

**TESTIMONY of
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**BEFORE THE HOUSE NATURAL RESOURCES COMMITTEE
SUBCOMMITTEE ON FEDERAL LANDS**

on

THE NATIONAL FOREST MANAGEMENT IMPROVEMENT ACT OF 2015

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to present the views of the U.S. Forest Service regarding the Returning Resilience to our Overgrown, Fire-prone National Forests Act. The Forest Service has not had time to thoroughly review this discussion draft, and neither the Forest Service nor the Administration takes a position on the bill at this time. The Forest Service is encouraged by many of the goals outlined within it and we look forward to working further with you and your staffs. As a general matter, the Forest Service welcomes legislation that incentivizes collaboration and expands the toolset we can use to complete critical work on our nation's forests, without overriding environmental laws. It is encouraging that, unlike other recent forestry bills we have seen, this bill does not contain troublesome provisions such as those that would mandate harvest levels, require a new layer of zoning on the National Forests, or elevate one use over another on these multiple-use lands.

While we support efforts to provide new tools to support improved forest management, capacity constraints due to the present approach to budgeting for wildfire continue to be the greatest impediment to further improving the health and resiliency of the nation's forests. In fiscal year 1995, the Forest Service spent 16 percent of its budget on firefighting. Today the agency spends nearly half of its budget in fire management activities and has seen a corresponding decline in non-fire staffing of 39 percent since 1998. This has enormous implications for how the agency carries out its mission, including taking funding from the very programs that help reduce catastrophic fire in the first place. Notwithstanding these challenges, through an emphasis on collaboration the Forest Service has consistently increased both the number of acres treated annually to improve watershed resilience and timber production—increasing timber harvest by 18 percent since 2008.

The frequency and intensity of wildfire, the rising cost of assets needed to deploy against the spread of wildfire, and the way that fire suppression is paid for constrain the agency's capacity to realize additional gains through efficiencies and partnerships alone. The most important action Congress can make now in advancing the pace and scale of forest restoration is to fix the fire funding problem. The Bipartisan Wildfire Disaster Funding Act, mirrored by a proposal in the President's FY 2016 Budget, would immediately increase restoration objectives and increase the

Forest Service's capacity to plan and execute restoration projects—including increasing timber volume sold from 2.9 billion board feet in FY 2014 to 3.2 billion board feet.

Our National Forests and Grasslands are national treasures and provide a broad range of values and benefits, including biodiversity, recreation, clean air and water, forest products, erosion control, soil renewal and more. Covering a third of the country's landmass, forests store and filter more than half of the nation's water supply and absorb approximately 12 percent of the country's carbon emissions. Our mission of sustaining the health, resilience and productivity of our nation's forests is critically important to maintaining these values and benefits.

In 2014, we exceeded our targets by producing 2.9 billion board feet of timber. Our timber harvest has increased 18 percent since 2008. The agency is achieving these results despite the fact that since 1998, National Forest System staff was reduced by well over a third. We have achieved much of this by investing in collaborative approaches to forest restoration across the country as a way to develop better projects, to work across larger landscapes, to build public support for forest restoration and management, and to reduce the risk from litigation. Dozens of collaboratives across the country are enabling the Forest Service and our partners to get more work done. These collaboratives are locally led groups from local communities, environmental groups, forest industry, and others and are designing projects that address forest restoration, supply wood to local mills, conserve watersheds and provide a range of other benefits.

The health of the national forests and the communities we serve are our shared priority. The Forest Service is accelerating restoration and management of the national forests through innovative approaches and increased collaboration, though it is clear that more work needs to be done, and we welcome practical legislation that provides for expedient and responsible efficiencies in the execution of that work.

Efficiencies

In recent years, the Forest Service has made great strides in the pursuit of efficiencies, and we are generally supportive of provisions that will help us pursue treatment at the landscape scale quickly, efficiently, and in a reasonable time to address problems before they can worsen. We look forward to continuing to work with you on the language of this bill to find efficiencies within the scope of important existing environmental laws.

An important way to increase the pace and scale of forest restoration and management is to improve the efficiency of planning timber sales and stewardship contracts. We are working to identify and implement process improvements and efficiencies that help with increasing the pace and scale of restoration, while also engaging the public and developing well-planned projects. Some strategies are discussed below.

The Forest Service is developing new approaches to NEPA in the wake of catastrophic fires. On the Rim Fire, which burned 257,000 acres in the summer of 2013, the Stanislaus National Forest finalized both an Environmental Assessment for hazard tree removal and an Environmental Impact Statement for restoration and salvage in one year. The EIS projects will lessen the potential for future catastrophic fire by reducing the fuel loading and, in addition, capture some of the perishable economic commodity value of the fire killed trees through timber salvage. The agency coordinated with the Council on Environmental Quality, which approved Alternative Arrangements to expedite the NEPA process. Overall, our partners and stakeholders appreciated the transparency while also enabling contracts to get awarded and work done on the ground.

Another innovative approach to environmental analysis under NEPA and stewardship contracting to increase the scale and pace of restoring forest health and to provide economic opportunities for local communities is the Mill Creek A to Z Stewardship Project on the Colville National Forest. This project was designed so that each step, from NEPA data collection to project implementation, where appropriate, will be performed and financed by the contractor, Vaagen Brother's Lumber Inc., under the supervision of the Forest Service. The Environmental Assessment for the first of the two planning areas was released for public comment recently. The contractor is planning vegetation treatments to begin after the decision is signed this fall. The three month limitation on time to prepare an Environmental Assessment following a large scale wildfire contained in the discussion draft artificially constrains the planning process without recognizing the non-NEPA considerations which may not follow the same three month limitation.

The Forest Service is planning and implementing projects across larger areas, which increases NEPA efficiency and thereby spreads costs across more acres, and provides a longer term and more certain timber supply for local mills. For example, the Mountain Pine Beetle Response Project on the Black Hills National forest is implementing a landscape scale approach across 200,000 acres for treating current and future pine beetle outbreaks.

In the Southwest, the Forest Service signed the Final Record of Decision for the Four Forest Restoration Initiative's (4FRI) first EIS on April 17, which analyzed approximately one million acres in the Coconino and Kaibab National Forests. This project was one of the Council on Environmental Quality's NEPA Pilot Projects, which were projects nominated for employing innovative approaches to completing environmental reviews more efficiently and effectively. The Environmental Impact Statement covers approximately one million acres and proposes 586,110 acres of restoration activities: 355,708 acres on the Flagstaff, Mogollon, and Red Rock districts of the Coconino National Forest; and 230,402 acres on the Williams and Tusayan districts of the Kaibab National Forest.

4FRI involves the entire suite of restoration efforts including thinning; prescribed burning; watershed and road maintenance; grassland, spring, and stream channel restoration; and habitat improvement. This milestone is the result of four national forests and more than 30 stakeholder groups joining together over five years to work on the largest landscape-scale restoration project ever analyzed in Forest Service history. 4FRI builds on many years of collaboration, research, and action since the mid-1990s. Over the past five years, the Forest Service has progressed toward accelerating restoration by implementing projects within the 4FRI landscape, using previous NEPA analyses. Progress continues with this final Record of Decision. The NEPA analyses for the Black Hills and 4FRI projects proceeded efficiently without limiting the alternatives considered to action / no action as the discussion draft would do.

The agency has established additional categorical exclusions for restoration work, has expanded the use of focused environmental assessments, is using adaptive management to allow our decisions to last longer, and is better training employees to take advantage of new efficiencies. The Forest Service is also developing efficiencies in NEPA through technology. For example, the Forest Service's investments in using electronic applications provide considerable cost and time savings, contributing to an efficient NEPA process by reducing the administrative workload in reporting, records management, electronic document filing, and managing public mailing lists, while making it easier for the public to comment on Forest Service projects.

Promoting Collaboration

The Forest Service generally supports legislation that incentivizes collaboration. Our emphasis on collaboration over the last decade has served us well. Simply put, collaboration works, and we have a number of collaborative projects and programs underway across the National Forest System that exemplify the success that can be achieved when diverse groups come together with a common cause of a healthy landscape.

Collaborative Forest Landscape Restoration Program

One way to support local collaboration has been through the Collaborative Forest Landscape Restoration Program (CFLRP), and we appreciate the Congress's support for this innovative program. The CFLRP encourages collaborative, science-based ecosystem restoration of priority landscapes. The program currently supports 23 large-scale projects with 10-year funding to implement priority restoration work on National Forest System lands while engaging local communities and leveraging partner resources through collaboration, implementation, and monitoring.

The CFLR program is on track to meeting its goals over its ten year timeframe, making substantial strides in the first five years to promote forest health and resilience and reduce the risk of catastrophic wildfire. In the five years since initial program implementation, the 23 projects collectively have treated over 1.45 million acres to reduce the risk of catastrophic fire,

over 84,570 acres to improve forest health, over 1.33 million acres to improve wildlife habitat, and over 73,600 acres to eradicate noxious weeds and invasive plants. In addition, these projects have exceeded their timber output goals, producing nearly 1.3 billion board feet.

These collaborative projects help rural communities by creating and maintaining jobs. Between 2011 and 2014 these projects generated \$661 million in local labor income and an average of 4,360 jobs per year. The FY 2016 President's Budget for the Forest Service includes a proposal to increase funding authority for the program from \$40 million to eventually \$80 million, with funding in FY 2016 requested at \$60 million. The funding increase will allow us to pursue up to 10 additional projects. Accordingly, the budget proposes extending authority for the program through 2024 to allow for full completion of new projects.

These collaboratives, and dozens of similar efforts, help maintain a robust forest industry with benefits flowing not only to local communities, but also to the Forest Service itself as the agency relies on local forest contractors and mills to provide the workforce to undertake a variety of restoration activities. A 2011 Forest Service study found that through work on National Forest System lands, the forest products industry supports about 42,000 jobs and contributes around \$2.7 billion to America's gross domestic product each year.

Chiefs' Joint Landscape Restoration Partnership

Our restoration efforts are not just confined to public lands. Recognizing that fire, insects, disease, wildlife and watersheds do not respect property lines, the Forest Service and USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service are combining resources to expand our efforts across both public and private land. In FY 2014, Secretary Vilsack announced a multi-year partnership between the U.S. Forest Service and the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) to improve the health and resiliency of forest ecosystems where public and private lands meet across the nation. The Forest Service and NRCS Chiefs' Joint Landscape Restoration Partnership program aims to reduce wildfire threats to communities and landowners, protect water quality and supply, and improve wildlife habitat for at-risk species. By leveraging technical and financial resources and coordinating activities on adjacent public and private lands, conservation work by NRCS and the Forest Service will be more efficient and effective in these watersheds.

In FY 2014, the Landscape Restoration Partnership invested \$30 million in 13 projects in 12 states across the country. The priority projects selected for FY 2014 are continuing in FY 2015. \$27 million will be provided to continue work on these projects in 2015. Fifteen additional projects were selected in FY 2015 totaling \$10 million. The 2015 projects are located where private and public lands meet, and where restoration objectives cross ownership boundaries. For example:

In the Middle Klamath River Communities of northern California, the Partnership helped support efforts by the Karuk Tribe, the Mid-Klamath Watershed Council, the Salmon River Restoration

Council, several local Fire Safe Councils, and the Northwest Youth Corps who are working together to increase community safety by reducing hazardous fuels in the Wildland Urban Interface adjacent to communities along the Klamath River.

As another example, in Colorado, the San Juan Project addresses fuel hazard in the project area which is considered moderate to extreme. Treatments would reduce dense shrub cover through mastication and reduce tree density through selective thinning in order to mitigate uncharacteristic wildfire behavior and improve forest health. Partners include the San Juan Conservation District, the Colorado State Forest Service, the Pagosa Lakes Property Owners Association, San Juan Headwaters Forest Health Partnership, the Mountain Studies Institute, and Hidden Valley and Eagle Peak Ranch Subdivisions.

The watersheds of Lake Superior's coastal forests are home to tributaries that impact the water quality of The Great Lakes, among the most important natural resources in the world. With more than 20 percent of the earth's surface freshwater, they provide drinking water for 45 million people and habitat for a vast array of plants and wildlife, including more than 200 globally rare species. Spanning 295,000 square miles, the basin's immense network of streams, lakes, wetlands and forests provides critical ecological services, such as water filtration, flood control, and carbon storage. In addition, the region offers unmatched opportunities for industry, tourism and recreation. The Forest Service and NRCS are partnering with Sugarloaf: The North Shore Stewardship Association, Grand Portage Tribal Council, The Nature Conservancy, Soil and Water Conservation Districts and the state to expand current restoration efforts to protect the water quality of Lake Superior, provide critical wildlife habitat and develop a resilient ecosystem for the future.

Secure Rural Schools and Resource Advisory Committees

When Congress first enacted the Secure Rural Schools Act, it provided the option of decoupling the payments from receipts by authorizing enhanced, stabilized payments to states for fiscal years 2000 through 2006. The Secure Rural Schools Act provided eligible counties with two options. A county could elect to continue to receive its share of the State's 25 percent payment, which fluctuated based on receipts, or the county could elect to receive a share of the State's "full payment amount", which was a stabilized amount. A county that elected to receive a share of the State's full payment amount was required to allocate 15 to 20 percent of its share of the payment to Title II (special projects on federal lands) or to Title III (county projects), or to return that amount to the Treasury. Title II funds could only be spent on projects benefitting the national forests that were recommended by resource advisory committees (RACs). The remainder of the county's share of the payment (80 to 85 percent) was required to be spent for Title I purposes (for public schools and roads.) As part of the initial implementation of the Act, the Forest Service established 55 RACs; as of fiscal year 2015, there are 117 RACs across the country.

The Forest Service values relationships fostered with tribal, county officials and other stakeholders under Title II. By actively engaging community members in recommending projects, the Forest Service has seen a significant decrease in appeals and a dramatic increase in successful long-term collaborations. Each of the 15-member RACs represent diverse interests such as environmental and conservation groups, watershed associations, forest and mineral development, hikers, campers, off-highway vehicle users, hunting and fishing enthusiasts, tribal, state and local government officials and teachers and officials from local schools. Members hear one another's views, interests and desires for national forest management and come to agreement on projects that will benefit the national forests and nearby communities. Here are a few examples that illustrate successful projects undertaken with Secure Rural Schools funding.

In Sierra County, California, a partnership with the Sierra County Fire Safe & Watershed Council supported by Title II funding has resulted in a number of high priority projects to reduce hazardous fuels within and adjacent to the communities within Sierra County and the National Forest. The fuels reduction projects on private lands have complimented fuels reduction activities on adjacent National Forest System Lands and are resulting in higher level of effective fuels reduction treatments within the Wildland Urban Interface (WUI). In rural Sierra County, the partnerships and Title II funds have provided more than \$200,000 and the financial mechanism for success. An additional benefit of these projects has been an increased level of opportunity for local employment within the County.

Since 2008, Apache County, Arizona in partnership with the White Mountain Apache Tribe upgraded a main access road to national forest lands using Secure Rural School Act funds. These road improvements have been critical to the treatment of areas within the Tribal Forest Protection Act (TFPA) – Los Burros project and the removal of materials under the White Mountain Stewardship Contract. To date, three quarters of the treatments are completed. This amounts to 12,000 acres of stewardship treatments of which 3,700 are within the TFPA project. The public is greatly benefiting from road improvements with safer and more comfortable access to quality recreation areas. This project has also improved relations with the White Mountain Apache Tribe.

In northern Utah, the Uinta-Wasatch-Cache National Forest has worked cooperatively with local counties to implement an aggressive “War on Weeds” program with Title II funding. These projects are vital to successfully treating invasive weed species threatening critical sage-grouse habitat, watersheds, and high-value recreation areas. Work is being accomplished through Forest Service and county crews. Fourteen local youth were hired through the Youth Conservation Corps (YCC) program to assist in the implementation of this program.

I am proud of the work that the Forest Service and its employees have been able to accomplish—particularly in a time of reduced resources and staff for non-fire programs—and of the partnerships we have developed that have made that work possible. Our track record of

accomplishments reflects an agency with a commitment to accomplish more and more with less. But, more work needs to be done to address the range of threats facing our National Forests.

While we appreciate some of the provisions in the draft bill, we have concerns with other provisions that are not based on science and local requirements, such as those that would require RACs to undertake one type of project over another; that would require post-fire Environmental Assessments to be accomplished in three months; and that would require reforestation on a fixed percent of the landscape. We look forward to working with the Committee and bill sponsors on crafting appropriate legislation to help the Forest Service increase the pace and scale of restoration.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify here today. I would be pleased to answer any questions you may have.