

**Statement of**  
**Kim Thorsen, Deputy Assistant Secretary**  
**Public Safety, Resource Protection, and Emergency Services**  
**Department of the Interior**  
**Before**  
**Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources**  
**Concerning**  
**Preparedness for the 2014 Fire Season**  
**July 15, 2014**

**Introduction**

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Chairman Landrieu, 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 2014 wildland fire season. The U.S. Department of the Interior (DOI), along with the Forest Service within the U.S. Department of Agriculture, is prepared for the 2014 wildland fire season with our available resources.

**2013 Wildfire Season**

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In the 2013 calendar year, nationally, nearly 51,000 fires were reported and over 4.3 million acres burned, which represents 65 percent and 59 percent of the 10-year averages, respectively. Alaska led the nation with 1.3 million acres burned. The Eastern Great Basin burned the most acres in the lower 48 states consuming nearly 768,000 acres. Over 2,100 structures were destroyed by wildfires in 2013, below the annual average of nearly 2,700. California accounted for the highest number of structures lost.

The available funding before transfers and reprogrammings for suppression in FY 2013 was \$368 million including the FLAME funding. The DOI obligations in FY 2013 were \$399.2 million which required Section 102 transfers to cover the balance needed. The transfers were from within the Wildland Fire Management accounts of Fuels, Preparedness and Burned Area Rehabilitation, as well as other DOI bureau accounts mainly Construction and Land Acquisition. Repayment of these impacted bureau resource accounts occurred in FY 2014.

The 2013 fire season was anything but normal when we reflect on the numbers of lives lost during the season. In total, 34 wildland Federal/state/local firefighters died in the line of duty. This number, second only to the fire season of 1910 when 84 firefighters perished, was tied with 1994, the year in which 14 firefighters died in the South Canyon Fire on Storm King Mountain in Colorado.

Loss of life leaves a mark not only on the families and friends of the fallen firefighters, but the loss resounds through the entire wildland fire community. Some particularly tragic fire seasons stand out in our history and continue to greatly influence the work we do every day.

This calendar year, the wildland firefighting community commemorated two significant anniversaries that were marked by historic loss to the interagency wildland fire management community—the anniversaries of the South Canyon (July 6, 1994) and the Yarnell Hill (June 30, 2013) incidents.

### **2014 Fire Season Outlook**

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The 2014 fire season is expected to be similar to last year's. The National Wildfire Potential Outlook issued by the Predictive Services Unit at the National Interagency Fire Center for the

period of July through October predicts above-normal fire potential for July over much of California, the Northwest, and the Great Basin.

In August, we expect California, Nevada, Oregon, Washington, and Idaho will continue to experience above-normal fire potential with the possibility of above-normal fire activity across the New England states and the Four Corners area if short-term weather develops that would support fire outbreaks.

Above-normal fire potential is predicted to remain over Southern and Central California through September and October; but Northern California, Oregon, and Washington should return to normal.

The impacts of climate change, cumulative drought effects, increasing risk in and around communities, and escalating emergency response requirements continue to impact wildland fire management and wildfire response operations. Drought is forecasted to persist or worsen over much of the southwestern quarter of the nation with exceptional drought continuing in California, western Nevada, and a large portion of the southern Plains.

Since the beginning of the calendar year, over 30,000 fires have burned more than 1 million acres, predominantly in the Southern, Eastern, Southwest, Northern and Southern California, and Alaska Geographic Areas of the country. The Northwest area has been unusually active for this time of the year. As of July 8, 2014, numbers of fires and acres burned represented 70 percent and 37 percent of normal, respectively.

### **Expected Available Fire Resources**

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Together with our partners at the U. S. Forest Service, we are well prepared for the 2014 fire season. The Department plans to deploy over 3,400 firefighters, including 143 smokejumpers,

17 Type-1 crews; 745 engines; more than 200 other pieces of heavy equipment (dozers, tenders, etc.); and about 1,300 support personnel (incident management teams, dispatchers, fire cache, etc.); totaling nearly 5,000 personnel.

The Department has been a leader in creating the Veterans to Wildland Fire program; and where possible, we will continue to emphasize the hiring of returning Veterans to fill the ranks of its firefighting forces.

This year, we have 33 single-engine airtankers or SEATS on exclusive use contracts and an additional 38 on call-when-needed contracts. SEATs are a good fit for the types of fires that the Interior agencies experience. Many of these fires usually burn at lower elevations, in sparser fuels, on flatter terrain. We also have small and large helicopters and water scoopers available. We will utilize Forest Service contracted heavy airtankers and, if necessary, Modular Airborne Fire Fighting System (MAFFS) equipped C-130 aircraft from the Department of Defense. Agreements are in place to acquire supplemental aircraft from our state and international partners, if necessary.

Appropriations for the 2014 wildland fire budget total \$861 million including \$378 million for suppression and the FLAME funds. Recently the President sent forward a supplemental request for the Forest Service in the amount of \$615 million, which is the difference between the July FLAME forecast at the upper bound of the 90% confidence interval (\$1.6 billion) and their available suppression appropriation of \$995 million. Interior did not request funding in the supplemental because the upper bound of the July FLAME forecast 90% confidence projection is \$355 million, which is \$23 million below our appropriated amount. The FLAME projections are based on modeling and may change over time.

## **Fiscal Year 2015 Budget**

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Drought conditions across the west, changing climate, invasive species, and longer/hotter fire seasons make it a challenge to plan for and budget for firefighting. What we need is a long term, sustainable wildland fire budget framework that recognizes the unpredictability of fire and treats it as an emergency like tornadoes and hurricanes. We greatly appreciate the leadership of Senator's Wyden and Crapo, as well as Congressmen Simpson and Schrader, and all of the supporting co-sponsors, in putting forth a sustainable framework. This legislation recognizes that we need a better way to budget for wildland fire management suppression programs, while maintaining accountability and transparency in spending. The 2015 budget proposal for Interior and the Forest Service models this approach.

The 2015 budget request for the Wildland Fire Management Program is \$794.0 million, which will allow the Department to fund an ongoing level of "normal" firefighting, fuels management, burned area rehabilitation, science, and facilities maintenance. An additional \$240.4 million is requested as a cap adjustment.

The budget proposes to amend the Balanced Budget and Emergency Deficit Control Act of 1985, as amended, to establish a new budget framework for the Wildland Fire Management program that is designed to provide stable funding for fire suppression, while minimizing the adverse impacts of fire transfers on the budgets of other fire and non-fire programs, as well as reduce fire risk, manage landscapes more comprehensively, and increase the resiliency of public lands and the communities that border them.

In this proposed new budget framework, a portion of the funding needed for suppression response is funded within the discretionary spending limits, and a portion is funded in an adjustment to those limits. For Interior, \$268.6 million is requested within the current budget cap which is 70 percent of the 10-year suppression average spending. This base level funding ensures that the cap adjustment will only be used for the most severe fire activity which constitutes approximately one percent of all fires and 30 percent of the costs.

This approach would provide funding certainty in future years for firefighting costs, maintain fiscal responsibility by addressing wildfire disaster needs through agreed-upon funding mechanisms and free up resources to invest in areas that will promote long-term forest health and reduce fire risk. In addition, our request does not increase overall discretionary spending, as it would reduce the ceiling for the existing disaster relief cap adjustment by an equivalent amount as is provided for wildfire suppression operations.

The 2015 budget request includes a program increase of \$34.1 million for Preparedness. The increased funds will enhance Interior's readiness capabilities by strengthening preparedness capabilities. A major share of the Preparedness increase will be devoted to strengthening the BIA wildfire program by, among other things, funding contract support costs, providing workforce development opportunities for firefighters, and enhancing administrative support capabilities.

### **National Cohesive Wildland Fire Management Strategy**

In April, the Secretaries of the Department of the Interior and Agriculture released the *National Cohesive Strategy* and the *National Action Plan* bringing to a close the three-phased, collaborative approach to evaluate and address the nation's most significant wildland fire management issues, now and into the future. The goals of the National Cohesive Strategy are:

Restore and maintain landscapes – Landscapes across all jurisdictions are resilient to fire-related disturbances in accordance with management objectives.

Fire-Adapted communities – Human populations and infrastructure can withstand a wildfire without loss of life and property.

Wildfire response – all jurisdictions participate in making and implementing safe, effective, efficient risk-based wildfire management decisions.

The National Cohesive Strategy was developed and will be implemented in an inclusive process. This is both significant and distinct from past efforts. The outcome of the cohesive strategy effort is more than a set of documents; it is a commitment to the doctrine that as stakeholders, we all share responsibilities for managing our lands; protecting our nation’s natural, tribal, cultural resources; and making our communities safe and resilient for future generations.

Across the nation, we recognize that the principles of the National Cohesive Strategy are already being implemented in some places. We need to continue and strengthen those existing efforts and partnerships that are working.

Wildland fire management must be an integrated program that works hand-in-hand with other natural resource, land use, and other program areas where we can achieve the most difference on the ground, together. It must be an integrated program that prioritizes efforts where there is an opportunity to work with our neighbors and partners who are taking action to collectively make the most difference.

The *National Strategy* recognizes this need for engagement and action at all levels, on behalf of Federal, state, local, territorial and Tribal governments, non-governmental partners, property owners, and public stakeholders. Our future success will be defined by our commitment and

ability to work together to achieve the vision and goals of the National Cohesive Strategy; together, we are moving forward with implementation.

## **Resilient Landscapes**

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The 2015 budget makes pro-active investments in fuels management and landscape resiliency to better address the growing impact of wildland fire on communities and the public lands.

The request includes a \$30.0 million increase to establish a new “Resilient Landscapes” activity to improve the integrity and resilience of forests and rangelands by restoring and maintaining landscapes to specific conditions for fire resiliency. Treatments will be strategically placed within landscapes, including outside of the wildland-urban interface (WUI) where ecosystem structure and function is threatened by wildfire and other disturbances.

Examples of treatments that will be conducted include thinning of overstocked stands in areas with critical wildlife habitat, removing trees encroaching on meadows or wetlands with significant resource value, and controlling fire-adapted invasive weeds that degrade habitat, compete with native vegetation, and increase the risk of wildfire. Importantly, the Resilient Landscapes activity will be coordinated with and supported by the resource management programs of the four Interior bureaus that participate in the Wildland Fire program. Bureaus will leverage funds to restore and maintain fire resilient landscapes.

## **Fuels Management Program**

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The Department of the Interior’s hazardous fuels program has been redefined as the Department’s risk-based Fuels Management Program. The Fuels Management program uses a risk-based approach that focuses on three strategic issues, including the nature and extent of the



fuels problem in terms of risk of wildfire to key values, primarily in the WUI; determination of treatment and funding priorities based on those risks; and measurement of accomplishment and program success in terms of reduction of those risks.

The risk-based fuels management program is aligned with the three goals of the National Cohesive Wildland Fire Management Strategy to improve the integrity and resilience of the forests and rangelands, contribute to community adaptation to fire, and improve our ability to safely and appropriately respond to wildfire.

More resilient, healthier ecosystems provide many benefits to society, including clean water, scenic, and recreation values, wood products, and biodiversity. Communities are better able to withstand wildfire and treatments provide safer conditions and more strategic options for firefighters.

We've seen examples where fuels treatments played an important role in managing the fires. This year a fire break on the border with Kenai National Wildlife Refuge protected an Alaskan community and helped firefighters contain the Funny River Fire. Crews working on the San Juan Fire on the White Mountain Apache Reservation and Apache-Sitgreaves National Forest in Arizona observed a significant change in fire behavior when the fire ran into a previous tree thinning project on the forest, and the crown fire dropped to a slow-moving ground fire, making the job for firefighters safer and easier to manage.

Last year, during the 2013 California Rim Fire in Yosemite National Park crews observed a big change in fire behavior due to tree thinning and prescribed fire work accomplished around several structures and infrastructure located in the Hodgdon Meadow's area. The time gained by

the reduced fire behavior allowed fire crews to protect NPS and taxpayer's investments in this developed area with little to no damaging fire effects and no loss of structures.

Interior has targeted a research effort with the Joint Fire Science Program to characterize the effectiveness of fuels treatment on wildland fire behavior, costs, and resilience. Results of these studies will be incorporated into our Fuels Management Program.

### **Preparedness Program**

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Consistent with the Cohesive Strategy and similar to fuels management, we are continuing to develop a risk-based framework to develop and manage the Preparedness Program budget. The risk framework seeks to align Preparedness investments with fire risk relative to priority values such as life and property, natural/cultural/economic resources, and DOI lands in general rather than on historical allocations. Fire managers will be able to adjust allocations while considering current capability, return on investments, and workload/complexity. It will let us be adaptive and make strategic decisions about placement of wildland firefighting resources with changing budgets and risk-profiles.

### **Partnerships**

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The realities of today's challenges at federal, state and other levels highlights the importance of working together across landscapes, and with our partners to achieve our goals.

The Federal 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 firefighters, support personnel and equipment; community assistance and hazardous fuels reduction. These actions demonstrate

Interior's continued commitment to the goals of the National Cohesive Wildland Fire Management Strategy (restore and maintain resilient landscapes, create fire-adapted communities, and response to wildfire).

### **Conclusion**

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Although the Department of the Interior and the Department of Agriculture (USDA) are offering separate written statements today, please be assured that our Departments work collaboratively in all aspects of wildland fire management, along with our other Federal, Tribal, state and local partners.

Together, with all our available resources, we will continue to provide a safe, effective wildland fire management program. We will continue to improve effectiveness, cost efficiency, safety, and community and resource protection.

This concludes my statement. Thank you for your interest in the Department's wildland fire management program and for the opportunity to testify before this Committee. I welcome any questions you may have and appreciate your continued support.