Statement of
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Oversight Hearing on the 2019 Wildland Fire Outlook and the
Department of the Interior's Wildland Fire Management Program
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Chairman Murkowski, Ranking Member Manchin, and members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony on the 2019 wildland fire outlook and the Department of the Interior's (Department or DOI) Wildland Fire Management (WFM) program.

The Office of Wildland Fire (OWF) develops, coordinates and oversees the Department's WFM policies and budget for the DOI's fire bureaus—the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA), Bureau of Land Management (BLM), U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS), and National Park Service (NPS). OWF is also responsible for coordinating with other Federal agencies, tribes, states, and external partners to ensure a fully integrated WFM program. These efforts support a collaborative approach to wildland fire management and implementation of the goals of the "National Cohesive Wildland Fire Management Strategy," which include: 1) restoring and maintaining fire-resilient landscapes; 2) creating fire-adapted communities that will withstand the effects of a wildfire without the loss of life and property; and 3) safely and effectively responding to wildfire.

The Department would like to thank the Committee for recent congressional actions that help the DOI take proactive steps to address wildfire risk and manage its response to wildfires. Authorities provided by the Agricultural Improvement Act of 2018 ("Farm Bill") and the Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2018 facilitate collaboration with the Department's partners to support efforts to manage vegetation, particularly in high risk areas. Additionally, the wildfire cap adjustment that was enacted in the Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2018 provides a new source of budget authority in Fiscal Years 2020 through 2027 above congressional appropriations for the Department's Suppression Operations Account. These additional funds, if needed, will allow the Department to avoid borrowing from other non-WFM program funds to pay for wildfire suppression.

The President's Fiscal Year 2020 Budget request also includes a suite of legislative proposals that are designed to expedite processes for certain forest management and vegetation management projects. Implementation of these proposals will support the Department's efforts to limit the risks and negative impacts that wildfires have on people, communities and resources.

The success of the Department's WFM program is dependent upon collaboration with our numerous stakeholders. Partnerships are vital to DOI's land stewardship responsibilities, including the implementation of fuels management work that helps limit the risk and negative impacts that wildfires have on communities across the country; post-fire rehabilitation work that

helps restore landscapes and watersheds; and the use of data, predictive tools, and new technologies that provide information that is needed for wildfire practitioners and decision makers. For example, the Wildland Fire Leadership Council (WFLC)—an intergovernmental group comprised of Federal, tribal, state, county, and municipal officials—provides a forum for partners to communicate and develop collaborative ideas to improve upon a range of wildland fire management issues. The WFLC partners are working together to better identify wildfire risk; address air quality issues by working collaboratively with the states to promote fuels management; and leverage advancements in technology to improve firefighting safety and operational capabilities.

Unified interagency wildland firefighting operations requires an environment where all personnel, regardless of their position or duties, have a strong and trusting relationship with their colleagues and partners. To achieve this standard, the Department has issued guidance that defines unacceptable conduct, outlines employees' rights and responsibilities, and establishes reporting procedures to resolve any incidents of harassment that occur on wildfire incidents. These efforts are important steps in transforming how the Department addresses harassment on wildfire incidents in order to raise our ethical standards to prevent harassment in the workplace.

Summary of the 2018 Fire Year

Last year marked another challenging year that saw more than 58,000 wildfires burn over 8.7 million acres of Federal, tribal, state and private lands. Additionally, nearly 26,000 structures were destroyed. Collectively, DOI and the USDA Forest Service spent nearly $5 billion on wildfire readiness and response, the largest amount ever. It was also one of the most tragic years on record. For example, California's Camp Fire saw the devastating loss of 85 people and the entire community of Paradise burned to ashes in the wake of one of the most catastrophic wildfire events in history. Overall, 19 members of the firefighting community lost their lives in wildfire incidents or wildland fire management related activities across the country. Furthermore, published research strongly suggests that smoke impacts from wildfires very likely caused or contributed to even more fatalities.

To supplement the Federal wildland firefighting workforce from July to September, 138 fireline personnel from Australia and New Zealand provided additional ground support, and from August 13th to September 5th, 233 soldiers from the 14th Brigade Engineer Battalion, 2nd Infantry Division, from Joint Base Lewis-McChord in Washington, assisted wildland firefighting in northern California. In addition, the National Guard and Air Force reserve mobilized several C-130 aircraft equipped with modular airborne firefighting systems and one National Guard RC-26 aircraft with Distributed Real Time Infrared (DRTI) capability from July to September.

The 2019 Fire Season Outlook & DOI Wildland Firefighting Assets

While drought conditions across much of the West have greatly improved since last year, above normal wildfire potential will increase across most of California throughout the summer. The Southwest and southern Great Basin will drop back to normal fire potential later in the summer. In July, a new area of increased wildfire potential is projected to develop in Washington, Idaho and extreme northwest Montana along the Canadian border that lasts

through September. Most of Hawaii will remain in above normal wildfire potential through September, but the majority of the rest of the country will see near normal large wildfire potential for most of the summer. This does not mean that there will be no large wildfires, but rather that wildfire potential will be typical for each geographic region.

This year, the Department plans to deploy nearly 4,500 firefighting personnel, 500 tribal firefighters, 151 smokejumpers, 17 interagency hotshot crews and 4 Tribal hotshot crews. Firefighters will have over 600 pieces of specialized equipment available for use, including engines, water tenders, dozers, and other equipment. Aviation assets play a critical role in efforts to manage wildfires and the Department will have access to 23 single engine air tankers, 6 water scoopers, 41 Type 1, 2 and 3 helicopters, and a number of other aviation resources.

We want to emphasize that these resources complement other Federal, tribal, state and local resources, as well as those specifically made available by rural fire districts. Together, these assets form the foundation of an interoperable, collaborative approach to joint firefighting. The "fire season" has become extended in many parts of the country, and what was once limited to certain months of the year now encompasses an entire "fire year." Managing a year-long season is increasingly challenging to the Department and the entire wildland fire management community.

The 35-day lapse of appropriations in late 2018 and into 2019 affected the Department's immediate wildfire preparations for 2019. Most contracting, hiring, training, restocking of equipment caches, and the preparation of firefighting facilities and structures were all delayed. However, the Department has made steady progress, and areas with the earliest expected onset of wildfires were prioritized and fully prepared for wildfire response. Currently, the Department is in a ready-state and all preparations are in place for the rest of the season.

Active Vegetation Management

Through more active vegetation management of DOI and tribally managed lands, we can reduce the threat and negative impacts of large and costly catastrophic wildfires. For instance, fuels management—including mechanical treatments, prescribed fire, and applications such as chemical and biological treatments—along with other land management activities that reduce vegetation can equally influence wildfire behavior and promote the safety and effectiveness of wildfire response. At the same time, active vegetation management projects help safeguard people, communities and infrastructure; enhance wildlife habitat; and help watersheds become more resilient to the effects of wildfires.

Active vegetation management is one of the cornerstones of the Department's WFM program. Work is completed through partnerships at the local level. In 2018, DOI collaborated with Federal, tribal, state and local partners on nearly 2,500 treatment projects that limit the risk and negative impacts that wildfires have on people, communities and natural resources. Through these partnerships DOI strategically removed excess burnable vegetation on more than 1.2 million acres of DOI and tribally administered lands to reduce wildfire risk in some of the most fire-prone areas of the country. The total number of acres treated by DOI increased nearly six percent from 2017 and more than 17 percent from 2016.

The integration of fire management with resource management across the Department is the foundation of the President's Executive Order (EO) 13855 and DOI's Secretarial Order (SO) 3372 on reducing wildfire risk. Both Orders set clear direction for the Department's strategy of advancing active management and stewardship of DOI and tribally administered lands. The EO directs DOI and USDA to collaboratively develop a wildfire strategy by December 31, 2020, to support Federal land managers in project decision-making and to inform wildfire management decisions in the protection of habitats, communities and physical infrastructure. SO 3372 steps down implementation of EO 13855 and includes fifteen action items with aggressive timelines for implementation. These items are concentrated on land management actions including but not limited to assessing the costs and challenges of managing wildfire risk; revising or amending land management plans; analyzing the conditions of and access to roads that support wildfire response; modifying rights-of-way policy; and developing performance metrics to better capture the efficacy of fuels management efforts in reducing wildfire risk. To date, the Department has made considerable progress in addressing the action items mandated in both Orders. This information will help inform the Department about opportunities to better assess, plan for and communicate about more active management, and develop the collaborative Wildfire Strategy that is mandated in the EO.

The Southern Border Fuels Management Initiative (SBI) is a targeted vegetation management program on DOI and tribally managed lands along the southern border that reduces wildfire risk and facilitates national security operations carried out by the Department of Homeland Security (DSH)-U.S. Border Patrol (USBP). SBI projects help reduce the risk of unwanted wildfires; improve habitat for endangered species; increase protection of DHS facilities on DOI and tribally administered lands; and improve viewsheds for DHS's fixed towers that are used to detect illegal activities along the border. SBI projects are developed jointly between DOI and DHS-USBP. In 2018 and to date in 2019, DOI and DHS-USBP collaboratively funded 14 projects totaling $8 million.

Use of Technology in Wildland Fire Management

As directed by S. 47, the John D. Dingell, Jr. Conservation, Management, and Recreation Act (the "Dingell Act"), Section 1114 (Wildfire Technology Modernization), DOI continues to enhance its use of advanced and emerging technologies, including the use of Unmanned Aircraft Systems (UAS). The mandates of the Dingell Act dovetail and enhance ongoing efforts by the Department. In advancing the goals of the WFM program, OWF recognizes the importance of adopting advancements in technologies as critical to becoming a more efficient, integrated, and effective wildland fire management organization.

Consistent with the Dingell Act, the Department continues to be the leader in the research, development, and practical deployment of UASs on wildland fire management operations. Partnerships on the use of remote sensing to map vegetation conditions, detect wildfires, track smoke emissions, and identify post-fire hazards are critical functions before, during and following wildfires. Increasing reliance on information technology is accompanied by the need for consistent software and data standards, increased connectivity to communication and data networks and continued standardization of interrelated components and systems.

The Department's UAS program is a prime example of leveraging technology to fight wildfires in safer and more efficient ways. Coupled with more aggressive active vegetation management, UAS technology is helping the Federal government improve safety and manage wildfires. The UAS program is widely recognized as the largest, most diverse, and successful domestic drone program outside of the Department of Defense. To support the expanded use of UASs for wildland fire management the Department, working with its partners, developed the operational guidance for the safe and secure use of UASs that falls outside of the regulations, certifications, and oversight that is administered by Federal Aviation Administration.

Currently, the Department uses UASs to assist firefighters in gaining a tactical advantage on wildfires by allowing them to improve their surveillance and reconnaissance capabilities. For example, the information relayed by UASs is used by firefighters to detect hotspots, improve mapping, and monitor incidents and operations. These advancements support the safety of our firefighters and the public and allow us to better position resources to more effectively manage wildfires. This past fire year, the Department conducted 1,552 drone missions on 200 individual wildfires, more than double the number of flights from the previous year.

Based on the growth of the program over the past two years, the Department is planning for a twenty percent increase in the number of UAS units and operators across the country over the next five years. The Department sees new opportunities to improve operational efficiency by expanding the use of UASs for aerial ignition for prescribed fires. Traditionally, aerial ignition meant using a helicopter flying low and slow over the ignition area. Using UASs instead of piloted helicopters for aerial ignition will improve safety and reduce costs for future missions.

One promising initiative to support operations, dispatch and the tracking of wildfire suppression resources is being deployed by the BLM. The BLM plans to equip 240 Global Positioning System satellite terminals on engines and other equipment in all BLM states at a reasonable cost; additional terminals will be purchased and installed in 2020. These systems will provide near real-time equipment position and utilization data to enhance situational awareness and safety.

Conclusion

This concludes my statement. Thank you for your support of the Department's WFM program and for the opportunity to testify before this Committee. I welcome any questions you may have.