

**Statement of
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Department of the Interior
Before
Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources
Concerning
Preparedness for the 2011 Fire Season**

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Chairman Bingaman, Ranking Member Murkowski, and members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify today on Department of the Interior's readiness for the 2011 wildland fire season. The U.S. Department of the Interior (DOI), along with the Forest Service within U.S. Department of Agriculture have been and continue to be prepared for the 2011 wildland fire season.

The 2011 fire season began in earnest in late April / early May, with the ignition of three large wildfires that continue to burn in Georgia and North Carolina. More than twenty percent of the United States (490 million acres) is managed by the bureaus within DOI, with fire management responsibilities that stretch from Florida to Alaska, from Maine to California. Historically and collectively, DOI has achieved a high success rate in suppressing fires during the initial attack stage.

Wildland fire behavior and our response are influenced by complex environmental and social factors as discussed in the 2009 Quadrennial Fire Review (QFR). Such factors include the effects of climate change, cumulative drought effects, continued risk in the Wildland Urban Interface, and escalating emergency response.

Nationally, already this fiscal year, approximately more than 46,000 fires have burned more than 4.5 million acres (this calendar year, approximately more than 31,000 fires have burned over 4 million acres), predominately in the southeast (Texas and Oklahoma) and now the southwest (Arizona and New Mexico) on federal and non-federal lands. Drought is forecast to persist or

worsen across much of the southern half of the nation. And in Alaska, where the Department has significant land management responsibilities, above normal significant fire potential is forecast for portions of the Upper Yukon and Kenai Peninsula where dead and down insect-killed trees and heavy grass understory exist.

For the 2011 fire season, available firefighting forces within the Department of the Interior – firefighters, equipment, and aircraft – are comparable to those available for the last several years. Among its bureaus, the Department will deploy approximately 3,500 firefighters, 135 smokejumpers, 17 Type-1 crews, 750 engines more than 200 other pieces of heavy equipment (dozers, tenders, etc.) and about 1,300 support personnel (dispatchers, fire cache, etc) ; for a total of nearly 5,000 personnel. Where possible, the Department will emphasize the hiring of returning veterans to fill the ranks of its firefighting forces.

Aviation assets for FY 2011 are comparable to prior years as well, with exclusive use contracts in place for 2 water scooping aircraft, 37 helicopters, and 22 other aircraft (smokejumper, air attack, etc.) Nearly 60 single-engine air tankers (SEATs) are expected to be available through call-when-needed contracts.

The federal government wildland fire agencies are working with tribal, state, and local government partners to prevent and reduce the effects of large, unwanted fires through preparedness activities like risk assessment, prevention and mitigation efforts, mutual aid agreements, firefighter training, acquisition of equipment and aircraft, and dispatching; community assistance and hazardous fuels reduction.

All these commitments are in line with the recently completed Phase I of the National Cohesive Wildland Fire Management Strategy. The wildland fire community, under the direction of the Wildland Fire Leadership Council (lead by Secretaries from the Departments of Agriculture, Interior, and Homeland Security), has developed a blueprint for all entities with statutory responsibilities for wildfire to collaborate on achieving a shared vision to “safely and effectively extinguish fire, when needed; use fire where allowable, manage our natural resources, and as a nation, live with wildland fire”. The blueprint called for: restoring and maintaining resilient landscapes, creating fire adapted communities, and wildfire response. In addition, the federal

government is continuing to work with our non-federal partners to complete Phase II of the Cohesive Strategy this fiscal year, which will develop regional goals and portfolios of actions and activities. Phase III would be a national risk trade-off analysis. This national collaborative effort represents a new strategy, a new path forward and perhaps, a new way of thinking about wildland fire and may pave the way for national, not just federal, wildland fire management policy which is not just comprehensive in its scope, but also consistent, coordinated and complementary across all jurisdictions.

Until then, DOI continues to take full advantage of the current Implementation Guidelines for the Federal Wildland Fire Management Policy. Our unwavering commitment to firefighter and public safety in managing wildfire is the foundation of the fire management program within each DOI bureau. We will continue to respond quickly and effectively to control unwanted wildland fires. Initial action on human-caused wildfire will continue to suppress the fire at the lowest risk to firefighter and public safety. When appropriate, we will also allow fire managers to manage a fire for multiple objectives and increase managers' flexibility to respond to changing incident conditions and firefighting capability, while strengthening strategic and tactical decision implementation supporting public safety and resource management objectives. Our actions will be supported by the Wildland Fire Decision Support System (WFDSS) and our enhanced ability to analyze fire conditions and develop risk informed strategies and tactics, resulting in reduced exposure to unnecessary risk during fire incidents.

The President's Fiscal Year 2012 Budget reflects the commitment of the Administration to implement program reforms to ensure fire management resources are focused where they will do the most good. The 2012 budget proposes a total of \$821.5 million to support the fire preparedness, suppression, fuels reduction, and burned area rehabilitation needs of DOI. The 2012 budget request fully funds the inflation-adjusted 10-year average of suppression expenditures of \$362.6 million, with the funding split between \$270.6 million in the regular suppression account and \$92.0 million in the FLAME Fund. Consistent with the FLAME Act, the regular suppression account will fund the initial attack and predictable firefighting costs, while the FLAME Fund will fund the costs of the largest, most complex fires and also serve as a reserve when funds available in the regular suppression account are exhausted.

The President's FY 2012 Budget provides DOI sufficient funding to fully cover anticipated preparedness and suppression needs. The Budget also recognizes the need to invest not just in firefighting related activities, but in hazardous fuels reduction and community assistance, and rehabilitation of burned areas as well. The budget for the Hazardous Fuels Reduction program focuses the program on projects in or adjacent to the wildland-urban interface and the Department has made significant improvements to its Hazardous Fuels Prioritization and Allocation System to ensure funds are directed to the highest priority projects in the highest priority areas. DOI developed and issued policy that outlines the Hazardous Fuels Prioritization and Allocation Process and has enhanced the computer systems that identify high priority areas for treatment and high priority projects across the nation. We have also worked collaboratively to improve the decision and documentation process. In fiscal year 2011, the bureaus within the Department have funded high priority projects in high priority areas which will result in the mitigation of risks to communities and their values. The Department will continue to pursue efficiencies and reforms that reduce project cost, increase performance, ensure the greatest value from invested resources, all while strengthening the accountability and transparency of the way in which taxpayer dollars are being spent.

In summary, the Department of the Interior is prepared to meet the wildland firefighting challenges of today and tomorrow. DOI will maintain customary operational capabilities and continue to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of the fire management programs. These efforts are coupled with other strategic efforts and operational protocols to improved oversight and use of the latest research and technology to ensure fire management resources are appropriately focused. Specifically, these actions include:

- Continued reduction of hazardous fuels on priority lands in wildland-urban interface areas with its hazardous fuels reduction funds that present the greatest opportunity to reduce the risk of severe damaging fires in the future;
- Continued improvement of decision-making on wildland fires by leveraging the Wildland Fire Decision Support System capabilities to predict what may happen during a fire to safeguard lives, protect communities and enhance natural resources ecosystem health;

- Continued enhancement to wildfire response and efficiency that comes from use of national shared resources, pre-positioning of firefighting resources, and improvements in aviation management;
- Continued review of fire incidents to apply lessons learned and best practices to policy and operations; and
- Continued strategic planning in collaboration with the Forest Service and our state, tribal, and local government to develop meaningful performance measures and implementation plans to address the challenges posed by wildfires in the nation.

Although the Department of the Interior and the Department of Agriculture (USDA) are offering separate written statements today, please be assured that the Departments work collaboratively in all aspects of wildland fire, along with our other federal, tribal, state and local partners. Our statements have been coordinated to ensure a well rounded presentation of our collective fire management program, the common challenges that we face, and our recent efforts to effectively meet these challenges. The two Departments collaborate in the Federal Fire Policy Council, and met just last week to explore some of the issues that are faced by senior executives during periods of significant wildfire activity and to reaffirm their mutual understanding of roles and responsibilities and develop appropriate response scenarios prior to any national emergencies.

Together, we are staffed to provide safe and effective fire management with available firefighting forces – firefighters, equipment, and aircraft. And at the same time, we continue to improve effectiveness, cost efficiency, safety, and community and resource protection in concert with each other.

This concludes my statement. Thank you for your interest in the Wildland Fire Program and the opportunity to testify before this Committee. I welcome any questions you may have and appreciate your continued support.