

**Testimony of Doug Decker, Oregon State Forester  
On Behalf of the Oregon Department of Forestry and  
The National Association of State Foresters**

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The Oregon Department of Forestry (ODF) and the National Association of State Foresters (NASF) appreciate the opportunity to submit testimony as the Committee explores the many and complex issues surrounding wildland fire management. The mission of ODF is to serve the people of Oregon by protecting, managing, and promoting stewardship of Oregon's forests to enhance environmental, economic, and community sustainability. Among other responsibilities and activities, ODF manages state-owned forestlands, administers the Oregon Forest Practices Act and provides forestry assistance to Oregon's 143,000 non-industrial private woodland owners. Additionally, ODF provides fire protection for 16 million acres of private, state and locally owned forests in Oregon, including federal lands in western Oregon owned by the Bureau of Land Management. ODF's fire protection goals are clear: to devise and use environmentally sound and economically efficient strategies to minimize the cost of protecting Oregon's timber and other forest values from loss caused by wildland fire.

The NASF represents the directors of the state forestry agencies in all fifty states, eight territories, and the District of Columbia. State Foresters deliver technical and financial assistance, along with forest health, water and wildfire protection for more than two-thirds of the nation's forests. The mission and duties of state agencies with forestry and wildfire protection responsibilities vary significantly from state to state; however most have statutory responsibility to provide wildland fire protection for state and private lands. In 2012, state forestry agencies provided this service on over 1 billion acres and helped train nearly 83,000 rural firefighters. State Foresters work closely with federal partners to deliver forestry programs and wildfire protection.

**2012-2013 Fire Season**

Wildland fire protection and management continues to increase in both cost and complexity across the country. With more people living in fire-prone landscapes, longer fires seasons due at least in part to our changing climate, and forests with fuel loads well outside the historic range of variability, we are continuing to see larger fires along with longer and more variable fire seasons. The conditions in our forests—particularly federal forests—have created a situation that can easily overwhelm fire management efforts, challenge fire management entities—especially in multi-jurisdictional fires—and produce billions of dollars in suppression costs and resource loss each year. The scope of the wildland fire problem is immediately evident in the Forest Action Plans,<sup>1</sup> wherein wildland fire was uniformly identified as a significant threat and a priority issue for states.

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<sup>1</sup> See Forest Action Plans website, [www.forestactionplans.org](http://www.forestactionplans.org). Last accessed May 21, 2013.

In 2012, a total of 67,774 fires were reported across the country, burning 9.3 million acres across all ownerships. These fires destroyed over 5,200 structures, including at least 3,500 homes. NASF estimates that nearly 72,000 communities are at risk of wildland fire, of which only 20% are covered by a Community Wildfire Protection Plan.

The National Interagency Fire Center recently reported that the 2013 fire season across the country has been slower than usual, with 16,436 fires burning 219,920 acres as of May 21, 2013.<sup>2</sup> These early season numbers are due in large part to cooler than normal weather in the southeastern United States. In Oregon, the 2013 fire season has actually been well above normal with more than 100 fires this year already, including evacuations of subdivisions in central Oregon and active burning even in Oregon's moist Coast Range. Much of the West, including Oregon, Arizona, New Mexico, California, Colorado, Idaho, Montana, Utah, and Washington are expecting above normal fire activity throughout the summer.<sup>3</sup>

### **Wildland Fire Challenges**

Oregon's fire season—which has already begun, as mentioned above—appears to be roughly one and a half months ahead of the typical seasonal cycle. Very recent moisture is providing some much-needed relief, even if only temporarily. Much of the state experienced below-average precipitation through late winter and spring. When coupled with recent above-average temperatures and lightning, this created unusually volatile early season burning conditions and challenged our resources with 40 fires during the first weekend in May. These fires spanned the entire state, from the Coast Range to the eastside, and presented unique challenges as the majority of Oregon's state and federal seasonal firefighters were not yet in place.

In addition to facing what is expected to be a very challenging fire season in Oregon and across much of the West, we are also working to address issues that are especially keen in western states with significant federal forest acreage. It is a constant challenge for states to reconcile our different missions and responsibilities with those of our federal partners. In Oregon, the responsibility of our Protection from Fire Division is clear when it comes to fire suppression: put the fire out as quickly and safely as possible. This is accomplished in Oregon through aggressive initial attack. We seek to keep fires as small as possible, which limits the risks to firefighting personnel from extended attack fire suppression and minimizes damage to the forest resources that forest landowners and all Oregonians pay ODF to protect. We strive to control 97 percent of all fires we fight at less than 10 acres, protecting property and saving millions in fire costs and damage.

Conversely, our federal partners do not have the same clear direction to engage in full suppression, but are tasked with both suppressing fire and also using fire by allowing it to burn under certain conditions in order to accomplish resource benefits. Our federal partners, such as the USDA Forest Service (Forest Service), are able to do this largely

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<sup>2</sup> The 10-year average for this same period is 27,657 fires burning 1,078,441 acres. National Interagency Fire Center [www.nifc.gov/fireinfo/nfn.htm](http://www.nifc.gov/fireinfo/nfn.htm). Last accessed May 21, 2013.

<sup>3</sup> National Significant Wildland Fire Potential Outlook. Issued May 1, 2013. Available at [www.nifc.gov/fireinfo/fireinfo\\_main.html](http://www.nifc.gov/fireinfo/fireinfo_main.html). Last accessed May 21, 2013.

because they have a different risk tolerance than the states. Because states are paid to protect private forestlands by the landowners, the states typically do not engage in anything less than full suppression of wildland fires during fire season. The differences in risk tolerance become a real problem for states when the strategies willingly assumed by federal partners—typically allowing fires to grow large to address other resource goals, or introducing fire in intermingled ownership patterns—are transferred as risk to non-federal lands. Even before a fire starts or is managed on federal forests, there are millions of federal forests where the transfer of risk has already occurred as a result of less active management or essentially passive management for a variety of reasons. As a result, millions of federal forest acres are at risk of catastrophic wildfire; this in turn has become central to the challenge of protecting adjoining private forests.

One of the guiding principles of the National Cohesive Wildland Fire Management Strategy (Cohesive Strategy) states “[w]here land and resource management objectives differ, prudent and safe actions must be taken through collaborative fire planning and suppression response to keep unwanted wildfires from spreading to adjacent jurisdictions.”<sup>4</sup> Divergent forest management and fire policies and fire crossing ownerships—and even state boundaries—strain working relationships between local managers, communities, and forest landowners. They can also result in substantial resource damage and loss. Much of the work of active management, collaboration and pre-planning that needs to be addressed under the Cohesive Strategy must occur in the off season if it is to succeed during a fire event.

### **An Oregon Lens–Northern Blue Mountain Pilot Project**

Alongside the Forest Service, ODF has taken a lead role in one of the Nation’s first pilot projects under the Cohesive Strategy. The Blue Mountain Pilot is based around the same three goals as the Cohesive Strategy:

1. Respond to Wildfire—seeking to ensure a safe, effective, and efficient response to wildland fire.
2. Create Fire-Adapted Communities—seeking to help populations create and modify infrastructure such that it can withstand a wildfire without loss of life or property.
3. Restore and Maintain Resilient Landscapes—seeking to implement management across all ownerships and jurisdictions to work towards landscapes that are resilient to fire-related disturbances.

The work of ODF and its partners in the Blue Mountain Pilot Project will serve as a backdrop for the remaining issues covered in this testimony. I will touch on specifics of our pilot project in the Blues, and relate them to challenges State Foresters experience at the national level.

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<sup>4</sup> Wildland Fire Leadership Council Commitment to Cohesive Strategy, January 27, 2012. Available at [www.forestsandrangelands.gov/strategy/](http://www.forestsandrangelands.gov/strategy/). Last accessed May 22, 2013.

- **Responding to wildfire**

One of the fundamental challenges in the area encompassing the Blue Mountain Pilot,<sup>5</sup> and a challenge that is replicated across much of the West, where large federal holdings exist, stems from intermixed ownerships and the conditions on the ground—including a growing wildland urban interface and fuel loads well beyond the historic range of variability. Within the Blue Mountain Pilot area, ODF shares roughly 3,500 miles of property and protection boundary with the Forest Service. High fuel loads and differences in fire policy and risk tolerance between federal land managers and ODF can create issues on both sides of the boundary.

With intermixed ownership and protection, interagency coordination of fire suppression and management is key—along with specifically communicating and coordinating with local landowners. Work is ongoing in the Blue Mountain Pilot to find ways for federal, state, rural and local responders to work together and better coordinate staffing levels and resource availability based on fire danger and conditions on the ground. Recognizing and utilizing local landowner and/or contract resources are important parts of this overall effort.

Nationally and in Oregon, State Foresters have played a substantial role in helping equip rural fire departments and assisting communities to prepare for wildland fire through the Volunteer Fire Assistance and State Fire Assistance Programs. In Oregon, nonprofit Rangeland Protective Associations and a fire detection camera system are two proven successes that started through these programs. Unfortunately, these programs have experienced significant cuts in recent years and are slated for additional cuts under the President's proposed budget. The reductions also come as state budgets for wildfire programs have declined nearly 15 percent (between 2008 and 2010).

Funding of federal fire suppression efforts is one of the greatest challenges we face in fire response. The fire suppression budget at the Forest Service has continued to grow in recent years and now accounts for nearly one-half of total spending for the Agency. State Foresters and other partners have real concerns about the continued escalation of fire costs. As suppression costs have risen, the Forest Service has had to transfer money from other programs to fund fire suppression. As the Committee is aware, the Federal Land Assistance, Management and Enhancement (FLAME) Act was intended to address this problem. Unfortunately, the emergency funds established for the Forest Service and the Department of the Interior (DOI) have not been funded as intended under the FLAME Act.

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<sup>5</sup> The Blue Mountain Pilot Project is located in northeastern Oregon and includes 2.4 million acres of the Wallow-Whitman National Forest, roughly 1 million acres of the Umatilla National Forest, nearly 2 million acres of private ODF protected lands, and 2.1 million acres managed by a host of agencies including the Bureau of Land Management, Bureau of Indian Affairs, the Umatilla Tribe, Rangeland Fire Protection Associations, rural fire districts and unprotected lands.

In fact, during fiscal year (FY) 2012 the Forest Service transferred \$440 million and the DOI transferred \$23 million from non-suppression programs within the agencies to cover the cost of fire suppression. While the federal FY 2013 Continuing Resolution restored the transferred funds, the transfers and possibility of future transfers continue to impact programs within the agencies. Fire transfers also impact non-federal partners including states. The FY 2012 fire transfer at the Forest Service left twenty State Competitive Resource Allocation Projects authorized under State and Private Forestry programs unfunded, potentially harming partnerships cultivated by states in developing these projects.

The latest FLAME Forecast Report<sup>6</sup> from the Administration predicts another costly fire season in 2013. Median forecasts for suppression costs at the Forest Service and DOI are \$1.191 billion and \$329 million respectively. The FY 2013 Continuing Resolution provided funding at the ten-year average suppression expenditure level of \$931 million (\$616 million for suppression and \$315 for FLAME) to fund fire suppression at the Forest Service<sup>7</sup> and \$378 million (\$286 million for suppression and \$92 million for FLAME) to fund fire suppression at the DOI.<sup>8</sup> When cuts mandated under the sequester were applied, total suppression funding available to the Forest Service dropped to \$807 million and \$349 million for the DOI.<sup>9</sup> Comparing actual available FY 2013 funding with the agencies' cost forecasts, funding at the Forest Service is \$384 million *below* the forecasted level. The DOI funding level is actually \$20 million above the forecast, but \$29 million *below* the ten-year average. These findings, particularly for the Forest Service, indicate that transfers are likely in FY 2013. These transfers will again disrupt agency programs, including forest management programs that would help to reduce wildfire suppression costs in the future.

One solution to minimize the need for the Forest Service and DOI to transfer monies from non-suppression accounts to suppression is to treat the FLAME reserve accounts as they were intended when the FLAME Act was enacted in 2009. In order for this to happen, State Foresters, along with a wide-range of partners, support funding the FLAME accounts separately from the ten-year suppression average, and not at the expense of other agency programs.<sup>10</sup> Additionally, any remaining balance in the FLAME accounts at the end of FY 2013 should be carried over, as intended under the FLAME Act, to FY 2014.

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<sup>6</sup> Federal Land Assistance, Management and Enhancement (FLAME) Act Suppression Expenditures for Interior and Agriculture Agencies: May 2013 Forecasts for Fiscal Year 2013. April 18, 2013.

<sup>7</sup> Fiscal Year 2013 USDA Forest Service Budget Justification. Available at <http://www.fs.fed.us/aboutus/budget/>. Last Accessed May 29, 2013.

<sup>8</sup> The U.S. Department of the Interior Budget Justifications and Performance Information Fiscal Year 2014 – Wildland Fire Management. Available at [http://www.doi.gov/pmb/owf/BPM\\_Resources.cfm](http://www.doi.gov/pmb/owf/BPM_Resources.cfm). Last accessed May 29, 2013.

<sup>9</sup> *Id.*

<sup>10</sup> Written Public Testimony from Members of the Fire Suppression Funding Solutions Partner Caucus. Available at <http://www.stateforesters.org/testimony-members-fire-suppression-funding-solutions-partner-caucus>. Last accessed May 30, 2013.

- **Creating Fire-Adapted Communities**

One of the challenges facing interagency leaders on our Blue Mountain Pilot Project is to grow that sweet spot represented by the overlapping themes of resilient landscapes, adequate fire response, and fire-adapted communities. In northeastern Oregon, creating fire-adapted communities involves asking what else can be done, working together, to manage the risk and to focus work in the highest priority areas. One of the ways that this decision-making and resource allocation process can be informed is through the Western Wildfire Risk Assessment. This is an effort led by the Council of Western State Foresters to quantify the magnitude of the current wildland fire problem in the West and provide baseline data for understanding the impact of mitigation activities, and to monitor change over time. The information provided through the Western Wildfire Risk Assessment is being used to inform national, regional, state and local planning efforts.<sup>11</sup> The Southern Group of State Foresters has completed a similar project and the Northeastern Association of State Foresters also utilizes regional risk assessment tools.

Importantly, the Blue Mountain Pilot Project leadership recognizes that fire-adapted communities are closely linked to broader forest health and restoration issues. Because of this linkage, federal, state and local partners are engaging in frank and open conversation about risk tolerance, values at risk and the use of fire as a management tool. The Pilot Project is seeking to find ways to improve the economics of forest management to maintain resilient landscapes that will in turn help protect communities.

- **Restoring and Maintaining Resilient Landscapes**

Forests across the nation face a host of threats from disturbance mechanisms such as insects, disease, and wildland fire. Much of the forestlands within the Blue Mountain Pilot Project are representative of forests across the country in urgent need of active management to address forest health issues. Unfortunately, one of the direct results of the increased spending on wildland fire suppression at the Forest Service is that fewer dollars are available to fund on-the-ground management activities that can reduce fire risk, such as the Hazardous Fuels program, which is slated for substantial cuts in the President's proposed budget. Unfortunately, until we can find a way to invest in management of forests before they burn, this problem will only be exacerbated as we undercut our ability to address the cause of the problem by directing most of our limited resources at efforts to treat the symptoms.

A recent report prepared for Oregon Governor John Kitzhaber and Oregon's Legislative leaders found that "[a]n investment in forest health restoration has the potential to save millions of dollars in state and federal funds by avoiding costs associated with fire suppression, social service programs and unemployment benefits."<sup>12</sup> The report notes that "[f]or every \$1 the [Forest Service] spends on forest restoration, the agency avoids a

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<sup>11</sup> An example of the potential utility of the Western Wildfire Risk Assessment is the Colorado Wildfire Risk Assessment Portal developed by Colorado State Forest Service with input from the Western Wildfire Risk Assessment.

<sup>12</sup> National Forest Health Restoration: An Economic Assessment of Forest Restoration on Oregon's Eastside National Forests at pg. IV. Nov. 26, 2012. Available at [www.oregonstate.edu/inr/national-forest-health-restoration](http://www.oregonstate.edu/inr/national-forest-health-restoration). Last accessed May 21, 2013.

potential loss of \$1.45.”<sup>13</sup> In addition to reducing the fire risk, investing in active forest management can improve the social, economic and ecological health of our forests and the communities that depend on them.

### **Wildland Fire Billing**

Before concluding, I would like to touch briefly on another matter that affects the ability of state and federal agencies to work together as efficiently as possible. State foresters are working with the Forest Service and members of Congress to clarify the Forest Service’s authority to continue coordinating the national response to wildland fires by facilitating mobilization and billing for state resources sent to support firefighting efforts in another state. This is a key role that the Forest Service has fulfilled for several decades and was only recently called into question. It is critically important to provide the Forest Service with the clarifying language they need to continue this role and we appreciate the support we have received from Congress in working to codify this authority. Having a central clearinghouse for fire billing saves the states and the federal government critical resources and time.

Finally, state foresters are also working with their partners at the Forest Service and the DOI Office of Wildland Fire to further understand direction that came from the National Wildfire Coordinating Group (NWCG) this past winter.<sup>14</sup> The release of the NWCG direction has created confusion as to who will handle billing for state resources sent out of state to assist in suppression of fires managed by a DOI agency. States have historically submitting billing packages to the Forest Service at the Albuquerque Service Center and have received assurances from the Forest Service that this process will continue through the current fire season.

### **Conclusion**

I appreciate the opportunity to appear before the Committee today on behalf of the Oregon Department of Forestry and the National Association of State Foresters. Wildland fire response is one of the most challenging facets of our jobs. The NASF and I stand ready to assist the Committee in finding ways to address the challenges we all face as the wildland fire problem continues to grow and consume larger and larger portions of our federal budget. Finally, I would like to thank the Committee for its continued leadership and support of efforts to both respond to wildland fire and to take the necessary actions to address the underlying causes through increasing active management of all forestlands.

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<sup>13</sup> *Id.*

<sup>14</sup> See NWCG memorandum dated December 10, 2012 on Single Point Interstate Billing available at <http://www.nwcg.gov/general/memos/nwcg-020-2012.html>. Last accessed May 21, 2013.