



April 16, 2013

Opening Statement of Chairman Ron Wyden

Today the Committee will consider the President's request for the Forest Service's FY 2014 budget. The President's budget was released last Wednesday, April 10th. This will be the first hearing in the Congress on the fiscal year 2014 budget. I want to thank the chief and his staff, in particular, for their being so responsive to get up here so quickly.

I think it's understood that these are very difficult budget times, particularly given sequestration. The chief knows I'm particularly concerned about a number of the decisions made in this year's budget, particularly the staggering proposed reductions to the timber program. I'm of the view that there is an extraordinary opportunity to get the harvest up in this country, particularly built around sensible environmental policies and the collaborative work, for example, that we're seeing in eastern Oregon, in Grant County, in the Malheur Forest.

Today's budget - both in terms of drastic decreases in the timber harvests that are proposed and the deep cuts to the hazardous fuels program with corresponding drops to the acres proposed to be treated - seems to me to be very counterproductive to the work the agency must accomplish. In my view, and the chief and I have talked

about this, it would be a huge blow to the cause of forest health. To me, healthier forests are going to equal a healthier economy. Clearly more is going to have to be done as we address this issue, particularly in terms of looking at all the benefits of our national forests, that's what multiple use is all about. And clearly, at the county payments hearing that we held recently, we stressed the need to get the timber cut up.

This budget is not consistent with the agency's restoration agenda of harvesting 3 billion board feet a year. In fact, it proposes going in the opposite direction—reducing the harvest target by 420 million board feet for FY 2014. My view is this will make it tough to get the timber cut up, restore the forests, and set back the fight against wildfires. I'm going to work closely with the agency and my colleagues here to see if these difficult decisions are made, trade-offs can be found to make sure that the critical programs get the funding that's necessary.

Let me mention the question of the Secure Rural Schools program that was written in this committee and also the three reiterations of the committee that were written here. The sequestration issue is going to work a real hardship on this program. We are hearing that at home. I just came off a big round of townhall meetings in eastern Oregon. It came up consistently there. What the concern is with respect to this morning is the Forest Service sent letters to the governors about the impact of sequestration on the payments made under the legislation. In the letters, the Forest Service requested that states send back 5.1% of Title I and Title III funds distributed earlier this year. The Forest Service also gave states the option to have this absorbed from Title II funding—the funding that supports the important work of the Resource Advisory Councils. I think it's understood for those who follow this committee that we consider these Resource

Advisory Committees really part of the bright light in terms of forestry policy, particularly because it cements the collaborative work that is really the prerequisite to permanent progress. So what we've got with these cuts from sequestration is communities that are already on the edge of bankruptcy, desperate to do more work in the woods – get people back to work in the woods, and the forest harvest up – and what they want is some predictability from the federal government. And in response, the Forest Service has said not only will less timber be cut, but money needs to be given back. I am deeply concerned about the impacts these cuts are going to have on rural counties, and what I heard last week, especially, and this came up at virtually every townhall meeting, is people saying, “What about the fact that the Forest Service and the Department of the Interior cannot agree on the approach they're going to take? That seems odd, even by Washington, D.C. standards.” So we are going to have to inquire into that.

Now, I want to express my appreciation to the Administration for saying that Secure Rural Schools should be in the budget. That is certainly constructive, because we understand that we have to have the budget details in order to have a more thoughtful discussion about it.

Let me talk briefly about wildland fire funding. Last year the country experienced a severe fire season, with devastating impacts of wildland fire affecting numerous communities – this is something Senator Udall of Colorado cares a great deal about. We know, past emergency borrowing from discretionary accounts and Congress's rescissions from firefighting accounts have left the Forest Service once again at risk of running out of firefighting funds in the coming season. We are getting the sense that the coming season could be a record one. When there isn't enough

money to fight fires, every other program in the agency's budget suffers, at a time, as I have indicated, when they are already taking a big hit.

On wildland fire issues as well, I would like to note my ongoing disappointment with the level of funding in the budget for hazardous fuels treatments and alarm at the level of cuts reflected in this budget. The Healthy Forests Restoration Act authorized \$760 million annually for hazardous fuels, and the Administration has not come close to that level in its request, and this budget proposes an extraordinarily large cut, cutting this line item by more than 30%. Year after year, this work has been underfunded. It is absolutely key to work to reduce the severity of fires, and again the budget is moving in the wrong direction. The result will once again be larger wildfires that will undoubtedly cost more to fight fire in the long run. Recent studies have confirmed that hazardous fuels treatments—done in the right places—lead to substantial reductions in both wildfire size and suppression cost. Once again being pennywise and pound foolish takes its toll.

We intend to explore these issues in more depth.

Let me close with just a couple of last points.

Many of us on this committee support full funding for the Collaborative Forest Landscape Restoration Program. I was an original co-sponsor of this program, and it has been tremendously successful in our state and I am glad to see the strong commitment made to restoration among a number of line items in this budget.

I am also pleased to see that this year's budget request includes funding for new air tankers. Sen. Murkowski and I have been very interested in this over the years. Chief, as we have discussed, the fleet of airtankers used for firefighting continues to

approach the end of its lifespan. It is my understanding that the Forest Service expects to make an announcement later this month regarding next-generation airtanker contracts, which I am pleased to hear. However, I continue to remain concerned about whether the agency will have enough planes ready to fight fires this summer.

Finally, I am pleased that the agency has included legislative proposals to support a number of important priorities – including support for permanent reauthorization of the stewardship contracting program.