American people.

The FY 2026 budget request focuses on crucial investments that will help the Forest Service conserve and manage national forests and grasslands sustainably. It will also support local economies through jobs, trade, timber production, recreation access, energy development, and livestock grazing.

The production of various forest products, such as timber, lumber, paper, bioenergy, and other wood products (timber production) is vital for the country's well-being. Executive Order 14225, *Immediate Expansion of American Timber Production*, emphasizes the importance of timber production and how forest management and wildfire risk reduction projects can protect American lives and communities. The FY 2026 budget request supports Executive Order 14225 by sustaining the forest products program at FY 2025 levels.

To ensure domestic production of critical minerals and to contribute to a stable supply of energy for current and future generations while continuing to sustain long-term ecosystem health and productivity, the Forest Service works together with the DOI's Bureau of Land Management to manage leasable minerals on National Forest System lands. The FY 2026 budget continues to support the Forest Service Minerals and Geology Management program.

Livestock grazing on federal lands is crucial for ranchers across the United States,

especially in the West. This practice has been part of land management for generations, providing food for the American public, and preserving working landscapes, conserving natural resources, and the communities that depend on them. The FY 2026 budget ensures that livestock grazing continues to meet many of the Forest Service's multiple-use objectives.

To improve efficiency and federal response, the FY 2026 budget removes duplicate efforts in Federal Wildland Fire Management by consolidating the federal suppression response apparatus into a new DOI bureau. The new U.S. Wildland Fire Service will unify logistical and support functions such as dispatching, training, information technology, reporting, financial management, and contracting. This organization will provide initial attack, large fire response, and facilitate hazardous fuels mitigation operations (both mechanical and prescribed fire) for all federal land management agencies enhancing the efficiency and effectiveness of the Federal wildfire response capacity.

The President's FY 2026 Budget Request for Specific Priorities

The following investments align with and enhance the agency's efforts to modernize the wildland fire management system:

- **Forest Service Operations:** Requested amount reduces support services salaries and facility leases to streamline Agency's management structure and right size the real property footprint. Some funding and associated capacity will shift to the new U.S. Wildland Fire Service in DOI to meet business support requirements associated with the combined fire organization.
- **Forest and Rangeland Research:** The account was eliminated, except for Forest Inventory and Analysis (FIA) which was moved to the National Forest System account and the Joint Fire Science program which would be moved to the DOI as part of the new U.S. Wildland Fire Service. The shift of the FIA program will ensure that it is aligned with the practical needs of forest management for timber production, continuing to sustain its longstanding census of forest resources and conditions to the National Forest System.
- **State, Private, and Tribal Forestry:** The discretionary account was eliminated to ensure fiscal responsibility with American taxpayer dollars and to better balance the appropriate roles of federal and state governments. In alignment with restoring federalism, we encourage increasing State authority to fund the management of State and privately-owned forests, community preparedness, and public risk mitigation activities.
- **National Forest System:** The 2026 Budget proposes \$1.297 billion to fund the National Forest System focusing support on field-based operations, which are essential for meeting high-priority agency objectives. With this level of funding the Forest Service will prioritize activities related to timber sales, recreation, environmental analyses, law enforcement, critical minerals permitting, and grazing allotment management. This prioritization will ensure public safety on National Forest System (NFS) lands, timber production and range management activities critical for rural economic development and restoration of NFS lands and increased domestic production of critical minerals to

support national defense and electrification needs. The \$175 million previously within the NFS account for hazardous fuels mitigation will be requested by DOI in support of the new U.S. Wildland Fire Service to perform and or facilitate mechanical and prescribed fire operations on NFS lands.

- **Capital Improvement and Maintenance:** The 2026 request necessitates a significant rightsizing of Forest Service facilities (both administrative and recreation), roads, and trails. Prioritization will be made in alignment with the Administration's priorities, with funding going towards infrastructure that facilitates timber production, hazardous fuels removal, mineral extraction, and emergency response.
- **Wildland Fire Management:** The 2026 request will transfer the Forest Service Wildland Fire Management appropriations to DOI for the creation of the new U.S. Wildland Fire Service. This new DOI bureau will absorb the Forest Service Wildland Fire Management response program, including over 11,000 firefighters, 3,000 operational fire support personnel and leadership, and over 400 business support personnel.

Through Great American Outdoors Act (GAOA) (P.L. 116-152) funding, the Forest Service continues to repair and upgrade vital infrastructure and facilities in the national forests and grasslands through the National Parks and Public Land Legacy Restoration Fund and the FY 2026 budget requests it's reauthorization for another five years.

The GAOA also permanently funds the Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF), with which the Forest Service invests in conservation and recreation opportunities in public and private lands through the Forest Legacy Program and Federal Land Acquisition. The FY 2026 request proposes an amendment to the Land and Water Conservation Fund Act expanding it to include a new Priority Deferred Maintenance program to address priority deferred maintenance projects at DOI bureaus and the Forest Service. For the Forest Service, this LWCF Priority Deferred Maintenance program will prioritize deferred maintenance projects that support and facilitate high-priority objectives associated with timber production, emergency response, and recreation activities. The funding would be spent predominantly on roads, bridges, and facilities, including those critical to housing employees and ensuring visitor safety.

In closing, the President's FY 2026 Budget request proposes a landmark restructuring in Federal wildland fire to ensure an efficient and effective combined response apparatus managed by the DOI for all Federal lands. The FY 2026 Budget request underscores our commitment to focusing on investments that prioritize the products from and access to the American public wants from their national forests. We are getting back to the basics of managing our national forests for their intended purposes of producing timber, clean water, recreation, and other necessities for the American taxpayers.

We look forward to working with this Committee to fulfill the President's economic goals and our key responsibilities for the long-term benefit of the Nation's forests and grasslands, and for all Americans. I will be glad to answer your questions.

Senator BARRASSO. Well, thanks so much for your thoughtful testimony, and I welcome you here this morning. We really haven't had an opportunity to meet. I have read your bio. I look forward to working with you in the next few years. Congratulations on this important appointment, incredibly important for Wyoming. And I appreciate your willingness to join us in Wyoming at the Wyoming Stock Growers later this month in Cody, Wyoming, and I am glad that you will be meeting with our livestock producers and learning how you can help strengthen the management of our national forests with effective livestock grazing.

I also want to congratulate you and thank you for working with Secretary of Agriculture Rollins, your work on rescinding the roadless rule a few weeks ago. That rule, to me, was outdated. It was outdated policy that has hindered forest management in Wyoming for years. This is going to restore vital forest health. It's going to help reduce wildfire risk across the country and help to boost responsible timber production. So thank you for your leadership there.

With regard to timber production, you know, over two years ago, Neiman Enterprises announced layoffs and shift reductions at their Spearfish, South Dakota Forest Products facility. At their facility in Hulett, Wyoming, they reduced down to one shift. This has significantly reduced their capacity as a result of the Biden administration's limiting of timber production, and this has impacted sawmills all around. What is the agency doing to retain the remaining forest products infrastructure in the Black Hills National Forest?

Mr. SCHULTZ. Senator, thank you for that question.

We have been working very closely with the Neimans in the industry up there to understand the issues and move forward. There are three specific things that we have done. We have identified staff that we have transferred to the Black Hills, actually from Washington State, to help assist in preparing sales. We have increased funding for them in the short term to help address some of the shortfalls in funding. They have had to do more work. The other piece is that we are collaborating with not only the industry, but some NGOs there—the Wild Turkey Federation, the Mule Deer Foundation, and also with the State of Wyoming—under the GNA program to increase predictability of the program for the Black Hills. So those are the three things we are doing: staffing, funding, and collaborating with those entities to ensure that we have the right plan in place.

Senator BARRASSO. Thank you.

And then, you are helping with the local communities as well?

Mr. SCHULTZ. Yes, sir.

Senator BARRASSO. Thank you.

You said we must steward tax dollars wisely. I appreciate that. You know, we have had a number of fairly significant fires in Wyoming. Last year, the House Draw fire, Johnson County, 175,000 acres. The Elk fire, 68,000—I'm sorry, 98,000 acres. Rural communities in the West are bracing again for this year. And of course, resources are spread thin. Federal and state agencies, I believe, must work together. So can you talk about how the Forest Service is engaging state, local, and private partners to ensure we can effectively respond to wildfires?

Mr. SCHULTZ. Yes, sir.

Senator, so first of all, the National Association of State Foresters represents those state interests in many cases. We have ongoing dialogue throughout the year with them, and going into the fire season, we increase that dialogue. We have had pre-season meetings with all of our cooperators at the local government level, the volunteers, and the states. So those meetings have been accomplished. The big thing though, this year, operating agreements are already all in place for all the states, so that when issues come up in terms of who is going to pay the cost of fighting the fire, those questions are not going to be in front of us. That has all been agreed to already. So in terms of that, that will not impact any tactics or strategies in fighting fire with some concern over who is going to pay for those fires. So those are things that we have done pre-season to ensure that we are prepared and working with our partners.

Senator BARRASSO. In this Committee over the years, we talk about how many millions of acres of our national forests are at high or very high risk of wildfire—I think it's about 63 million acres right now. In Fiscal Year 2024, the U.S. Forest Service treated only about four million acres of our national forest. I think it's imperative that the U.S. Forest Service is planning on how they are going to treat all of these high-risk areas within our National Forest System.

You inherited the prior administration's budget deficit as well. Can you talk about how you plan to lead the agency to catch up from the last four years in forest management?

Mr. SCHULTZ. Yes, sir, thanks for that question.

So I think the big thing is relying on partners. If you recall, there was a disaster bill passed at the end of the year last year. There was about \$75 million that Sierra Pacific is putting to use on federal lands to create fuel breaks. So we are going to be looking at other partnerships, whether that's with NGOs, whether it's directly with industry, but helping us to manage the National Forest System to increase the pace and scale of what we are doing. So that's a big part of our strategy. It's also going to be relying on states to do that.

Senator BARRASSO. And my final question, Mr. Chairman, thanks so much for your indulgence. Just last week, the U.S. Department of Agriculture announced it will be revising the NEPA regulations, the National Environmental Policy Act. So I commend you and Secretary Rollins for your efforts to reduce unnecessary red tape and to streamline the projects. As you are well aware, the Forest Service is required to update and develop land management plans to guide management of our national forests. And I understand the U.S. Forest Service will be conducting public and stakeholder meetings so Wyoming's voice will be heard.

Currently in Wyoming, the Bridger-Teton National Forest and the Black Hills National Forest are undergoing their forest plan revision process. Can you please give us an update on your timelines for these forest plans?

Mr. SCHULTZ. Yes, sir, thanks for the question.

The Black Hills plan was started in 2001. The phase one assessment is complete and we expect to have the full plan completed in 2027. So there is ongoing public involvement there.

On the Bridger-Teton plan that was started in 2024, the draft assessment is out currently, today, for public review. That public review will end in August 2025. And we expect that it should take two to three years to complete that process.

Senator BARRASSO. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

The CHAIRMAN [presiding]. Thank you so much, Senator Barrasso.

Senator Wyden.

Senator WYDEN. Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. Schultz, the lack of emergency preparedness, whether it's in Texas Hill Country or public lands in Oregon, can cost lives. Just recently fire officials in southern Oregon told me they were coming up dangerously short in emergency preparedness. Specifically, I was told in southern Oregon, one meteorologist was trying to provide early warning systems and doing the work for four people. Now, what this, of course, is all about is getting key timely information out to communities so they can battle these infernos. We have talked in the past about how these infernos are not your grandfathers' fires. They are bigger and they are hotter. And we need to address this critical preparedness gap.

Now, instead of moving quickly, you all have trotted out yet another new, and described as improved, reorganization in the middle of a very dangerous fire season. Now, nobody in my home state—and I was Chair of this Committee and worked closely with the agency—has in effect said, Ron, we have got to have the Forest Service less involved in fighting fires. But that is the net effect of your organizational plan.

So here is my question: what is this new plan going to accomplish for preparedness in my home state this fire season? That's what I was asked about, what can be done this fire season. And how is this new organizational plan going to get real help to people quickly?

Mr. SCHULTZ. Senator Wyden, thank you for the question.

This fire season, we do not intend to implement any changes in the structure of the fire program. Nothing is going to take place this fire season.

Senator WYDEN. So why aren't we using the resources that seem to be going to this new plan to get help to the people who are telling me they are coming up short? Why wouldn't we get that help out to them quickly?

Mr. SCHULTZ. So, just, in terms of resources this year, here is where we are at today. So our max staffing that we typically hire for firefighters, GS-9 and below, is 11,300 firefighters. Today, we are at roughly 11,250 firefighters. So we are at about 99 percent of our hiring resources. So in terms of firefighting capacity, we are there. So we have not made any changes to our resource availability this year, whether it's aviation resources or—

Senator WYDEN. Why don't you get me, in writing, something that backs up your argument that there has been no reduction in resources, because that's not what I was just told in southern Or-

egon, where they are worried about getting urgently needed information.

Now, along these lines, we have been told that the agency—and we are most of the way through the fiscal year—hasn't even treated half as many acres to reduce wildfire risk as were treated in the last year of the Biden administration. Why is that?

Mr. SCHULTZ. So sir, we actually have treated similar acres that we did in previous years. And so, this administration came in in February. So in terms of basically treating acres, there has not been a major reduction in acres treated for the last year, for this year, so.

Senator WYDEN. We will get to you those numbers because that is factually inaccurate.

Mr. SCHULTZ. Okay.

Senator WYDEN. And let me tell you what concerns me about this net effect, because I have described to you the problems that we are seeing on the ground in southern Oregon where we are not getting the help, in terms of stepping up to deal with emergencies. I mentioned the data that shows we are not doing as much timber production in line with natural resources laws as in the Biden administration. And it seems to me, what you all are doing is making a case that somehow this mismanagement is a case for selling off our public lands. And I want you to know that I am going to fight that argument every step of the way because we heard loud and clear that when the administration advanced their arguments just recently for selling off public lands, the American people said no way—not a close call—no way. And I am not going to allow the mismanagement and the lack of really using resources effectively, as I have just described in my state, become an argument that somehow this mismanagement is a case for selling off our public lands.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you, Senator Wyden.

Chief Schultz, I was thrilled by the announcement made by Secretary Rollins about the rescission of the 2001 roadless rule. The roadless rule prohibits, as the name implies, road construction, and it also prohibits, effectively, timber harvesting on nearly 59 million acres of National Forest System lands, including 60 percent of the Forest Service land in Utah. By the way, that 59 million acres represents nearly 10 percent of the total federal land footprint. This is a significant amount of land.

Now, while the intent of the original roadless rule may well have been to preserve the environment, in practical effect, in many ways, it has done the opposite of that. The practical effect of it has been environmental disaster. It has been devastating to forest health and to wildfire mitigation efforts. It has also added to the demise of our domestic timber industry. Last year, I asked your predecessor, the person who held this job in the previous administration, if the roadless rule had helped or hindered wildfire mitigation efforts. He said, "I don't think it was designed to help wildfire mitigation." Certainly a true statement, and vastly understated, in my opinion.

Would you say that the roadless rule has helped or hindered wildfire mitigation efforts over the last two decades?

Mr. SCHULTZ. Senator Lee, I would say the roadless rule, and what we see in terms of the datasets, there are about 24.5 million acres of roadless areas that are within the wildland urban interface or within one mile of the wildland urban interface. So by not being able to have areas that we can go into and manage or be able to put the fires out, that is a problem. So it doesn't help, for sure, and it definitely hinders. And what you will find out too is that many roadless areas are, in fact, roaded, so sometimes it's a misnomer. I was in Montana last week on the Helena–Lewis and Clark Forest. There is a lot of roaded roadless. It's the same thing on the Lolo Forest. So to suggest that roadless areas are truly always roadless, that is not the case. In many cases——

The CHAIRMAN. Right.

Mr. SCHULTZ. They were roaded.

The CHAIRMAN. No, I get that, but that's not the point. The point is just whether it has helped or hindered.

Mr. SCHULTZ. It has not helped.

The CHAIRMAN. Good.

Now, so what does the rescission of the roadless rule mean then for land management, for timber harvesting, and for wildfire mitigation on Forest Service land going forward? What does that look like?

Mr. SCHULTZ. Chairman, so the rescission, what that will look like is, we will begin this fall, we will have a rulemaking process and we will go through that process to repeal the rule officially. There are two states where we will not be repealing the rule. That's Idaho and Colorado. They have their own unique roadless rules. So those rules will not be impacted. But we will repeal the rule through our rulemaking process. We will have public input in that process. And then, ultimately, we would have to amend forest plans to adopt that strategy in those forest plans. But that's what will be started this fall.

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you.

Well, I would like to discuss briefly the revisions to the Manti-La Sal National Forest Management Plan. The 2023 draft of that plan included 122,780 acres of recommended wilderness areas. Now, to be perfectly clear, these areas do not meet the Forest Service's own standards for wilderness or for recommended wilderness. The recommendations also appear to conflict with the Utah Wilderness Act of 1984, which designated wilderness areas in exchange for the assurance of no future Utah wilderness designations. That agreement was seemingly ignored by the Biden administration. Will you commit to working with the state and with local cooperating agencies to reevaluate and remove these recommended wilderness areas before the final land management plan is complete?

Mr. SCHULTZ. So sir, yes. We have received those comments from the state. They are being reviewed right now, and we will definitely work with the state in that review of that process in reconsidering those recommendations in the draft.

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you. And I hope you will reach out to me as you do that. In any way I can be helpful, I would love to be kept apprised of that.

Now, timber harvesting is a critical component of responsible forest management. It helps maintain healthy forest density, removes

hazardous fuels by preventing fuel buildup for the fires, and supports rural economies across the country. Since 2000, just the last 25 years alone, the average annual harvest from Forest System lands has been just 2.3 billion board-feet, far below both historic averages and allowable quantities. Now, just last week, we took a huge step in the right direction by enacting new timber harvesting provisions in the Big Beautiful Bill passed by Congress and signed into law by President Trump, to help restore our forests and revitalize the domestic timber industry.

What do you see as the biggest remaining barriers to increasing timber production on federal lands, you know, now that this bill has been passed, and how do we cut through red tape and provide a degree of certainty for our timber and our sawmill industries?

Mr. SCHULTZ. Mr. Chairman, I think you hit a lot of the good points. The biggest thing that the sawmills are looking for is certainty and predictability, right? So the biggest thing is, the Forest Service needs to do what they say they are going to do. So when you talk about, you know, our sustainable supply in what we are doing, if we deliver what we are saying we are going to do, that's what the industry is looking for.

In terms of barriers that are out there, we know litigations are barriers, but in terms of funding things, we are looking at other ways. You mentioned the long-term contracts that are identified in the reconciliation bill. That's something we will be looking at. We actually just signed an agreement with the State of Montana just last week to do a 20-year agreement where the state would come in and assist in managing federal lands. And that's something where we actually have some initial discussions with Utah to look at that and other states in the West as well. So we see that being an opportunity where the states can kind of step in and help us in managing those resources on a go-forward basis.

So that's it. I mean, we are looking at other mechanisms for contracting. We are looking at working with partners on a go-forward basis. Litigation is something, and I know there are provisions and other statutes and laws you are looking at right now to help with some of that, we have talked about the Cottonwood decision many times, but that is one that is out there that still creates some hurdles for us on the litigation piece.

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you very much.

Senator Padilla.

Senator PADILLA. Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Schultz, welcome.

As you know, the Forest Service plays a critical role in wildfire response, not just programs to prevent or mitigate the impact of fires, but to respond to them when they happen. However, under the current administration, we have seen a dangerous reduction in the capabilities and capacity of the Forest Service to respond to wildfires. Through both the deferred resignation program and the voluntary early retirement authority, the Forest Service has lost more than 5,000 employees, about 1,400 of whom had red cards, and you know the significance of red cards. So I am concerned that this represents a significant reduction in capability and capacity and poses a serious danger to communities, not just in California, but elsewhere in the West and across the country. These staff re-

ductions coupled with the President diverting National Guard units in California to mean that those resources are no longer available to support a wildfire response capacity. It's not just irresponsible, it's dangerous.

That's me talking. I want to hear from you, Chief. I know that since the reductions, the agency has invited those who resigned to re-status themselves for fire season. Can you share with the Committee how many have actually taken the agency up on the offer to re-status?

Mr. SCHULTZ. Senator, thank you for the question.

So just to kind of restate again, in terms of resources, we are basically at 99 percent of capacity of our firefighting resources in terms of our GS-9 and below firefighters. So we have had no degradation—

Senator PADILLA. Is that funding or staffing levels?

Mr. SCHULTZ. It's staffing levels, yes, sir. And there has been no impact on the funding, either, on that.

Senator PADILLA. So how have you offset the more than 1,500 staff—

Mr. SCHULTZ. Okay, so, we are talking about two different things. So we had people that took DRP. Firefighters were not eligible for DRP. We had non-firefighting personnel that had red cards, like you said, there were about 1,400 that—

Senator PADILLA. So you are saying there is no reduction in the red cards?

Mr. SCHULTZ. No, what I am saying is that the firefighters that are classified as firefighters were not eligible for DRP, so none of them took DRP. We had other staff that were non-fire personnel that do have red cards and we had, like you mentioned, I think we had 4,000 who took DRP, and another thousand that retired outside of DRP. And there were about 1,400 that did have red cards. So those are the folks that you are referring to. We don't have numbers yet. They have just been kind of coming back on in the last couple weeks. And as we get those numbers, we can get them to you, but we have reached out, as you indicated, to those 1,400 and allowed for them to come back—and not just allowed—but encouraged them to come back, and we have a process for them to come back and support us this year through the end of September.

Senator PADILLA. Well, I am going to eagerly await those numbers and regular reports and updates because red cards are significant, even those that are not firefighters serving critical roles to support the firefighting activity. And so, I am going to be looking for that data and those further assurances and commitment on your part because we are just now entering peak fire season in California and throughout the West.

I want to get back to the topic of partnerships. You mentioned it earlier in the hearing, and I know Senator Barrasso emphasized this earlier in the hearing. The Forest Service's state and private forestry programs, including state fire assistance, the volunteer fire assistance, and the broader state, private, and tribal forestry initiatives provide crucial financial and technical support to state and local fire departments for wildfire prevention, as well as detection and suppression. These programs are essential for building and

maximizing the capacity in fire-adapted communities and ensuring the safety of first responders during wildfires.

What is the status of FY25 funding for these programs? Are you aware? And I guess alongside with that, what is your confidence in getting the funding out by the August 15 deadline?

Mr. SCHULTZ. Sure, thank you, sir. So Senator, for the Fiscal Year 2025, we are still working with OMB on that request. So we are looking to finalize that here, probably within the next couple weeks.

Senator PADILLA. That worries me. I don't mean to cut you off.

Mr. SCHULTZ. Yes.

Senator PADILLA. The deadline to get this out is August 15th. We are a month out and you are still finalizing the numbers?

Mr. SCHULTZ. So Q4 numbers for 2025 are still being finalized for some of those programs, yes, sir.

Senator PADILLA. That should be a big red flag for all of us.

And let me make one other important point as my time is running out. From past fires in California, including Santa Rosa years ago and Los Angeles more recently, these are the types of programs that we should be supporting. I asked you about the FY25 numbers. Do you know what the FY26 numbers are? My understanding is that the President's proposed budget zeros out this program. How does that make any sense?

Mr. SCHULTZ. Senator, I think the intent of that program in 2026 is to transfer that responsibility to the states. That's the intent of that. And giving the states some heads up that that's coming—

Senator PADILLA. Every state that I am aware of is having a tougher budget picture to face. The threat of fires is real. The threat of fires is growing. How does it make sense for the Federal Government to zero out these programs that you said are so critical?

Mr. SCHULTZ. Sir, we would still be partnering with the states in dialogue and discussions, but the transfer—

Senator PADILLA. But you are zeroing out their resources. How does that make any sense?

Mr. SCHULTZ. Well, it's sharing that responsibility and pushing that to the states—

Senator PADILLA. Pushing that to the states that have less resources to work with. How does that make any sense?

Mr. SCHULTZ. In a sense, it makes sense because it's putting that responsibility on the states to make those decisions locally.

Senator PADILLA. Look, it may be residents of California or Utah or other states in between, these are all Americans. Communities in the United States of America that are at increased risk because of the actions of this administration, which contradict the supposed goals and objectives.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you.

Senator Daines.

Senator DAINES. Mr. Chairman, thank you.

If I might just comment on the states' role, and thank you, Chief Schultz, for being here. If you take a look at the landscapes across Montana and look at federal lands versus state lands, I can tell you, the state is doing a much, much better job in terms of stew-

ardship of public lands than the Federal Government. I appreciate the efforts you are doing to work with the states as you are doing.

I know the Idaho delegation, Chief Schultz, likes to claim you, but I want to remind the Committee here that before you were in Idaho, you were a Montanan, and it's good to see you here. You understand the West, and I appreciate that. I want to acknowledge the work the Forest Service firefighters are doing currently across the country. This fire season is expected to be another challenging year for you and your team. Congress must do more to ensure the Forest Service has the tools needed to not only fight the fires, but to prevent them in the first place. And we can do this by increasing better forest management activities and decreasing litigation that is holding up projects.

Chief Schultz, on the Fourth of July, President Trump signed into law the One Big Beautiful Bill, and with it is an extremely important provision for forest health. As you know, the new law requires the Forest Service to nearly double annual timber sales by 2034. That would put Montana at approximately 250 million board-feet and about 5 billion board-feet nationally. These numbers are more in line with our forest plans and will lead to stronger rural communities, better forest health, and reduced wildfire risk.

Chief Schultz, will you prioritize implementation of this provision in the One Big Beautiful Bill?

Mr. SCHULTZ. Senator, thanks—thanks for the question. Yes, we will be doing that. We know that those provisions are there. I think the increase is 250 million board-feet nationally, year over year, for the next 10 years, and we will be doing that.

Senator DAINES. Thank you.

You brought up the Cottonwood decision in one of your responses. I have the bill that will fix that disastrous Ninth Circuit Cottonwood decision. It is crucial in preventing some of the litigation that is stopping wildfire mitigation work, and fixing it will be necessary for you to fully implement the new provisions that are found in the Big Beautiful Bill. In Montana alone, there are 367 million board-feet of timber projects tied up in litigation. This means less work done on the ground before fire season starts in Montana and increased risk of catastrophic wildfires for our communities. And by the way, many think about Montana as being, you know, the beautiful rivers, our fishing, which we are all a part of, but we are a semi-arid state. Think about this: this city here, Washington, DC gets 39 inches of rain—more than Seattle gets, by the way, by a little bit. My hometown of Bozeman—16 inches of rain. So it's a precious commodity, water is. It's also why we have got to be smarter and better in managing our forests, because of the semi-arid climate, of which I get to call home, which I am very thankful for.

There are increased costs, as the Forest Service must spend additional staff time responding to litigation and time trying to make these projects bulletproof, rather than advancing other work. In fact, during a recent hearing, Associate Chief Chris French said, "The Forest Service unit costs are double in regions with frequent anti-forestry litigation." Chief Schultz, will you commit to working with me and this Committee to get a legislative fix done so that

the Forest Service can focus on getting fire mitigations completed rather than fighting endless litigation?

Mr. SCHULTZ. Senator Daines, yes, we will do that.

Senator DAINES. And incidentally on that Ninth Circuit Cottonwood fix, this started off as a small band here of advocates wanting to address that issue. It has moved now to being very bipartisan. In fact, it came through unanimous consent in the Committee last time we had it before in the markup. So I am hoping we can get this done. Both sides of the aisle recognize the importance of fixing the Ninth Circuit decision and making the Ninth congruent with the rest of the nation.

Third, I want to talk about emergency action terminations. In April, Secretary Rollins expanded the authorization for the Forest Service to use the emergency action authority that I authored. This authority reduces red tape and allows the Forest Service to expedite needed active forest management to prevent these catastrophic wildfires. No one can deny that our forests are in a crisis with beetle kill, drought, and overgrowth that are destroying the health of our forests.

Chief Schultz, can you speak to the ground work the Forest Service was able to do with this expanded emergency authority?

Mr. SCHULTZ. Senator Daines, yes, thanks for the question.

So yes, that authority expanded that. Previously, it was about 20 to 30 million acres that had been identified. Now, we are looking at 112 million acres across the country that are at risk of catastrophic fire or insect and disease. So those authorities help us to get work done quicker on the ground. And we are using that today in Region 1, in Region 6, and in Region 5. So those authorities are already moving forward, as you alluded to.

Senator DAINES. Great. Thank you, Chief.

Mr. SCHULTZ. Yes, sir.

The CHAIRMAN. Senator Heinrich.

Senator HEINRICH. Chief, you have talked recently about how your budget is constrained because you need to pay out accrued vacation time for the 5,000 Forest Service employees who opted into the deferred resignation program. Basically, 5,000 people that we are paying not to do work in our forests. Which programs are being affected this year because of the need to pay off that leave?

Mr. SCHULTZ. Senator Heinrich, we are using primarily IRA and IJA funds to pay those out. Those are the funds that are being used for that.

Senator HEINRICH. So it had no impact on the decision to zero out the state and volunteer fire assistance program?

Mr. SCHULTZ. Sir, no, those funds were not used directly. They were not directly earmarked for SFA and VFA funding. Those were not those funds.

Senator HEINRICH. You told the Senate Appropriations Committee a few weeks ago that the Forest Service would be quickly releasing the FY25 funds for these programs for state and volunteer fire assistance. But now, we are hearing that states have been told to prepare to receive zero funding this year. Is that correct?

Mr. SCHULTZ. Sir, you are correct in what my testimony was, and what we are telling states right now is we don't have an answer just yet, but we are not telling them that they are not going to get

it. We are saying we are still in discussion on that. So we are not saying they are not going to get it, but we are still in discussion.

Senator HEINRICH. Well, what I would say is that states need that funding. That is an example of a successful partnership. If we don't have that funding, that's not shared responsibility, that's abdicating our federal responsibility. And not every state has even an agency in place to sort of replace that capacity at the state level at a time when their budgets are also being decimated by Medicaid cuts thanks to the big whatever bill. So I would think very seriously about our responsibility to continue to maintain positive relationships with those states and meet our federal responsibility.

Do you have any thoughts?

Mr. SCHULTZ. I can tell you, your sentiments have been reflected by the state foresters, and we are in close communication with them and we are aware of their concerns and we are taking those into consideration as we work through this issue. Yes, sir.

Senator HEINRICH. Last year, the Forest Service predicted it would accomplish about four million acres of hazardous fuels reduction in 2025. You are three quarters the way through the fiscal year. What is your number right now?

Mr. SCHULTZ. Sir, I don't have that number with me, but I will get it to you.

Senator HEINRICH. I think I have the number.

Mr. SCHULTZ. Okay.

Senator HEINRICH. And you can tell me if I am wrong. It is about 1.7 million acres. So not even 50 percent of the way towards our goal, despite the fact that we are almost through the fiscal year. So, you know, one of the things we agree on in this Committee is we would like to see more fuels reduction as a way to deal with our fire risk. And yet, we are abysmally behind our goals. We have 5,000 fewer people working for the Forest Service now. And there are many of us on this Committee that are worried that the current budget is a recipe for more trees burned and fewer trees cut.

What would you say to my constituents who are worried that this budget blueprint is going to result in fewer hazardous fuels being treated?

Mr. SCHULTZ. Senator Heinrich, what I would say is that overall, we are still going to maintain our fuels program, as we have done. And this budget, what it does is, it transfers the fuels program to the Department of the Interior, so that work would be done in the future by the Department of the Interior. That is part of what happens in this budget, that fuels program goes there. So we would be working with the Department of the Interior to accomplish those objectives on Forest Service grounds. So the intent—we still have the same amount of funding. The funding doesn't shift for fuels, it just shifts from Forest Service to Department of Interior. So the intent would still be to accomplish those goals.

Senator HEINRICH. So if the firefighting efforts are shifted to Interior, would the hazardous fuels treatments go with them?

Mr. SCHULTZ. Senator Heinrich, yes, sir. So the funding for that program, the \$170 million does transfer to Interior. So the large bulk of that would transfer with that program, yes, sir.

Senator HEINRICH. When are we going to get a detailed blueprint of what this new firefighting approach is going to look like?

Mr. SCHULTZ. Senator, we have been requested, through executive order, within the next 90 days, to develop a plan that would identify the structure of this. So that's something that we just started discussions on internally and with the Department of the Interior, so we will meet the timelines that are established in the executive order. So as we work through that, in 90 days, we will have a plan of what this would look like.

Senator HEINRICH. Irrespective of how long it takes to put that plan together, I think there are many of us who are more concerned about the adequacy of that plan and would like to see that plan before we start making budgetary decisions about whether it's a good idea or not. I am very open to different ways of organizing how we fight fires on our national forests and our public lands but I want to see the plan because people's lives and livelihoods are at stake. We have to get that right. And irrespective of whether the White House wants it in two weeks or 90 days, I know that members of this Committee are going to want to see the details and know that this has actually been thought through, unlike some of the early decisions about letting people go who are critical to the management of our public lands.

The CHAIRMAN. Senator Risch.

Senator RISCH. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Tom, good to see you. Tom and I share a lot. My undergraduate was in forestry. Are you first? I am very sorry. The Chairman called on me.

The CHAIRMAN. I'm so sorry. I have even got it on my card.

Senator Cassidy.

Senator CASSIDY. When I speak to my sheriffs back home, next to Kisatchie National Forest, they are providing law enforcement within the forest, and there will be people that will go for recreation, and somebody gets drunk and causes a problem, and it's they who are providing the services. They are not really getting compensated for that. So Grant Parish, for example, the majority of which is owned by the Federal Government, through the Kisatchie, is providing that sort of service. I am told that the agents that are there are merely there to make sure that somebody is not harvesting a tree which they shouldn't harvest or take something out of the ground and take it away. But if there's a fistfight, they don't go and break it up. But my sheriffs are not being compensated.

And I am sure this is true elsewhere. I am sure it's true elsewhere. Is there anything in the budget that will help defray the expense of law enforcement being effectively outsourced to the local community?

Mr. SCHULTZ. Senator Cassidy, thank you for the question. So we have approximately 300 law enforcement officers around the country.

Senator CASSIDY. Well, I am told that they don't break up fights. I am told that they keep people from illegally harvesting, like digging up a plant and taking it away.

Mr. SCHULTZ. So I don't think that is wholly accurate. So we do, our law enforcement officers and investigators, they do deal with trespass, you know, trespass timber issues. They deal with fire starts, in terms of investigations, but they also address law enforcement issues in the forest.

Senator CASSIDY. But if you have 300, with as much land as you have, that's not very many. They are stretched more than thin.

Mr. SCHULTZ. Sir, you are right. They are stretched thin, but they do cooperate, as you mentioned, with local law enforcement, and we have different agreements. So every law enforcement—it could be the county level, it could be the local level. We do have reciprocity agreements where there is assistance provided and requested in some cases. And there are some instances where there are charges that we don't typically assess. You are talking about some of those criminal charges. Those would be assessed typically by local law enforcement.

Senator CASSIDY. But they are also having to incur the expense, and these are rural parishes or counties, and they are incurring the expense of actually providing these services. So what is being done to compensate? Right now, nothing is being done to compensate. That's why, you know, I am——

Mr. SCHULTZ. Right.

Senator CASSIDY. So how do we address that?

Mr. SCHULTZ. So I think it's something we need to follow up with you on. We will take that offline and we will talk with our law enforcement folks and talk about what a strategy might look like to do that.

Senator CASSIDY. I would appreciate that because these are rural parishes.

Mr. SCHULTZ. Yes, sir.

Senator CASSIDY. Poorly resourced, particularly if 80 percent of the parish or county is absorbed by the forest, their tax base and PILT do not really work for them. Their tax base is not adequate to support, so, major issue. So if we can follow up on that, that would be great.

Mr. SCHULTZ. Yes, sir.

Senator CASSIDY. There are also logging activities that take place. In Kisatchie they do logging there. Some of my small contractors feel like they get elbowed out by the big guys. And so, these are family-owned businesses, important for that rural parish's economic vitality. The big guys are based someplace else. They come in and they leave. Is there any kind of understanding of the need to maintain a local economy in a county or parish in which the Federal Government owns most of the land? And if so, does it include, and how does it include, making sure that you can contract with some of the smaller businesses?

Mr. SCHULTZ. Senator, thanks for the question. We do have a couple of programs. One, we have Small Business Administration programs. So if you have less than 500 employees, there are specific provisions in our timber sales that we have to afford so many timber sales to small business. And those are bid out.

Senator CASSIDY. Now, that's a sale. Does that include the logging itself?

Mr. SCHULTZ. The logging—you can actually be a logging contractor and directly buy a timber sale.

Senator CASSIDY. Got it.

Mr. SCHULTZ. You do not have to be mill to buy timber sales, so they would qualify as a small business. The other opportunity we have is, we have provisions that allow some direct sales to small

companies or to just logging contractors at less than \$10,000. There are provisions in some of the legislation being considered in FOFA that would change that and adjust that for inflation. So there is the ability to increase direct sales to small operators on small volumes and small values so that they could buy those directly.

And so, there are a couple programs that we do have that would give some of those smaller operators a greater advantage in terms of buying some of that wood.

Senator CASSIDY. So if some of my folks ended up not being aware of this, then I may connect back with you to make sure that they are.

Mr. SCHULTZ. Yes, sir.

Senator CASSIDY. I am almost out of time and I will yield. Thank you.

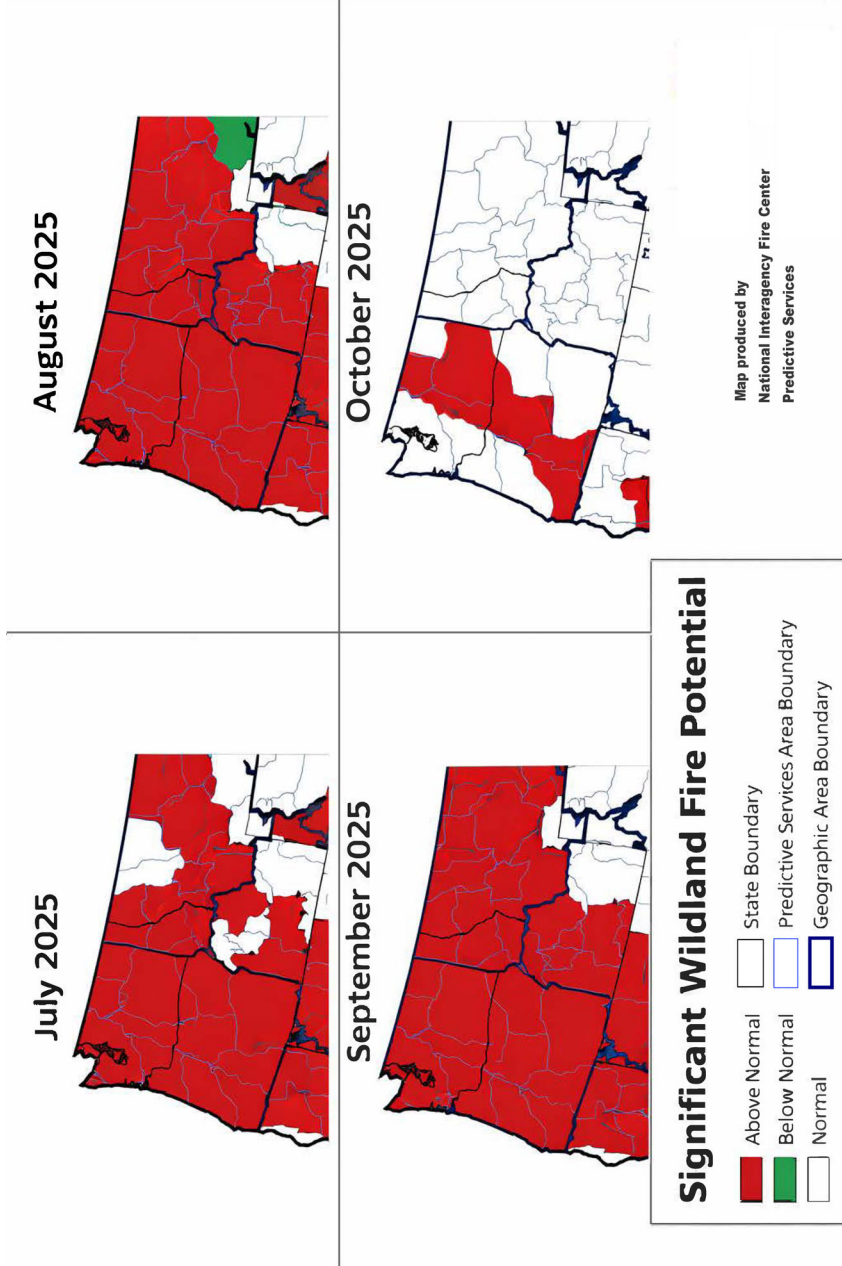
The CHAIRMAN. Senator Cantwell.

Senator CANTWELL. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

First, I want to thank you, Chief Schultz, for being here. And I want to take a moment with my colleague from Idaho to acknowledge the sacrifice and bravery of the firefighters in the Coeur d'Alene Idaho area, and my condolences go out to their families and to this community. And so, we want to remember these individuals, and again, thank the firefighters all across the nation.

Chief Schultz, the season is upon us. I think my staff probably has our most recent charts that show how bad our prediction is for this summer.

[The charts referred to follow:]



Senator CANTWELL. You know, each month it gets more dramatic. And so, the challenge that we face is, we want to prepare, and I think as the nation sees practically 24/7 coverage of what natural disasters can do to a community, one of the best things that you can do is cache resources early—and that meaning c-a-c-h-e—cache them early so that they are close to the proximity of where they need to be. And that is always the best thing to do, and I do think, you know, people were probably asking questions why, if you thought you were going to have flood season in Texas, why didn't you have more resources there at an earlier time, but now we know this is the outlook for us.

My colleague and I—I think our whole states will be covered in red. I don't know about you, but as I fly home every week, I see less and less snow on the Cascades, and I keep thinking, wow, this is really a challenge because you are just going to have drier and drier conditions. Okay, so, where is the resource for the state? I think it's, you know, a budget that has already been approved. So why aren't we releasing the funds that go to the community so that they can best prepare for this fire season?

Mr. SCHULTZ. Senator Cantwell, thanks for the question. I think you are talking about the SFA and the VFA funding. We were talking about that previously. So we are evaluating that right now. We have had a lot of feedback from the state foresters. We are working with OMB on that question right now, looking at that issue. We have not made a determination yet, but that's something that is being evaluated.

Senator CANTWELL. So when do you expect that to go out?

Mr. SCHULTZ. We expect there probably to be a determination in the next several weeks will be my expectation.

Senator CANTWELL. Okay.

Mr. SCHULTZ. But we don't, and again, we can't commit that that's for sure going to go out yet. That is still under discussion.

Senator CANTWELL. Well, we want to follow the normal process.

Mr. SCHULTZ. Right.

Senator CANTWELL. So that the Forest Service is working, you know, with others to get the resources into those communities and do the work that they need to do.

Same question about LWCF. Why is that money being held up by OMB or others?

Mr. SCHULTZ. Senator Cantwell, what we are looking at is just looking at the administration's priorities and looking at the 2025 budget to make sure the work that we are doing is in alignment with the priorities of the administration. So that's something that's just being evaluated right now and we are still looking at that.

Senator CANTWELL. But if LWCF are projects submitted and approved by Congress—this Committee played a key role in saying we want to fund these and let's move forward—why is OMB now requiring a review of LWCF projects?

Mr. SCHULTZ. Senator, I think it's just like I mentioned. We are looking at all those programs in the 2025 budget, just looking at alignment with the priorities of the administration.

Senator CANTWELL. What does that mean? That you are creating a different process than exists, that has been the practice for 50 or 60 years?

Mr. SCHULTZ. I don't think it's that we are creating a new process. I think what we are saying is, that just given the authorities in this—I think the language is that we are saying the President is acting within his authority for the full-year continuing appropriations to revise spending within the amounts provided by Congress. I mean, I think that's what is being done. We are looking at that right now.

Senator CANTWELL. Okay.

And then, on the roadless rule, you know, I love my colleague from Idaho. He probably doesn't want me to say that. Okay, I will pretend I don't like you. How about that? I don't like you.

[Laughter.]

Senator CANTWELL. But he did implement a roadless rule in his state, which he got the people together and he got it done. He made the right decisions—or he made a lot of decisions. He made a lot of decisions. So that's the prerogative, like, that was the way it worked—like, a state could step up and do the work or you could have somebody else tell you. In this case, he did the work. So, are you aware that research found that approximately 88 percent of all wildfires are human-caused and 95 percent of those fires are ignited within a half a mile of a road? And so, one of the reasons why the roadless rule was good for some of these areas is because, no, we are not having roads all over the place and we are not igniting fires all over the place.

So do you have an assessment of the cost of rescinding the roadless rule when you might be building roads into pristine areas and causing more challenges?

Mr. SCHULTZ. Senator, I think our bigger concern isn't building roads into pristine areas, it's that we have 24.5 million acres of the roughly 60 million acres of roadless that is within—either in the WUI or is within a mile of the WUI, so that is our primary concern on this, that we have areas, and much—I mentioned this earlier in my testimony—that there is much roadless area that actually has roads in it. I was on the Helena-Lewis and Clark Forest last week. The Lolo Forest has roads. It's not uncommon that roadless areas do have roads. It just inhibits—

Senator CANTWELL. Well, another question is whether we want to continue that process. And I think what, you know, I think what everybody wants is to not—we want to maintain our forests. We want to have recreational areas. We want to invest in the resources to have the public go enjoy those recreational areas. I personally don't want to sell public lands. But at the same time, you are saying let's not build more roads in places we don't need to build more roads just because one or two people have a great idea that that's what they want to go do. Let's set aside those areas that we think, no, really, we shouldn't be building roads there. That was the whole point of the roadless rule, to make those decisions. And as I said, my colleague was successful at making those decisions and prioritizing that.

And so, now, if you are saying the wildland urban interface is really an issue, yes, I agree. The wildland urban interface should be debated every day of the week now because what we are finding is that we almost had, literally, a fire approach Spokane. I mean, there are people who are looking at that and saying not where the

next, you know, fire like the Palisades or like Hawaii will be, but people are saying the next event is going to be something that goes all the way from the WUI to a major urban city and could cause damage. And that's what happened outside of Spokane last summer.

So I think we are all in, but I think you and I will probably have to continue this dialogue about what's best to do to approach this issue.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you.

Senator Risch.

Senator RISCH. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and thank you to my friend from Washington. I would be remiss if I didn't acknowledge that horrible situation we had with the firefighters being killed. Firefighting is a really dangerous job to begin with, then when you add to it this kind of thing, it's awful. And I would be remiss if I didn't say thank you to Washington, which responded with literally hundreds of law enforcement people to address the situation. We are very thankful for that. Our heart goes out to the people up there.

Tom, proud of you. You are the first Idahoan to be Chief since Dale Bosworth was when I was Governor of Idaho. Dale and I had graduated in the same class from the University of Idaho College of Forestry. That was a little before your time, probably, but Dale did a great job and helped me. And my colleague got ahead of me on the roadless. She knew I would be bringing it up, and that was really an effort between us in Idaho. And how this worked is, George W. Bush invited the states to look at the roadless areas and come up with a plan for their state. I guess Colorado did some, but we were primarily—we have got *the* roadless rule. I am very proud of it. The other states did not do what we wanted to do, and frankly, I had a lot of people advise me that I shouldn't get into that because it was controversial, as you know. Nobody knows how many roadless lawsuits there have been. There have been hundreds, maybe into the thousands, and every time the Republicans are in, the Democrats file suit, and every time the Democrats are in, the Republicans file suit. And nothing ever gets done.

The good news—and I think the proof is in the pudding on my roadless rule—is that, since that has been in for the last two decades, we haven't had one lawsuit involving roadless in Idaho. There have been a lot of roadless lawsuits, but every time they are filed, they exclude Idaho from the suit. So I mean, I think the lawsuits are a great deal for the lawyers, but it really wastes a lot of time and energy and everything else.

The way I went about it was, when the Federal Government suggested that we and the states have a look at it, they gave us no parameters of any kind. And the way I went about it was, I said, well, we are going to put together a committee that everybody is represented on. It's the loggers, so industry is represented. It was the recreation users, which is not one bucket, as you know, the motorized recreational users are very different from the wilderness type of recreational users. And we brought all those people to the table and really took the millions of acres that we had in Idaho and broke them in to various—we had five different categories. Be-

cause, as you know, the roadless, as you say, there is roadless that have roads in them, and they are all over the board. And they were the ones left over when they put all the wilderness lands into wilderness area, there were ones they couldn't reach an agreement on and they set them aside saying these should be looked at. Well, nobody ever looked at them.

But in any event, my pitch to you is that we are in the process of it, and have been for a little while, because it has been so successful, looking at it, I will put it in statute as opposed to just by rule because over the last two decades, the Forest Service—not you, but the people in the Forest Service, have taken a run at dismantling the Idaho roadless rule. The roadless properties, as you know, are managed by a committee that is appointed by the Governor. So it's federal land, but we have very strict parameters on these five different themes that are there, and then this group manages it. And within there, we have a number of small towns. As you suggested, Senator Cantwell, interface is a real problem when you come into fire. So what the roadless committee in Idaho has done, they have focused on these areas and have done treatment plans around these towns so they can stop a fire as it goes through there because, as you know, if one of these things gets going at about ten o'clock in the morning when the wind comes up, what you need is a pair of tennis shoes because you have got to stay away from the fire and not attack the fire. You can't control it.

So on the other hand, if you have treated property, that is ones that have had a sensible harvest on them, it's really a good thing. So we are going to look at trying to get this statutory in because within the Forest Service, there are some who really hate the fact that the state has a say in managing these grounds. For those of us that have a lot of federal lands, this is not uncommon for us. But look, we can deal with this and it has been a tremendous success. I am going to enlist your help in that, Tom, to see if we can't get that done.

And I always hoped that other states would take a hold of this. It was a collaborative effort. The minute it was done we had one of the environmental groups file suit, which I had tried to get to the table. We tried to get everybody to the table. And they filed suit immediately, but bless the environmental group, we said, look, we were going to do this together. We stuck together all the way through the litigation, which went on into the Obama administration. And to their credit, they let us, in Idaho, direct that lawsuit. Our roadless rule was approved by the district judge, an environmental-leaning district judge, but more importantly, it was approved by the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals.

And then certiorari was turned down by the Supreme Court, so we got it. We got a rule. We got it in law. But we would like to see it statutorily, so we have been working at it for some time. We're going to continue to do it. It's been a tremendous success. I highly recommend it for any state that doesn't have it. You can avoid all those lawsuits and actually do stuff with the ground that's in keeping with the various themes that we propose.

I have talked long enough. Mr. Chairman, thank you for the floor. Thank you, Senator Cantwell. And those of you from states

that have large federal holdings, I strongly recommend the approach that we did in Idaho.

Tom, thank you for your service. Thanks for doing this.

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you.

Senator Hickenlooper, you are up next.

Senator HICKENLOOPER. Thank you, Mr. Chair, and my colleague from Idaho, I appreciate all your work. I share a lot of that history with you. We worked on our roadless rule until we finally got it enacted in 2012. I came in, got elected in 2010. So it took a big part of my first couple of years to get everybody around that table and make sure that every single—hunters and anglers and timber merchants and you go down the list, everyone signed off on that roadless rule. And it was a remarkable achievement, and I don't think it has been—to my knowledge, it has never been litigated since. We moved heaven and earth to make sure that everybody was at the table because it did help.

It doesn't solve the problem, and I mean, the problem writ large is that we have a lot of people in this country that want to live in the woods and they want to experience wildlife and be closer to wildlife. And we see more and more people living in that wildland urban interface. And I am deeply concerned about our ability to keep them safe. And we are working on the Fix Our Forests Act that is going to help accelerate the ability to allow thinning of forests—ecological thinning so that we can make sure that the forests aren't so vulnerable, but the cuts that it looks like are coming through your budget in terms of firefighters really concerns me. And we have it in our national forests in Colorado. We have got the Maroon Bells. We have got, well, I could go down the list—Fish Creek Falls, a whole bunch of iconic views that people talk about and dream about and come visit. And, as every year, we are really worried about, if a little wildfire gets out of control, how do we keep people safe, and not just the people that live in the wildland urban interface, but visitors that don't know their way around and are going to get caught up in a place where they are, you know, going to have their entire summer disrupted or actually become in danger.

So with the budget cuts, I guess my first question is, how are you going to keep Coloradans and people from all across this country safe?

Mr. SCHULTZ. Senator, thanks for the question.

The first response is that the budget—the 2026 budget—does not reduce our firefighting resources or capacity. It transfers it from the Forest Service to the Department of the Interior to create this new Wildland Fire Service. But there is no reduction in the firefighting budget that is established. So there is no reduction in that case. What we have been talking about though is, there are reductions on some of the state and private components. And that's maybe what you are alluding to, is the SFA/VFA piece. And that's the piece that, as I have testified previously, that would be shifting from the Forest Service paying for those costs or Interior to the states to cover those costs.

Senator HICKENLOOPER. Right. Well, I think, what I see again and again throughout all the budgets we are seeing, there is more

cost shifted from the Federal Government to states and local areas that are going through their own budget struggles right now.

I also understand that we need to both streamline our permitting and all of our financial services to look at the wildfire crisis. In what other ways are you promoting resilience in terms of forest fires and those efforts?

Mr. SCHULTZ. Senator, I think a big part of what we look at is—you know, the suppression is just the back end of this. Ideally, what we want to do is be very active managers, and that's using prescribed fire, it's using mechanical thinning, it's using commercial timber sales. All of those are critical to making sure that we create resilience and protect communities.

One of the big things I mentioned earlier that Congress did back in December is, you all passed a disaster supplemental, and there was funding in there for Sierra Pacific to actually do fuel breaks on federal lands, on Forest Service lands in California and Oregon. So to me, those are some of the innovative approaches that we are looking at where we can partner with industry and partner with the states. We just signed an agreement with the State of Montana. We are actually having discussions with the State of Colorado right now looking at a similar type of arrangement where the state could come in and assist in managing some of the federal lands in a broader way.

Senator HICKENLOOPER. Right.

Mr. SCHULTZ. We have also had discussions on recreation and how the state can assist in managing recreation. Pike's Peak, for instance, is an area that the state has expressed interest in managing that site. So we are looking very much from a perspective of cooperating with the states to look at how we can address some of these issues.

Senator HICKENLOOPER. I Appreciate that.

Your budget also proposes a land transfer initiative to right-size the federal land. Coloradans—and I can't tell you how many tens of thousands of notices we have—do not want public lands put up for sale, certainly not on any scale. I think we were okay and recognize in certain small areas, isolated circumstances, maybe for workforce housing or something like that in a small mountain community, but I think county commissioners, town councils, mayors, Republicans, Democrats all called us, wrote us, and said do not sell our public lands at scale and certainly not to try and reduce the deficit. So hopefully you will listen to local governments and public citizens to recognize that that's not a constructive direction to take the Forest Service.

Mr. SCHULTZ. Senator, one of the things—I think you alluded to this—there has been a big focus on housing. The administration has looked at this issue and is concerned that as communities want to grow and they are surrounded by federal lands, there are limited opportunities. So the Forest Service is looking at this issue. We have actually done—we did a 99-year lease on the White River Forest that is an existing administrative site that is going to be leased for housing. And we are looking at opportunities in Oregon and in Idaho as well. So where we have tracts, we have authority to sell 40 acres right now. It's through the Small Tracts Act, but we are also looking at other ways to dispose. And those can be long-term

leases where we can encourage where communities want to expand ski resorts, for instance, right, where there is not enough housing for employees, whether at current administrative sites—we are not talking about going into the backcountry, we are talking that we have admin sites that are in areas where they are roaded and those kinds of things where you can take those sites and maybe make affordable housing.

So that's the opportunities that we are looking at right now.

Senator HICKENLOOPER. Okay, well, I am out of time, but when you use language like right-sizing the federal estate, I think that notion of scale that that language creates is of great concern to a lot of people. So just keep that—be mindful.

Thank you.

The CHAIRMAN. Senator Cortez Masto.

Senator CORTEZ MASTO. Thank you. Thank you, Chief, for being here, I appreciate it. I look forward to working with you.

So can I ask, as we are talking about the combination of the U.S. Forest Service firefighting crew along with the Interior and this new bureau and this combination, of combining the existing wildland fire programs, when this happens, what involvement will the U.S. Forest Service still have in this new bureau?

Mr. SCHULTZ. Senator Cortez Masto, so right now, we haven't figured that plan out yet. So right now, the executive order directs us within 90 days to come up with a plan. So in terms of what that's going to look like, we know that the firefighting capacity of the Forest Service is projected to move to the Department of the Interior to create this fire service. So the Forest Service would be a component of that. How that exactly is structured, we don't know yet because we haven't come up with that plan yet. But we would still have a role, it would just be within this unified fire service.

Senator CORTEZ MASTO. So I think that's what we would all be interested in. We want the specifics, obviously, because of our states and the impact these fires have.

Mr. SCHULTZ. Right.

Senator CORTEZ MASTO. So if you would be willing to share that with us when that comes to fruition, that would be very, very helpful.

Mr. SCHULTZ. Yes, ma'am. Right now, we have that 90-day plan that we are working on as we speak.

Senator CORTEZ MASTO. Okay. Thank you.

How many Forest Service employees, I am curious, in Nevada in the Lake Tahoe basin were let go or left since the beginning of this administration? Do you know?

Mr. SCHULTZ. Senator Cortez Masto, I don't have those numbers, but we can get those to you.

Senator CORTEZ MASTO. Okay, thank you. I appreciate that.

And then, we all have talked about this—we know the Forest Service has long struggled to recruit and retain wildland firefighters. But I am curious. I was upset to learn that the Trump administration scrapped the Women in Wildfire Bootcamps program because the administration deemed them unnecessary DEI initiatives. Now, these were programs that were offered to women to learn the basics of wildland firefighting over a two-week course. So please explain to me why, when we need wildland firefighters, we

are scrapping programs that provide training to both men and women to be in this fight to help us address these fires that are happening across the West all the time now—longer, hotter, seasons, and we need firefighters. Why was that program scrapped?

Mr. SCHULTZ. Senator Cortez Masto, what we have done is, we have looked at all of our contracts, everything that we have got. We have looked at that. The Department has looked at those. And our assistants from the DOGE folks looked at those as well. So when we are looking at those types of issues we are looking at, you know, we have training for all firefighters, not just women. So instead of just focusing solely on women, we look at what opportunities for training do we have. And we have numerous opportunities to train firefighters, not just focusing on women. So I think that was the thought behind that is that there are still ample opportunities for all firefighters to be training without just singling out solely women in that case.

Senator CORTEZ MASTO. Right, but this wasn't really singling out women. This is providing programs to train firefighters. Whether they are women or men, who cares? What if there is a program that just trains men? What's the big deal? As long as we are training wildland firefighters, whether it's a man or a woman, those programs should be supported. We need all hands on deck in the West during these fire seasons. So why pick and choose?

Mr. SCHULTZ. Well, I would agree that we need all hands on deck, and I think we are looking at training that provides opportunities for everybody to have all hands on deck. I think that's the response.

Senator CORTEZ MASTO. All right, well, I disagree. And I think it's just a poor use of the administration's discretion.

Let me ask you this—the Ruby Mountains in northern Nevada is one of my state's most cherished places. It is loved by hunters, outdoor enthusiasts, recreationists, tribes, local community leaders. I can't explain it enough. And for many years, all of us, and it goes back to what you have heard in the West—all of the stakeholders, everybody in my state coming together. I don't care what party you are, it's everybody coming together to protect the Ruby Mountains from spurious oil and gas activity that took place there a few years ago in 2017. This Committee previously approved my bill, the Ruby Mountains Protection Act, to permanently prohibit oil and gas development there following a 2019 finding by the Forest Service that no leasing should occur there due to the very low potential to develop oil and gas resources in the area and the substantive public opposition.

The Biden administration announced it was initiating a 20-year administrative withdrawal process to protect the Ruby Mountain area from oil and gas leasing. However, this administration, the Trump administration, reversed these protections for the Rubies, and the only formal notification I received of this reversal was by reading a USDA press release, and it stated, "the Agency also canceled two mineral leasing withdrawals on Forest Service land that will help boost production of critical minerals," which I was told pertained to the Ruby Mountains in Nevada and another proposed withdrawal in New Mexico.

So let me just be clear: Nevadans don't want drilling in the Ruby Mountains. So I am curious, what production of critical minerals does the Forest Service expect to develop in the Ruby Mountains?

Mr. SCHULTZ. Senator Cortez Masto, first of all, on future communications, I will communicate with you directly.

Senator CORTEZ MASTO. Thank you.

Mr. SCHULTZ. On the issue of what we would expect, so, typically what happens with leasing of minerals, the Forest Service isn't trying to, basically, promote a certain activity or not, but it would be made available, if someone deemed that there was a resource there, that would be available for leasing. And I think that was the intent of this.

Senator CORTEZ MASTO. But that has already been done, and that's my point. It seems like everything that has been done in the past, including the speculative leasing that has been denied in the past, is being ignored because it was done under a previous administration. It makes no sense. We are wasting the resources of your men and women that work for you as well as in Interior because this administration thinks that they have to start from scratch when they should be actually looking at what has happened in the past and not waste everybody's time.

So I am curious, along with the critical minerals, what does this administration have plans to do to open the Ruby Mountains for oil and gas drilling, because now you are telling me that you are willing to do that as well, even though we have already gone through this process. This is Groundhog Day. I mean, literally, we are repeating this over again. So what is going on?

Mr. SCHULTZ. Senator Cortez Masto, I think there is nothing going on other than we want to make these lands available to be leased—

Senator CORTEZ MASTO. But they already were available and your administration said no, there is no oil and gas available here. It's low-potential, and the community doesn't want it. Why would you start this process over again? Why can't you learn from what has happened in the past? Was there some problem there? Is there something that we are not aware of that would help my constituents in Nevada understand why this administration wants to repeat the past?

Mr. SCHULTZ. I think the short answer, Senator, is just that we want to make it available so if there is an interest, that we can evaluate that. It doesn't mean it would automatically be leased. They have to demonstrate—

Senator CORTEZ MASTO. I appreciate, Chief—and I am not going to belabor this. Listen, I appreciate this, and I am going over my time and I thank you for the indulgence.

I look forward to working with you and talking to you about this.

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you. Thank you so much.

Chief Schultz, thank you for being here today. This has been enlightening and informative, just as your service thus far has been encouraging. On some of these issues that we have discussed, it's just a reminder of the fact that the states and tribes are incredible partners. They are indispensable parties, really, in that they are the ones on the ground, living in communities that depend on these

forests that are right next to them, whose lives are inextricably intertwined with the lands in question.

So I want to thank you, Chief, for giving the states more authority, more involvement, and more of an ability to set a course for the proper management of these lands, particularly in the ways that affect states and localities. I know that Utah is really looking forward to working with you to expand these partnerships, and I know my state is not alone in that.

As we wrap up, I will remind members that they may submit questions for the record until 6:00 p.m. tonight, and they will have until 6:00 p.m. one week from today to submit any statements that they want to be included in the record.

With that, we stand adjourned.

[Whereupon, at 11:17 a.m., the hearing was adjourned.]

APPENDIX MATERIAL SUBMITTED

**U.S. Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources
July 10, 2025 Hearing: The President's Budget Request
for the U.S. Forest Service for Fiscal Year 2026
Questions for the Record Submitted to Chief Tom Schultz**

Questions from Ranking Member Martin Heinrich

Question 1: I understand that the Office of Management and Budget is demanding new OMB review for every individual project proposed for the Land and Water Conservation Fund.

- What is the administration's rationale for adding procedural roadblocks to projects that were already approved by the Forest Service and OMB, proposed by the President, and approved by Congress?

Response:

In each fiscal year, after appropriations bills become law, OMB provides the funds within the bill to agencies through the apportionment process. An apportionment is an OMB-approved plan to use budgetary resources and can limit the obligations an agency may incur for specified time periods, programs, activities, projects, or objects, and can require additional reports or create other requirements. Apportionments are legally binding, and obligations and expenditures (disbursements) that exceed an apportionment are a violation of the Antideficiency Act.

One of the FY 2025 apportionments for full-year budget authority included a requirement for a Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF) Land Acquisition spend plan prior to executing this program fully. This is necessary because the FY 2025 LWCF Land Acquisition Project List was proposed by the previous Administration. The required spend plan describes the use of FY 2025 funding via a list of projects and associated goals. This review ensures that the Forest Service's LWCF Land Acquisition projects align with the current Administration's priorities and goals while appropriately stewarding Federal resources. The agency is working to meet this requirement as quickly as possible to ensure effective execution of funds.

Please note, the requirement for a spend plan does not include the Land and Water Conservation Fund Forest Legacy program.

Question 2: There are thousands of staff at the Forest Service who don't have "firefighter" in their job title, but still hold red card certifications to respond to wildfires.

- If fire operations are moved to Interior, will these red card employees still support firefighting efforts? How would the two agencies navigate that?

Response:

The Forest Service and all DOI bureaus are dependent on non-fire employees who are not expected to be part of the consolidation to deliver wildfire response. It is expected that with the creation of the new U.S. Wildland Fire Service these non-fire employees, who will remain with their respective agency/bureau, will continue to be ordered and funded, as needed, through the incident response system, in the same way it works now.

**U.S. Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources
July 10, 2025 Hearing: The President's Budget Request
for the U.S. Forest Service for Fiscal Year 2026
Questions for the Record Submitted to Chief Tom Schultz**

- Will red card certifications still be offered to Forest Service employees? And who at the Forest Service will lead this effort?

Response:

It is anticipated that the new U.S. Wildland Fire Service at DOI would continue to offer training available to all Federal employees who have the interest and meet the requirements to be certified for wildland fire response.

Question 3: This budget eliminates funding for the Forest and Rangeland Research division, which supports efforts to map wildfire risk, create value-added materials out of forest products, and find innovative ways to keep firefighters safe.

- How do you expect to make improvements in wildfire and forest technology if you eliminate the research division at the Forest Service?

Response:

We recognize that sound decision-making must be informed by science. We will continue to support research that is aligned to the Agency's land management focus through the Forest Inventory and Analysis program. In addition, per the President's FY 2026 budget, the Joint Fire Science Program will continue to be supported in the proposed Department of the Interior U.S. Wildland Fire Service.

- Does the administration expect to transition existing research personnel from the Forest Service to the Department of the Interior?

Response:

No. The FY 2026 President's Budget eliminates funding for the Forest and Rangeland Research program. Funding for the Joint Fire Science program, which is not staffed by Forest Service research personnel, would be moved to the proposed Department of the Interior U.S. Wildland Fire Service. Forest Inventory and Analysis program personnel would remain within the Forest Service.

Question 4: The State, Private, and Tribal Forestry program supports an array of critical forest health activities, including eliminating invasive species, treating disease outbreaks, preserving working forests, and supporting firefighting capacity at the local level.

**U.S. Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources
July 10, 2025 Hearing: The President's Budget Request
for the U.S. Forest Service for Fiscal Year 2026
Questions for the Record Submitted to Chief Tom Schultz**

- How many fires on Forest Service land occur per year for which State, Tribal, and local firefighters are the first on the scene?

Response:

On average, there are approximately 60,000 to 70,000 wildland fires per year. These fires are responded to by a mix of agencies including states, Tribes, Federal wildland fire agencies, and municipalities. While individual agency dispatch records may indicate what agency resource was first on scene, we estimate that approximately 75% of the time State, Tribal, and local firefighters are first on the scene.

- Has the agency completed an analysis of the changes to response times for wildfires on Forest Service land if these fire departments are forced to close? Please share any related studies or models.

Response:

The FY 2026 Budget seeks to restore federalism by encouraging States and local partners to fund their wildfire preparedness activities and the proposed U.S. Wildland Fire Service will continue to work with states, Tribes, and local partners to respond to wildfires.

- Has the agency completed any modeling of the positive impact that State, Private, and Tribal Forestry programs have had on federal lands, such as whether insect and disease impacts on federal lands were lessened as a result of interventions on private land? Please share any related studies or models.

Response:

The FY 2026 Budget request eliminates the Federal Lands Forest Health Management account to ensure fiscal responsibility with American taxpayer dollars and to better balance the appropriate roles of federal and state governments. The Federal Lands Forest Health Management program is duplicative of other land management programs within the National Forest System appropriation.

Question 5: The Forest Service's International Programs help protect our forests from zoonotic diseases, invasive species, and illegal timber harvesting. They also help domestic producers qualify for international markets and keep illegally harvested timber out of U.S. markets.

- Has the administration completed an analysis of the value to domestic producers of the International Program assistance? Please share any related studies or models.

Response:

**U.S. Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources
July 10, 2025 Hearing: The President's Budget Request
for the U.S. Forest Service for Fiscal Year 2026
Questions for the Record Submitted to Chief Tom Schultz**

The FY 2026 request eliminates funding for the International Programs account to ensure fiscal responsibility with American taxpayer dollars and to better balance the appropriate role of the United States in international natural resources conservation efforts. While the Budget does not request new funding for this account, the Forest Service will strategically utilize existing carryover balances to responsibly and effectively close this program. The Forest Service will continue to meet its statutory requirements under the Lacey Act.

- I understand that the administration has considered the creation of a new International Operations Division to enforce the Lacey Act. How would you fund this new operation if not through the International Programs division?

Response:

The FY 2026 request provides for sustained support for Law Enforcement and Investigations (LEI) operations. The Agency will continue to deliver on its statutory Lacey Act enforcement responsibilities.

Question 6: The Forest Service reported last year that the 31 projects in the Collaborative Forest Landscape Restoration Program (CFLRP) restored 6.7 million acres of high-priority forest lands from California, to New Mexico, to Arkansas. Those treatments were successful in moderating fire behavior 83 percent of the time and supported 4,900 jobs—this year, the budget requests zero dollars for this program.

- What is the rate of litigation against CFLRP projects versus traditional timber sales? How often are those lawsuits successful in blocking the project compared with traditional timber sales?

Response:

CFLRP projects are not considered an alternative to traditional timber sales. CFLRP projects are often carried out using traditional timber sale contracts. CFLRP demonstrated the value of bringing partners together, which has become a model for how we generally operate and that we will continue without the need for a separate program.

- Has the Forest Service completed an analysis of community approval rates for timber harvesting or hazardous fuels management projects conducted through CFLRP authorities versus traditional timber sales?

Response:

Please see the response to the previous question.

**U.S. Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources
July 10, 2025 Hearing: The President's Budget Request
for the U.S. Forest Service for Fiscal Year 2026
Questions for the Record Submitted to Chief Tom Schultz**

Question 7: The National Forest System receives an estimated 159 million visitors every year and recreation brings in more funds than any other activity on the National Forest System.

Yet, this budget proposes a 31 percent cut to recreation accounts and another 50 percent cut from the capital maintenance account.

- Please quantify the level to which staffing reductions so far in 2025 (e.g. Deferred Resignation Program, Voluntary Early Retirement, or firing of probationary staff, etc.) have already impacted hours at visitor centers?

Response:

We intend to keep as many public contact spaces open as possible in offices, facilities, visitor centers, and developed recreation sites. However, as the agency reassesses needs, resources, and capacity, there may be cases where adjustments to facility and site schedules are needed.

- What additional reductions in visitor center or ranger station hours would occur if this budget were signed into law as a result of reductions to the recreation accounts?

Response:

The Budget request allows the Forest Service to continue offering high-quality recreation experiences to visitors of national forests. With this funding level, the Forest Service will focus on high-use recreation sites and work with communities and public-private partnerships to pursue efficient, collaborative approaches to offering recreation opportunities on NFS lands.

- Please provide the number of special use permits, or other related recreational permits, that have been approved so far this year compared with the ten-year average.

Response:

So far this year (January 1, 2025 – July 22, 2025) the Forest Service has issued 2,455 recreation special use authorizations. The average for this same time window over the last 10 years is 2,972. The average for full years (January 1 – December 31) over the last 10 years is 4,637 recreation special use authorizations.

Question 8: Secretary Rollins announced in June her intent to initiate a repeal of the 2001 roadless area conservation rule, citing a need to support the timber industry and suppress wildfires.

- Has the Forest Service conducted an analysis of the number of timber industry jobs that were lost or expected to be lost as a result of the 2001 rule? Please share any related studies or models.

**U.S. Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources
July 10, 2025 Hearing: The President's Budget Request
for the U.S. Forest Service for Fiscal Year 2026
Questions for the Record Submitted to Chief Tom Schultz**

Response:

It was noted in the 2001 Final Rule that “[i]n addition to lost revenue, there would be an estimated immediate impact of 461 fewer timber jobs and 841 total jobs” (66 FR 3268). The current rulemaking process will include analysis of economic effects as appropriate.

- Has the Forest Service conducted an analysis of the recreation visitation to Forest Service lands or impacts to the local recreation industry that resulted from the promulgation of the 2001 rule?

Response:

The Roadless Rule is overly restrictive and poses real harm to millions of acres of our national forests. In total, 30% of National Forest System lands are impacted by this rule. For example, nearly 60% of forest service land in Utah is restricted from road development and is unable to be properly managed for fire risk. In Montana, it is 58%, and in Alaska's Tongass National Forest, the largest in the country, 92% is impacted. This also hurts jobs and economic development across rural America. Utah alone estimates the roadless rule alone creates a 25% decrease in economic development in the forestry sector.

- Please provide the number of special use permits, or other recreation-related permits, that have been approved within inventoried roadless areas for each year within the past 10 years.

Response:

The Forest Service does not track the number of special use permits or other outdoor-related permits for inventoried roadless areas. The agency tracks congressionally designated areas, such as Wilderness, in our Special Uses Database System. Roadless areas are not congressionally designated.

- How many wildfires each year ignite as a result of human activity? How many of those wildfires are ignited within a half mile of a road?

Response:

Repealing the Roadless Rule is more important than ever because 24.5 million acres of the Wildland Urban Interface, where forests meet communities, are either in roadless areas or within a mile of a roadless area—making the need for increased access a major public safety issue. Roads improve access for wildland firefighting when timing is critical and lives are at risk. As

**U.S. Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources
July 10, 2025 Hearing: The President's Budget Request
for the U.S. Forest Service for Fiscal Year 2026
Questions for the Record Submitted to Chief Tom Schultz**

the [Secretary stated](#), the lack of forest maintenance and access have frustrated land managers for years, including firefighters who haven't been able to reach fires in time to slow their spread.

The USDA Forest Service uses sound, peer reviewed research to help fire managers make science-based decisions to understand the tradeoffs between allowing road access and wildfire risk. While roads can increase the likelihood of human caused fires, they also improve access for wildland firefighting when timing is critical, and lives are at risk. Roads also allow access for forest health and wildfire risk reduction projects, which include prescribed burning, mechanical treatments, and timber harvest. A growing body of research -- including a recent [intensive review of over 40 case studies](#) -- shows that this work reduces wildfire severity by more than 60% compared to untreated areas.

Rescinding this outdated and overly prescriptive rule allows us to increase access to the forest to do more of this critical work to save lives, protect communities and safeguard our forests.

- What is the average damage to high-value resources and assets, including homes and critical infrastructure, that result from wildfires caused by human activity versus lightning?

Response:

We do not track data related to damage to homes and other high value resources.

Question 9: Please provide, to the best of your ability, the amount of funding received by state and local fire departments in the Coeur d'Alene, ID area through the State Fire Assistance or Volunteer Fire Assistance programs.

Response:

During fiscal years 22-24 state and local fire departments in the Coeur d'Alene area received a total of \$148,000 dollars through State Fire Assistance (SFA) and Volunteer Fire Assistance (VFA) programs. In those same fiscal years, the state of Idaho received approximately \$11 million dollars through SFA and VFA.

**U.S. Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources
July 10, 2025 Hearing: The President's Budget Request
for the U.S. Forest Service for Fiscal Year 2026
Questions for the Record Submitted to Chief Tom Schultz**

Questions from Senator Lisa Murkowski

Question 1: Chief Schultz, we all know that addressing the ever-increasing risk of wildfires across the country will take cooperation and collaboration among state, local, federal, tribal, and community partners. To this point, the President's Executive Order 'Empowering Commonsense Wildfire Prevention and Response' states "the Secretaries SHALL expand and strengthen the use of partnerships, agreements, compacts, and mutual aid capabilities that empower Federal, State, local, tribal, and community-driven land management."

- A) How does your FY26 budget request reflect this directive, and will the zeroing out of the State, Tribal, and Private Forestry account be detrimental to your ability to carry it out?

Response:

The FY 2026 request eliminates funding for the State, Private, and Tribal Forestry account to ensure fiscal responsibility with American taxpayer dollars and to better balance the appropriate roles of federal and state governments. The budget request anchors to a return to federalism, which is a priority for the Trump Administration, and encourages increasing state and local governments' authority to fund the management of state and privately-owned forests, community preparedness, and public risk mitigation activities in alignment with local priorities. Our partnerships with the States and local governments are a key aspect of managing the nation's forests. While our funding for non-federal activities will not continue, we will continue our steadfast partnerships with states and local communities to ensure America's forests are healthy and resilient.

- B) Chief Schultz, in briefings regarding the FY26 President's Budget for your agency, it was reiterated that the FY26 budget will not interfere with or lessen ability of the federal government to respond to wildfires.

1. What is your agency's average response time for wildland fires in Alaska?

Response:

Fire response is highly variable in Alaska because of the remote nature of the state. Fire response is based off pre-determined fire management option polygons which are identified in the Alaska Master Cooperative Wildland Fire Management and Stafford Act Response Agreement, and corresponding Alaska Statewide Operating Plan. Fire management options are defined as Critical, Full, Modified and Limited and are primarily based on "Values at Risk" such as the Wildland Urban Interface. Areas which reside near existing roads systems range from 15 minutes to 2 hours response times. Areas which are accessed by boat range from 1 hour to 6 hours. Areas which are accessed by rotor wing aircraft can range from 15 minutes to 2 hours. Areas which are accessed by fixed wing aircraft can range from 1 hour to 4 hours. It's important to recognize that fire response timelines are also influenced by staffing, proximity to hazardous fuels work sites,

**U.S. Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources
July 10, 2025 Hearing: The President's Budget Request
for the U.S. Forest Service for Fiscal Year 2026
Questions for the Record Submitted to Chief Tom Schultz**

time of day in relation to being "on" and "off" shift as depicted by local fire danger and preparedness plan.

2. How many USFS wildfire personnel are permanently stationed in Alaska?

Response:

Staffing USFS positions in Alaska is a challenge due to fire resources being stationed in remote and urban areas which have a very high cost of living, limited government housing and facilities. Currently the program is staffed with 20 fire fighters, 2 prevention technicians, 8 dispatchers, 1 fuels technician, and 3 fire managers. Additionally, 7 Aviation personnel and 2 dispatchers support the Combined Chugach and Tongass Fire and Aviation Management program are funded outside of fire organization. There is also 1 R10 Assistant Director for Fire Operations. A Regional Fuels staff provides additional support.

3. How many wildfires are currently active in Alaska at the time of your response?

Response:

As of August 26, 2025 Alaska is at preparedness level one and there are 145 active fires in Alaska, of which 2 are staffed with a total of 31 personnel.

4. Administration as well as Members of Congress have floated the goal of initiating suppression operations within 30 minutes of fire detection. Based on the resources your agency has, is that an achievable goal for fires within Alaska?

Response:

Every fire has a response plan based on accessibility, weather condition and threat to values at risk. In some cases, response will occur more quickly than 30 minutes while other situations resources may not arrive until later.

5. With the proposed elimination of the State and Volunteer Fire Capacity Grants in the President's FY26 Budget Request how do you believe this will affect wildfire response times in rural areas like the entirety of my state?

Response:

The 2026 Budget seeks to restore federalism by encouraging States and local partners to fund their wildfire preparedness activities. Local governments should be empowered to fund their wildfire protection capabilities – without Federal interference – so as to not impact response times.

**U.S. Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources
July 10, 2025 Hearing: The President's Budget Request
for the U.S. Forest Service for Fiscal Year 2026
Questions for the Record Submitted to Chief Tom Schultz**

6. Is the Forest Service proposing to increase the number of personnel to augment the State and volunteer fire crews who would lose funding?

Response:

The FY 2026 budget seeks to restore federalism by encouraging States and local partners to fund their wildfire protection capabilities. Determination of staffing needs will be an iterative process as the proposed U.S. Wildland Fire Service is established.

Question 2: Chief Schultz, In Alaska we rely on the Forest Service to be a good neighbor and partner – to maintain visitor centers and staffing levels necessary to support a thriving tourism and outdoor recreation economy, to maintain facilities for guests, and to maintain trails and ANILCA cabins for local users and subsistence access.

Deferred maintenance grows exponentially every year, and I'm concerned that the 48 percent reduction to the Capital Improvements and Maintenance account requested in this budget will worsen this backlog and could impact access and use of Forest Service lands Alaskans rely on.

- A) Can you describe how the funds in this account will be implemented to avoid a significant increase in the Forest Service's deferred maintenance inventory?

Response:

The Budget also proposes an additional \$110.9 million in Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF) – Priority Deferred Maintenance mandatory resources for high-priority deferred maintenance objectives; predominantly roads, bridges, and facilities, including those that are critical to housing employees and ensuring visitor safety. Forest Legacy is maintained at previous request levels. Great American Outdoors Act (GAOA) – Legacy Restoration Fund reauthorization is also included in the FY 2026 budget request. Total amount available in the FY 2026 budget request between annual appropriations, the reauthorization of GAOA – Legacy Restoration Fund, and the new LWCF Deferred Maintenance program would be \$474 million. This is approximately 14% more than currently available in FY 2025.

Question 3: Chief Schultz, like deferred maintenance, invasive species are a problem that only worsens if left unchecked. Invasive species are a core driver of species endangerment and extinction, contribute to hazardous fuels and wildfire risk, and jeopardize the health of our forests and grasslands – as well as the communities and economies reliant upon them.

- A) How will you prioritize funding for invasive species treatment to ensure we are able to control this threat to our forests? What criteria will be used to identify high-priority areas for invasive species treatment?

**U.S. Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources
July 10, 2025 Hearing: The President's Budget Request
for the U.S. Forest Service for Fiscal Year 2026
Questions for the Record Submitted to Chief Tom Schultz**

Response:

The Vegetation and Watershed Management Program, which is included in the 2026 Budget, improves and maintains landscape and watershed conditions by preventing and controlling invasive plants; maintaining or improving soil quality; establishing native plants for pollinators and diverse native plant communities.

The Budget request focuses the Forest Service on the most critical watershed restoration and conservation actions. Land management actions with multiple benefits, such as timber production and recreation management efforts will be prioritized.

Question 4: Chief Schultz, while I understand and appreciate your effort to maximize efficiencies within the Forest Service budget, I'm concerned the proposed reduction of workforce and facilities outlined in this budget could impact community safety, access, and economic opportunity for communities proximate to Forest Service lands. The Forest Service takes on a critical role in safety for Southeast Alaska – mediating visitor interactions with wildlife, performing hazards monitoring in areas at risk for landslides, providing emergency response in remote areas, and maintaining trails and cabins to maximize safety for those traveling through the Tongass. Forest Service lands and the staff who facilitate visitor services, issue guide permits, perform surveys necessary for sustainable timber sales, and maintain our trails and facilities, are all essential to the diverse economy of Southeast Alaska.

- A) How will positions like these – that are essential to the economic prosperity of the region – be weighed in reduction decisions?

Response:

USDA is realigning and refocusing the Forest Service around its original intended mission and will continue to prioritize critical health and safety positions.

Question 5: When it comes to this budget request, I understand the need to find efficiencies, but I will reiterate that a failure to maintain core functions in Alaska will damage economic opportunities, jeopardize the health of our forests, and threaten the safety of visitors and residents alike.

- A) Can you provide my office with updated information regarding Forest Service staffing across Alaska – including the region, position, and number of staff lost to deferred resignations and terminations, as well as the number of staff who have returned to the Forest Service or whose positions have been posted for hiring?

Response:

**U.S. Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources
July 10, 2025 Hearing: The President's Budget Request
for the U.S. Forest Service for Fiscal Year 2026
Questions for the Record Submitted to Chief Tom Schultz**

While the agency continues to undergo transformational change, the Alaska Region's workforce has seen a reduction in workforce through participation in the completely voluntary deferred resignation program, regular and voluntary early retirements, reassignments, and general attrition. The Regional office has retained approximately 50% of employees from the beginning of calendar year 2025. The Tongass and Chugach National Forests have each retained approximately 75% of its workforce. The highest impacted positions include Biological Science Technicians, Engineers, Forestry Technicians, Recreation Management Specialists, and Visitor Information Assistants. Current regional office employees are accepting reassignments, through critical position outreaches, to vacant forest positions within Alaska to further Presidential and Chief priorities.

**U.S. Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources
 July 10, 2025 Hearing: The President's Budget Request
 for the U.S. Forest Service for Fiscal Year 2026
 Questions for the Record Submitted to Chief Tom Schultz**

UNIT	# employees	% Remaining
Tongass National Forest		
Tongass Total Employees (As of Jan. 1, 2025)	377	
Tongass Resignations	-8	
Tongass DRP 1.0	-10	
Tongass DRP 2.0	-80	
Reassignments	0 (-4/+4)	
Total Remaining (as of July 23, 2025)	279	74%
Chugach National Forest		
Chugach Total Employees (As of Jan. 1, 2025)	164	
Chugach Resignations	-5	
Chugach DRP 1.0	-4	
Chugach DRP 2.0	-31	
Reassignments	3	
Total Remaining (as of July 23, 2025)	127	77%
Region		
Region Total Employees (As of Jan. 1, 2025)	115	
Region Resignations	-7	
Region DRP 1.0	-7	
Region DRP 2.0	-33	
Reassignments	-6	
Total Remaining (as of July 23, 2025)	62	54%

**U.S. Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources
July 10, 2025 Hearing: The President's Budget Request
for the U.S. Forest Service for Fiscal Year 2026
Questions for the Record Submitted to Chief Tom Schultz**

Questions from Senator Ron Wyden

Question 1: During the hearing, I asked you about impacts of the loss of Forest Service employees on wildfire preparedness in Oregon. Your claim that wildfire response capacity has not been diminished is entirely inconsistent with your admission later in the hearing that 1,400 “red card” holders have been separated from the agency. These individuals are critical to providing support to wildland firefighters during wildfire. Do you have a plan for immediately replacing this capacity and, if that plan is to rehire former employees, how will you successfully incentivize them to accept positions they were previously encouraged by your agency to leave?

Response:

Over the past five years, approximately 350 of those 1,400 employees were activated to fires. In other words, only about 25% of the red-carded employees who took DRP supported fire incidents in the last five years. As of July 21, 85 employees who voluntarily left through the DRP have decided to return for the season. 65 of those have mobilized to fire assignments.

Question 2: During the hearing, you did not seem aware of the numbers provided recently by senior leadership within the Department of Agriculture that confirm that the Forest Service has conducted less than half of the hazardous fuels treatments to date this fiscal year as compared to FY24. Are you now committing to ensuring that the Forest Service will complete at least as many acres of hazardous fuels reduction treatments in FY25 as it did in FY24?

Response:

Operational challenges have impacted the ability to implement prescribed fire across the country. Active fires starting in CA in January, followed by significant fire in the Southeast and the upper Midwest, as well as extremely dry conditions limited our ability to conduct prescribed fire in many parts of the country. Early and continued support to Canada through the spring and early summer reduced available resources to conduct prescribed fire. The continued high level of fire activity and extreme conditions in many parts of the west is requiring significant resources and personnel, impacting our ability to achieve additional acres of accomplishment.

Question 3: Prescribed fire is an important component of wildfire risk reduction and critical to restoring and maintaining forest health. The Forest Service treated a record 2.2 million acres with prescribed fire in 2024, a number that still needs to grow. Given the concerning, substantial proposed and actual reductions to the agency's budget and workforce over the last six months, how will you ensure the Forest Service continues to expanding prescribed fire treatments in the future for the safety of our communities?

Response:

**U.S. Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources
July 10, 2025 Hearing: The President's Budget Request
for the U.S. Forest Service for Fiscal Year 2026
Questions for the Record Submitted to Chief Tom Schultz**

In the 2026 Budget, \$175 million would be transferred to the Department of the Interior as part of the new U.S. Wildland Fire Service which will facilitate hazardous fuels mitigation operations on NFS lands. The overall objective of all NFS program activities is manage for productive use and resilience to catastrophic wildfire, and to provide a broad range of ecosystem services.

Question 4: You told me during the hearing that the actual consolidation of the wildland firefighting apparatus under the Department of the Interior would not take place during the current fire season. You stated at a later point that you were still formulating the blueprint for the consolidation. Can you confirm in writing that no efforts will be made to implement this blueprint until Congress has had time to review the plan to ensure it will not jeopardize the lives and livelihoods of our constituents?

Response:

We will not compromise our obligation to respond to wildfire and the Administration will commit to keeping your office informed as we execute the President's Executive Order signed on June 12, 2025.

Question 5: The Forest Service has a multi-billion-dollar backlog of road maintenance on lands it manages. Too many of these roads have been completely neglected and are falling apart – not even four-wheel drive, high-clearance vehicles can drive many of these roads—and as they fail they threaten drinking water and habitat. One of the many reasons the Roadless Area Conservation Rule was adopted was to stop excessive and fiscally irresponsible road construction. Secretary Rollins recently announced that she plans to rescind the long-standing Roadless Area Conservation Rule. Please explain why you would take the fiscally irresponsible step to rescind the Roadless Rule before taking care of the road network that the Forest Service has currently?

Response:

In total, 30% of National Forest System lands are impacted by the 2001 Roadless Rule. For example, nearly 60% of forest service land in Utah is restricted from road development and is unable to be properly managed for fire risk. Of the 58.5 million acres of inventoried roadless areas covered under the 2001 Roadless Rule, 28 million acres are in areas at high or very high risk of wildfire. Repealing the Roadless Rule is more important than ever because 24.5 million acres of the Wildland Urban Interface, where forests meet communities, are either in roadless areas or within a mile of a roadless area – making the need for increased access a major public safety issue.

The budget increases the Forest Service's ability address priority deferred maintenance projects across owned Forest Service infrastructure, including through the FY 2026 Budget proposal to utilize LWCF resources to address priority deferred maintenance resources.

**U.S. Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources
July 10, 2025 Hearing: The President's Budget Request
for the U.S. Forest Service for Fiscal Year 2026
Questions for the Record Submitted to Chief Tom Schultz**

Question 6: I have long been a champion of the Land and Water Conservation Fund, which was permanently authorized under the Great American Outdoors Act, which Congress passed in 2020 and which President Trump signed into law that year. LWCF is one of our nation's most important conservation and recreation programs. This program is critically important to Oregon's economy and outdoor way of life, making sure everyone has access to our treasured forests, streams, and trails, for hunting, fishing, hiking, and other outdoor activities.

Your FY 2026 budget breaks our promise to the American people by breaking two laws: The Dingell Act of 2019, which ensured that LWCF federal land protection priorities would be balanced alongside state and local LWCF grants for investment of the non-taxpayer dollars that are set aside in this fund every year, and the Great American Outdoors Act, which guaranteed funding for LWCF conservation and recreation purposes - including federal land protection. I worked for many years to stop the diversion of LWCF to other uses, and GAOA finally solved it. For good, we thought. But now your budget reinstates that diversion by proposing LWCF be used for deferred maintenance. I oppose this budget proposal. Have you evaluated the impact of this sweeping cut to LWCF on pending projects on public lands and National Forests in Oregon? What specific projects will not get done this year if your budget is approved?

Response:

It is critical that the Federal estate is right-sized to reduce Federal costs for land management and asset maintenance. Continuing to acquire Federal lands without the financial resources to maintain them is not good stewardship of these lands.

- In addition, on LWCF, it is apparent that the Office of Management and Budget is reviewing and holding back funding on already approved LWCF projects. The way the law works is projects are proposed by both the Administration and Congress, approved by Congress, and then funded and implemented by the Administration. Will you commit to ensuring that the already Congressionally approved projects are funded and carried out?

Response:

One of the FY 2025 apportionments for full-year budget authority included a requirement for a Land and Water Conservation Fund Land Acquisition spend plan prior to executing this program fully. The spend plan describes the use of FY 2025 funding via a list of projects and associated goals to ensure alignment with Administration priorities and appropriate stewardship of Federal resources. The agency is working to meet this requirement as quickly as possible to ensure effective execution of funds.

**U.S. Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources
July 10, 2025 Hearing: The President's Budget Request
for the U.S. Forest Service for Fiscal Year 2026
Questions for the Record Submitted to Chief Tom Schultz**

Questions from Senator John Hoeven

Question 1: The Forest Service administers 20 publicly owned National Grasslands, including those in North Dakota, where grazing associations have long partnered with the agency to support livestock grazing through paid permits.

Will you commit to upholding and strengthening this longstanding partnership between the U.S. Forest Service and North Dakota's grazing associations?

Response:

Yes. USDA agrees that North Dakota and other state grazing associations are critical to maintaining healthy and productive rangelands.

Question 2: The FY 2026 budget removes duplicative federal efforts and consolidates wildland fire management activities into a new bureau within the Department of the Interior.

What benefits would this proposed reorganization provide, and would it enhance the Forest Service's ability to focus on its core land management responsibilities?

Response:

There are currently five federal entities that directly support wildland fire. Creating a singular entity – the U.S. Wildland Fire Service (USWFS) – to manage wildland fire response will inherently increase the overall efficiency of the organization while focusing on not just maintaining but increasing the effectiveness of wildland fire response. We will be more efficient by reducing administrative overhead and duplication and by ensuring we have consent rules for operational requirements for our partners. Additionally, we will focus on enhancing standard training requirements for federal firefighters to help develop the next generation with the skill sets needed to protect communities and other critical infrastructure. The USWFS will provide initial attack and large fire response for all federal land management agencies.

Additionally, the consolidated USWFS will allow the Forest Service to focus on core land management responsibilities, including timber production emphasized in E.O. 14225, "Immediate Expansion of American Timber Production", rangeland health, recreation, and other services to the American people.

**U.S. Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources
July 10, 2025 Hearing: The President's Budget Request
for the U.S. Forest Service for Fiscal Year 2026
Questions for the Record Submitted to Chief Tom Schultz**

Questions from Senator Mazie Hirono

Question 1: The U.S. Forest Service's (FS) FY 2026 Budget Request eliminates all funding from the Forest and Rangeland Research account, which includes the agency's Research and Development program. This program supports staff working across nearly 80 FS facilities throughout our country who conduct cutting edge research and produce innovative technologies that improve the health of our nation's forests.

Has the FS conducted a performance or cost-benefit analysis to justify cutting the entire Forest and Rangeland Research Account? If so, can you share the findings with the Committee?

Response:

No, this is not a requirement of the out-year budget formulation process.

Question 2: The FY 2026 budget proposal eliminates a number of discretionary programs to "ensure fiscal responsibility with American taxpayer dollars and to better balance the appropriate roles of federal and state governments." One of the many benefits of having FS personnel physically present in Hawaii and the U.S. Affiliated Pacific Islands (USAPI) is their ability to tap into their national network of experts and laboratory resources to solve local problems. For example, the Fire Lab in Montana conducts fundamental research into fire spread models that have nationwide ramifications. If those responsibilities are shifted onto the state, that network will be lost.

How do you envision states filling the role that FS experts and laboratories play, especially in places like Hawaii, with remote and unique landscapes?

Response:

We recognize that sound decision-making must be informed by science. We will continue to support research that is aligned to the Agency's land management focus through the Forest Inventory and Analysis program.

Question 3: The Institute of Pacific Islands Forestry (IPIF) is the only facility in Hawaii and the U.S. Affiliated Pacific Islands (USAPI) in which FS staff are physically present. IPIF's dedicated team provides critical services to Hawaii and the USAPI, including responding to Rapid Ohia Death (ROD), advancing agroforestry, and addressing wildfire threats.

So far this year, IPIF has lost two-thirds of its staff and further cuts could result in the depopulation of all staff, which would effectively force IPIF to close. This would be an unacceptable outcome and direct violation of IPIF's statutory obligations under Section 2407 of the 1990 Farm Bill (PL 101-624).

**U.S. Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources
July 10, 2025 Hearing: The President's Budget Request
for the U.S. Forest Service for Fiscal Year 2026
Questions for the Record Submitted to Chief Tom Schultz**

What role do you see IPIF playing in Hawaii and the Pacific Region? Will you commit to ensuring that IPIF remains open and staffed, as required by law?

Response:

The Forest Service intends to continue meeting all statutory obligations in Hawaii, the Pacific Region, and elsewhere. The Forest Service is working hard to implement the Administration's priorities with respect to the size, scope, and focus of our activities.

Question 4: The FY 2026 Budget also proposes eliminating all funding from the State, Private, and Tribal Forestry (SPTF) account. The SPTF supports large landowners in managing lands across the state, including invasive ungulate control and improving forest health. Programs administered within this account, such as the Urban and Community Forestry Program, have resulted in a 3:1 leverage of federal funds in Hawaii.

Has the Forest Service conducted a performance or cost-benefit analysis to justify cutting high-performing programs within the SPTF account? If so, can you share the findings with the Committee?

Response:

No, this is not a requirement of the out-year budget formulation process.

Question 5: The Urban and Community Forestry Program supports local job creation and small business development by funding tree planting, pruning, maintenance, and nursery operations—often through partnerships with nonprofits, workforce development organizations, and municipal governments. In Hawaii, this has helped build local capacity in areas like arboriculture, landscaping, and native plant restoration.

What analysis has the Forest Service done on the economic and workforce development impacts of eliminating this program, and how does it plan to replace those lost opportunities for small businesses and green jobs in communities nationwide?

Response:

An analysis was not conducted as it is not a requirement of the out-year budget formulation process. The FY 2026 Budget request eliminates this program to ensure fiscal responsibility with American taxpayer dollars and to better balance the appropriate roles of Federal and state governments. The request recognizes that local governments should be empowered to fund their urban forestry efforts in alignment with local priorities.

**U.S. Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources
July 10, 2025 Hearing: The President’s Budget Request
for the U.S. Forest Service for Fiscal Year 2026
Questions for the Record Submitted to Chief Tom Schultz**

Question 6: The proposed restructuring into a new “U.S. Wildland Fire Service” within the Department of the Interior (DOI) separates fire programs from the Forest Service. How does the Forest Service plan to ensure coordination between this new agency and land management functions that remain within the Forest Service—especially in areas like Hawaii where fire, land use, and invasive species are deeply interconnected?

Response:

There are currently five federal entities that directly support wildland fire. Creating a singular entity – the U.S. Wildland Fire Service (USWFS) – to manage wildland fire response will inherently increase the overall efficiency of the organization while focusing on not just maintaining but increasing the effectiveness of wildland fire response. We will be more efficient by reducing administrative overhead and duplication and by ensuring we have consent rules for operational requirements for our partners. Additionally, we will focus on enhancing standard training requirements for federal firefighters to help develop the next generation with the skill sets needed to protect communities and other critical infrastructure. The USWFS will provide initial attack and large fire responses for all federal land management agencies. The Forest Service will coordinate closely with the USWFS, State, and local governments on interconnected land management issues.

**U.S. Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources
July 10, 2025 Hearing: The President's Budget Request
for the U.S. Forest Service for Fiscal Year 2026
Questions for the Record Submitted to Chief Tom Schultz**

Question 7: Programs like the Community Wildfire Defense Grant (CWDG), which support fire risk reduction planning and fuel mitigation in Hawaii's highest-risk areas, are administered under State and Private Forestry. The FY 2026 Budget proposes to transfer CWDG administration over to the U.S. Wildland Fire Service under the DOI. However, the DOI FY 2026 Budget provides only \$2.8 million for the administration of all such grants.

How will existing grants be affected by the transfer of the CWDG program to the DOI? Are there any other grants that are also proposed or being considered for transfer to the DOI?

Response:

CWDG is a program funded by Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA) funding. In the IIJA spend plan included in the 2026 budget request, these funds are proposed to be transferred to DOI as part of the new U.S. Wildland Fire Service organization.

Question 8: Is the FS working on a reorganization plan? If so, when will that be completed and available to Congress?

Response:

On July 24, 2025 Secretary Rollins announced the reorganization of the U.S. Department of Agriculture, refocusing its core operations to better align with its founding mission of supporting American farming, ranching, and forestry.

In her memorandum, the Secretary identified that the Forest Service will phase out the nine Regional Offices over the next year and implementation activities will take into consideration the ongoing fire season. The Forest Service will maintain a reduced state office in Juneau, Alaska and an eastern service center in Athens, Georgia. The current stand-alone Research Stations will be consolidated into a single location in Fort Collins, Colorado. The Forest Service will retain the Fire Sciences Lab and Forest Products Lab - the former, vital for understanding and protecting values from forest fires and the latter, critical for assessing market development opportunities for timber and other forest products and related industries.

Question 9: The FY2026 Budget proposes moving the Joint Fire Science (JFS) program to DOI. The DOI's budget proposal indicates that JFS would be funded under the Intelligence & Technology line item, which only provides \$28.5 million. This is less than 10% of the \$300 million that FS research receives today.

**U.S. Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources
July 10, 2025 Hearing: The President's Budget Request
for the U.S. Forest Service for Fiscal Year 2026
Questions for the Record Submitted to Chief Tom Schultz**

Is your agency planning to transfer all FS research staff to DOI and if so, how many? How will important research on fire be funded without the present level of support from both agencies?

Response:

The FY 2026 budget proposes transferring the Forest Service's portion of the Joint Fire Science program, which was appropriated \$3 million in FY 2024, to DOI as part of the proposed new U.S. Wildland Fire Service (USWFS). The Joint Fire Science program does not currently fund Forest Service staff; therefore, no Forest Service Research and Development staff are proposed to transfer to DOI. The USWFS will centrally manage necessary research on Federal wildland fire.

Question 10: Will you commit to following the law and dispersing 100% of the funding appropriated by Congress for the FS, even for accounts that the FY 2026 Budget proposes to cut?

Response:

We will continue to align Forest Service expenditures with legislative text and President Trump and Secretary Rollins' priorities.

**U.S. Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources
July 10, 2025 Hearing: The President's Budget Request
for the U.S. Forest Service for Fiscal Year 2026
Questions for the Record Submitted to Chief Tom Schultz**

Questions from Senator Catherine Cortez Masto

Question 1: The Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF) has been one of the most bipartisan and important tools we have to protect our National Forest lands. However, your FY26 budget seems to ignore the Great American Outdoors Act, which was signed into law by President Trump, by diverting LWCF federal land protection funds to deferred maintenance. What is the rationale for the President's Budget to undermine President Trump's own signature conservation legislation by diverting Land and Water Conservation Fund federal land protection funds to deferred maintenance?

Response:

The FY 2026 Budget proposed to reauthorize the Great American Outdoors Act (GAOA) Legacy Restoration Fund (LRF) to continue the important work of addressing the deferred maintenance backlog at the Forest Service. President Trump signed the GAOA-LRF into law during his first Administration and the Administration looks forward to again working with Congress on this important issue. It is critical that the Federal estate is right-sized to reduce Federal costs for land management and asset maintenance. Continuing to acquire Federal lands without the financial resources to maintain them is not good stewardship of these lands.

The Budget proposes \$110.9 million for the new Land and Water Conservation Fund – Priority Deferred Maintenance program to further fund high-priority deferred maintenance objectives beyond the reach of GAOA-LRF; predominantly roads, bridges, and facilities, including those that are critical to housing employees and ensuring visitor safety.

Question 2: Please share with me how many Forest Service employees were employed in Nevada and the Lake Tahoe Basin at the time the current administration began, and how many were let go or left since the beginning of this administration that were involved in wildfire management activities or served as auxiliary firefighting support?

Response

On January 20, 2025 there were 313 employees on the Humbolt-Toiyabe National Forest. On July 24, 2025 there were 324 employees. On that forest there were 18 red carded employees who voluntarily left the Forest Service during this time frame.

On January 20, 2025 there were 109 employees on the Lake Tahoe Basin Management Unit. On July 24, 2025 there were 102 employees. On the forest there were 7 red carded employees who voluntarily left the Forest Service during this time frame.

**U.S. Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources
July 10, 2025 Hearing: The President's Budget Request
for the U.S. Forest Service for Fiscal Year 2026
Questions for the Record Submitted to Chief Tom Schultz**

- Was the prospect of letting go of employees that are involved in wildfire management and the impact this would have on our wildfire response capabilities given any consideration before these people were offered their deferred resignation?

Response:

In support of the President's vision and the Secretary's direction, the Forest Service worked with OPM to exempt wildland fire hiring from the national hiring pause and exempted wildland firefighters and other public safety officials from taking the deferred resignation program. The agency has met our target of having 11,300 firefighters on board for the summer peak fire season. Additionally, we have invited staff who had voluntarily separated from the Forest Service through the deferred resignation program and who hold current red cards, to come back and support fire assignments this season. We have already had these staff members taking assignments into support roles. We will do everything we can to reduce the risk of catastrophic fires and respond effectively to new fires when they start. The Forest Service is certainly not alone in these fire efforts. We coordinate with other federal agencies, as well as tribal, state and local partners. As our preparedness levels increase, so does this coordination.

Question 3: Will the agency's Reduction in Force (RIF) plans eliminate positions that directly or indirectly support wildfire prevention, suppression, or restoration? How many more employees overall is the Forest Service looking to eliminate?

Response:

On July 24, 2025 Secretary Rollins announced the reorganization of the U.S. Department of Agriculture, refocusing its core operations to better align with its founding mission of supporting American farming, ranching, and forestry.

In her memorandum, the secretary identified that the Forest Service will phase out the nine Regional Offices over the next year and that implementation of phase out activities will take into consideration the ongoing fire season. The Forest Service will maintain a reduced state office in Juneau, Alaska and an eastern service center in Athens, Georgia. The current stand-alone Research Stations will be consolidated into a single location in Fort Collins, Colorado. The Forest Service will retain the Fire Sciences Lab and Forest Products Lab - the former, vital for protection from forest fires and the latter, critical for assessing market development opportunities for timber and other forest products and related industries.

To help align USDA's workforce with financial resources and Department priorities, this reorganization is another step of the Department's process of reducing its workforce. Much of this reduction was through voluntary retirements and the Deferred Retirement Program (DRP), a completely voluntary tool. As of July 24, 2025, 15,364 individuals voluntarily elected deferred resignation.

**U.S. Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources
July 10, 2025 Hearing: The President's Budget Request
for the U.S. Forest Service for Fiscal Year 2026
Questions for the Record Submitted to Chief Tom Schultz**

Question 4: Can you confirm how much Forest Service land has been treated for hazardous fuels so far this year?

- What is the projection of total acres to be treated this year?

Response:

As of July, the agency has accomplished 1.8 million acres. We will provide a final number after all accomplishments have been reported following the end of the fiscal year.

- Have the terminations and RIFs decreased the agency's ability to match or exceed the amount of previously-treated acres?

Response:

Operational challenges have impacted the ability to implement prescribed fire across the country. Active fires starting in CA in January, followed by significant fire in the Southeast and the upper Midwest and extremely dry conditions limited our ability to conduct prescribed fire in many parts of the country. Early and continued support to Canada through the spring and early summer reduced available resources to conduct prescribed fire. The continued high level of fire activity and extreme conditions in many parts of the west is requiring significant resources and personnel, impacting our ability to achieve additional acres of accomplishment.

The agency has not conducted any reduction in force activities. All of the probationary employees terminated as a part of the government-wide effort were reinstated.

- How have the terminations created efficiencies in this space?

Response:

Nearly all of the reduction in the number of Forest Service employees have been a result of voluntary departures through the Deferred Resignation Program or through the Voluntary Early Retirement Program and not through terminations. Staffing changes are allowing USDA to realign and refocus the Forest Service around its original intended mission while continuing to prioritize critical health and safety positions.

Question 5: The Forest and Rangeland Research Program provides critical scientific data that gives insight into the health of our National Forests. In Nevada, funding from this program has proven to be worth the investment. Scientists at Lake Tahoe have leveraged this funding to help

**U.S. Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources
July 10, 2025 Hearing: The President's Budget Request
for the U.S. Forest Service for Fiscal Year 2026
Questions for the Record Submitted to Chief Tom Schultz**

them study impacts of forest health treatments within the Caldor Fire burn area, and such research can be used to make decisions that mitigate future fire risk and keep the public safe.

- If this program is eliminated, as the President's budget requests, how will the Forest Service ensure that it promotes healthy forests and keeps the people who live near them safe?

Response:

We recognize that sound decision-making must be informed by science. We will continue to support research that is aligned to the Agency's land management focus through the Forest Inventory and Analysis program. In addition, the Joint Fire Science program will continue to be supported in the proposed Department of the Interior U.S. Wildland Fire Service.

- Forest and Rangeland Research has informed the agency and others on the way we respond to wildfires. And the firefighting safety equipment in use today is a result of long-standing research completed by the Forest Service. How does eliminating this research help meet the needs of current and future generations?

Response:

We recognize that sound decision-making must be informed by science. We will continue to support research that is aligned to the Agency's land management focus through the Forest Inventory and Analysis program. In addition, the Joint Fire Science program will continue to be supported in the proposed Department of the Interior U.S. Wildland Fire Service. The Forest Service will continue to collaborate with industry, States, Tribes, local governments and partners to respond to wildfires safely and effectively.

Question 6: Your Budget includes significant cuts to recreation staff across all forest service lands. In the Lake Tahoe Region, the Forest Service has been understaffed for years, preventing maintenance and enforcement of federal laws.

- How can you ensure the millions of people that visit federal lands at Tahoe every year will still be able to safely do so without experiencing any loss of services?

Response:

USDA is realigning and refocusing the Forest Service around its original intended mission and will continue to prioritize critical health and safety positions.

- How have staffing reductions already impacted hours at visitor centers? What additional reductions would occur if this budget were signed into law?

**U.S. Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources
July 10, 2025 Hearing: The President's Budget Request
for the U.S. Forest Service for Fiscal Year 2026
Questions for the Record Submitted to Chief Tom Schultz**

Response:

We intend to keep as many public contact spaces open as possible in offices, facilities, visitor centers, and developed recreation sites. However, as resources and capacity are assessed, there may be cases where adjustments to facility and site schedules are needed, consistent with the focus on the Forest Service's core mission. The Forest Service will continue to collaborate with industry, States, Tribes, local governments and partners to keep our public facing facilities and recreation opportunities open.

Question 7: Your Budget proposes to eliminate funding for State and Private Forestry assistance programs, which provide technical assistance to other Federal units, and State and local government land managers.

- If your proposed budget is enacted, how will you be able to work with state, private, and tribal agencies to empower them to manage the lands you think the federal government no longer has responsibility or interest to manage?

Response:

The FY 2026 request eliminates funding for the State, Private, and Tribal Forestry account to ensure fiscal responsibility with American taxpayer dollars and to better balance the appropriate roles of federal and state governments. The budget request anchors to a return to federalism, which is a priority for the Trump Administration, and encourages increasing state and local governments' authority to fund the management of state and privately-owned forests, community preparedness, and public risk mitigation activities in alignment with local priorities.

**U.S. Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources
July 10, 2025 Hearing: The President's Budget Request
for the U.S. Forest Service for Fiscal Year 2026
Questions for the Record Submitted to Chief Tom Schultz**

Questions from Senator John W. Hickenlooper

Question 1: As the wildfire crisis worsens in Colorado and across the West, it's clear we need faster, more effective wildfire mitigation on the ground. That's why I was proud to team up with Senators Curtis, Sheehy, and Padilla on the *Fix Our Forests Act*, and I'm grateful for the support your agency has expressed for our bill.

However, while Congress works to give you more tools, the Administration is taking them away—cutting staff, forcing mid-fire season consolidation with DOI, and eliminating collaborative forest health programs.

- Do you agree that we need both permitting streamlining and financial resources to address our wildfire crisis? If yes, why does your budget move away from proactively investing in the programs and people that can improve our wildfire resilience?

Response:

As the USDA Forest Service enters a new era, it faces urgent challenges such as meeting domestic lumber demand, reducing wildfire risk, and revitalizing economies. Focusing on priority actions that support active forest management, the agency will fulfill direction from Executive Order 14225 by modernizing processes, building capacity, streamlining compliance, and strengthening partnerships. These actions will deliver greater value to the public, protect natural resources, and ensure America's forests remain resilient and productive for present and future generations. Further, implementation of Executive Order 14308 will reform the Federal approach to wildland fire management, creating operational efficiencies and streamlining efforts around risk mitigation and coordination with non-Federal partners to combat the wildfire crisis.

Question 2: Your budget completely eliminates the State, Private, and Tribal Forestry (SPTF) Program. Roughly a *third* of Colorado State Forest staff are supported by this funding — funding that goes to firefighter training, wildfire mitigation, and working with communities to boost their fire preparedness. Additionally, this funding underpins Colorado's capacity to plan and implement Good Neighbor Authority treatments in our National Forests.

- Why is this administration unwilling to fund wildfire prevention work with our state and tribal partners? How are states like Colorado supposed to fill these gaps as the threat of wildfires has only been growing?

Response:

The FY 2026 President's Budget request eliminates funding for the State, Private, and Tribal Forestry account to ensure fiscal responsibility with American taxpayer dollars and to better balance the appropriate roles of federal and state governments. The budget request anchors to a return to federalism, which is a priority for the Trump Administration, and encourages increasing

**U.S. Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources
July 10, 2025 Hearing: The President's Budget Request
for the U.S. Forest Service for Fiscal Year 2026
Questions for the Record Submitted to Chief Tom Schultz**

state and local governments' authority to fund the management of state and privately-owned forests, community preparedness, and public risk mitigation activities in alignment with local priorities.

Question 3: From its founding, the US Forest Service (USFS) has been focused on science-based management of our nation's forests and grasslands. USFS' Forest and Rangeland Research has developed key innovations often with university partners such as Colorado State University; this includes developing fire behavior models, silviculture techniques, ecosystem science, and production of wood products that have been vital to the management of public and private lands across the country and in Colorado.

- What is the Forest Service's rationale for eliminating the research and science that helps us manage wildfires and strengthen forest ecosystems? How does removing science from the agency's operations ensure our appropriate stewardship of our National Forests, when so much of our existing forestland work relies on sound, readily available science?

Response:

We recognize that sound decision-making must be informed by science. We will continue to support research that is aligned to the Agency's land management focus through the Forest Inventory and Analysis program. In addition, the Joint Fire Science program will continue to be supported in the proposed Department of the Interior U.S. Wildland Fire Service. The Forest Service will continue to partner with industry, States, Tribes, local governments and partners to respond to wildfires safely and effectively.

Question 4: Colorado's national forests have some of the highest visitation rates in the nation. But getting outside safely requires Forest Service staff on duty — including the seasonal labor who help keep facilities clean and trails maintained. And yet, the President just extended a hiring freeze through October, virtually guaranteeing that USFS will remain short staffed throughout the busy summer season. Simultaneously, we are seeing institutional knowledge leave the agency, with vacancies at the Forest and District leadership level that are critical for maintaining the agency's work and relationships on the ground.

- What is the Forest Service doing to ensure our trails, campgrounds, and forests are safe this summer without full staff? How does your agency intend to address leadership gaps that are crucial for supporting local units?

Response:

The Budget request allows the Forest Service to continue offering high-quality recreation experiences to visitors of national forests. With this funding level, the Forest Service will focus

**U.S. Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources
July 10, 2025 Hearing: The President's Budget Request
for the U.S. Forest Service for Fiscal Year 2026
Questions for the Record Submitted to Chief Tom Schultz**

on high-use recreation sites and work with communities and public-private partnerships to pursue efficient, collaborative approaches to offering recreation opportunities on NFS lands.

Question 5: Congress provided mandatory funding for the Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF) to make land acquisitions that help promote outdoor recreation. Your budget proposes to reject the decision Congress made just five years ago and instead divert the vast majority of that funding to deferred maintenance. Under your proposal, four Colorado LWCF FY26 projects will not be funded.

- Why does the USFS FY26 budget reject Congress' intent to use LWCF to acquire strategic land holdings that promote outdoor recreation in the West?

Response:

It is critical that the Federal estate is right-sized to reduce Federal costs for land management and asset maintenance. Continuing to acquire Federal lands without the financial resources to maintain them is not good stewardship of these lands.

- For FY25 projects, I understand that previously selected LWCF acquisitions must go through an extensive review with OMB, despite the fact that your agency already vetted these. Why add a new layer of bureaucracy for good projects that have already made it through the process?

Response:

In each fiscal year, after appropriations bills become law, OMB provides the funds within the bill to agencies through the apportionment process. An apportionment is an OMB-approved plan to use budgetary resources and can limit the obligations an agency may incur for specified time periods, programs, activities, projects, or objects, and can require additional reports or create other requirements. Apportionments are legally binding, and obligations and expenditures (disbursements) that exceed an apportionment are a violation of the Antideficiency Act.

One of the FY 2025 apportionments for full-year budget authority included a new requirement for a Land and Water Conservation Fund Land Acquisition spend plan prior to executing this program fully. This is necessary because the FY 2025 LWCF Land Acquisition Project List was proposed by the previous Administration. The required spend plan describes the use of FY 2025 funding via a list of projects and associated goals. This review ensures that the Forest Service's LWCF Land Acquisition projects align with the current Administration's priorities and goals while appropriately stewarding Federal resources. The agency is working to meet this requirement as quickly as possible to ensure effective execution of funds.

Please note, the requirement for a spend plan does not include the Land and Water Conservation Fund Forest Legacy program.

**U.S. Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources
July 10, 2025 Hearing: The President's Budget Request
for the U.S. Forest Service for Fiscal Year 2026
Questions for the Record Submitted to Chief Tom Schultz**

Question 6: Another critical program that your budget proposes to eliminate is the Collaborative Forest Landscape Restoration Program, or CFLRP – one of the agency's most successful programs that advances work like forest thinning and prescribed fire. The program also enjoys substantial bipartisan support. This is exactly the type of program that ought to be scaled up, not eliminated.

Can you explain the Administration's intentions in eliminating this program?

Response:

The Forest Service is looking to maximize the return of every dollar entrusted to us. We will continue to leverage collaboratives to achieve priority forest landscape outcomes. As an example, we will be looking to develop greater public-private partnerships to incentivize external investments and complete these large-scale restoration activities to create increased public benefit. CFLRP demonstrated the value of bringing partners together, which has become a model for how we operate. This is an integrated approach for the agency that we will continue without the need for a separate program.

**U.S. Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources
July 10, 2025 Hearing: The President's Budget Request
for the U.S. Forest Service for Fiscal Year 2026
Questions for the Record Submitted to Chief Tom Schultz**

Questions from Senator Alex Padilla

Question 1: Earlier this year, I worked in a bipartisan fashion to introduce the Senate version of the "Fix Our Forests Act," with my friend and fellow committee member Senator Hickenlooper, along with Senators Curtis and Sheehy. The Forest Service has testified in support of the bill, and I appreciate that support. One of the aspects of the bill I am most proud of is how it expands the Forest Service's R&D program. However, the FY26 budget request completely eliminates that program area. How do you expect to implement FOFA, which we both support, if the R&D program area is eliminated?

Response:

The FY 2026 Budget proposes terminating the Forest and Rangeland Research program to ensure fiscal responsibility with taxpayer dollars and appropriate alignment of resources with the Administration's emphasis on the Forest Service's responsibility to appropriately steward National Forest System lands. In the event the Fix Our Forests Act is enacted into public law, the Forest Service will meet the statutory requirements included in the bill.

Question 2: The proposed FY26 budget reduces the Recreation, Heritage, and Wilderness line item by 31% and reduces capital improvement and maintenance for trails by 60%. These cuts will be devastating across the country, but particularly to my home state of California, where outdoor recreation contributes \$81 billion to the state's economy and supports 545,000 jobs. Sustainable access to recreation opportunities on national forests is important for helping make these economic benefits possible. How does the agency plan to keep recreational sites open and safe if these significant budget cuts were to be enacted as proposed?

Response:

The Budget request allows the Forest Service to continue offering high-quality recreation experiences to visitors of national forests. With this funding level, the Forest Service will focus on high-use recreation sites and work with communities and public-private partnerships to pursue efficient, collaborative approaches to offering recreation opportunities on NFS lands.

Question 3: The President's budget proposes to divert dedicated Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF) dollars away from permanent conservation and expanded outdoor recreation access toward short-term deferred maintenance. In California, these LWCF funds have helped the state maintain and protect millions of acres of recreation lands that are enjoyed by millions of Americans. Why does the Forest Service budget not meet the statutory requirement that at least 40% of LWCF funding be used for federal land acquisition? Furthermore, how long will the new administrative reviews on LWCF projects from OMB delay the two priority acquisition projects in California – the Alder Creek project and the Martis Valley Headwaters Phase 2 project?

**U.S. Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources
July 10, 2025 Hearing: The President's Budget Request
for the U.S. Forest Service for Fiscal Year 2026
Questions for the Record Submitted to Chief Tom Schultz**

Response:

The Budget proposes an additional \$110.9 million in Land and Water Conservation Fund – Priority Deferred Maintenance mandatory resources for high-priority deferred maintenance objectives; predominantly roads, bridges, and facilities, including those that are critical to housing employees and ensuring visitor safety.

One of the FY 2025 apportionments for full-year budget authority included a requirement for a Land and Water Conservation Fund Land Acquisition spend plan prior to executing this program fully. This is necessary because the FY 2025 LWCF Land Acquisition Project List was proposed by the previous Administration. The required spend plan describes the use of FY 2025 funding via a list of projects and associated goals. This review ensures that the Forest Service's LWCF Land Acquisition projects align with the current Administration's priorities and goals while appropriately stewarding Federal resources. The agency is working to meet this requirement as quickly as possible to ensure effective execution of funds.

**U.S. Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources
July 10, 2025 Hearing: The President's Budget Request
for the U.S. Forest Service for Fiscal Year 2026
Questions for the Record Submitted to Chief Tom Schultz**

Questions from Senator Ruben Gallego

Question 1: Arizona is home to one of the Southwest Ecological Restoration Institutes, which not only conducts wildfire research but integrates science and technology into fire response and supports land managers with applied science. Under the continuing resolution for FY25, the Forest Service finalized a 55% reduction to FY25 SWERI appropriations. At a time when fires continue to burn longer and hotter, removing a bridge between fire science and application is a step in the wrong direction. **Do you commit to adequately funding SWERI in future years? How will the consolidated Wildfire Service impact SWERI?**

Response:

The President's FY 2026 Budget Request provides continued support for hazardous fuels within the proposed DOI U.S. Wildland Fire Service budget request. It is up to Congress to determine how that funding would be directed, including the regarding the Southwest Ecological Restoration Institutes (SWERI).

Question 2: The FY 2026 budget proposes zeroing out the State, Private, and Tribal Forestry account. In patchwork states like mine where state, tribal, federal, and private land constantly share borders, this account coordinates resource and information sharing that keeps all lands safer. Wildfires do not acknowledge property lines. **Without the state, private, and tribal account, how will USFS maintain communication with local partners? What is your plan to uphold the federal trust responsibility to tribes while also zeroing out the budget for the Office of Tribal Relations within this account?**

Response:

It is the policy of the Department of Agriculture to honor the United States' trust relationship and Tribal treaty rights and to faithfully execute the laws of the United States as they relate to federally recognized Indian Tribes, American Indian Tribal citizens and Alaska Natives, and the Native Hawai'ian Community.

The United States Department of Agriculture and the Forest Service's tribal relations occur primarily at the field level with line officers working closely with the Tribes in their regions. We will continue to uphold our federal trust responsibilities with Tribes.