

**STATEMENT
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**BEFORE THE
COMMITTEE ON ENERGY AND NATURAL RESOURCES
SUBCOMMITTEE ON PUBLIC LANDS AND FORESTS
U. S. SENATE**

**CONCERNING
S. 1344 THE ARIZONA WALLOW FIRE RECOVERY AND MONITORING ACT
AND**

S. 1090 THE TENNESSEE WILDERNESS ACT OF 2011

AUGUST 3, 2011

Chairman Wyden, Ranking Member Barrasso, and members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today to provide the Department of Agriculture's views on S. 1344, the "Arizona Wallow Fire Recovery and Monitoring Act" and S. 1090, the "Tennessee Wilderness Act of 2011."

S. 1344, the Arizona Wallow Fire Recovery and Monitoring Act

The Department supports the objectives and comprehensive response that underlie the legislation and agrees that the response to this fire should be addressed with a sense of urgency. With or without this legislation, the U.S Forest Service is committed to accomplish the restoration objectives in a timely manner. The Wallow Fire burned over a half million acres of National Forest System land, as well as tribal, state and private lands (including lands in New Mexico). In terms of acres of forest burned, the Wallow Fire was the largest fire in Arizona's history. The effects of this wildfire are significant for the communities of eastern Arizona. I want to assure

you that the U.S. Forest Service understands and appreciates the magnitude and scope of the task ahead to restore the landscapes damaged by this fire and we have already started this work.

Background

Igniting on May 29, 2011 in the Apache-Sitgreaves National Forest southwest of Alpine, Arizona, the Wallow Fire was contained on July 8th. Its cause is under investigation. The fire's burned area includes 840 square miles (535,000 acres) and includes 24 square miles (15,000 acres) of western New Mexico. Nearly half of the Wallow Fire's burned area (48%) is classified as low burn severity, 14% moderate severity and 16% high severity. Burned Area Emergency Response (BAER) assessments have been completed with approved funding and prescriptions being implemented. USDA agencies and Arizona State agencies are assisting the Forest Service at public workshops to provide information on programs and assistance to home owners and small businesses affected by fires and/or floods. At the zenith of the Wallow Fire's run more than 4,700 firefighters from the Forest Service and cooperating agencies responded. Moreover, fuels treatments developed with private citizens and state and local governments as part of the White Mountain Stewardship Project and implemented between 2004 and 2011 successfully reduced fire behavior near the Arizona communities of Greer, Eagar, Nutrioso, and Alpine.

Current Planning

The Forest Service is in the process of conducting an evaluation which includes an assessment of restoration needs and salvage as required by the bill. In order to assess the magnitude of the restoration needs resulting from the Wallow Fire, a Rapid Assessment Team was assembled. The Team is currently developing a comprehensive restoration plan for the Wallow Fire area. The plan will identify and organize all restoration needs for the Wallow Fire area, including ongoing Burned Area Emergency Response (BAER) projects, and projects to reduce risks to health and safety in the short term and restore the area over the longer term. The Forest Service will adjust work priorities in order to focus the resources necessary to ensure the recovery of the Wallow Fire area.

Ongoing and Proposed Work

The Forest Service's BAER work is ongoing. We have just completed seeding some 36,000 acres of 80,000 acres projected for seeding, spreading straw on 18,000 acres of 25,000 projected, and are currently removing hazard trees along 245 miles of road from a projected 300 miles of road needing treatment. The roadside hazard tree removal could result in approximately 162,000 tons of material. Approximately 39 miles of power line corridors have been identified for emergency hazard tree removal (BAER work) in conjunction with various power companies. In addition, our post-emergency assessment shows that there is a substantial risk of falling hazard trees along an additional 350 miles of roads and power line corridors. These roads and power line corridors are critically important to the communities of Greer, Alpine, Nutrioso, and Eagar, among others. We estimate that treatments within these corridors could result in the removal of approximately 150,000 tons of material on approximately 10,400 acres. In order to minimize the safety risk and provide employment opportunities, we plan to proceed expeditiously so that some of the wood can be used for higher valued products.

Collaborative Efforts

The White Mountain Stewardship collaborative, a diverse group of local, state, tribal, environmental and other partners, is assisting us in developing our rehabilitation plans. Our plan is to complete the environmental analyses and administrative review for the projects to carry out the plan, and prepare the contracts over the next several months. Roadside corridor work would conclude by the end of 2012. Other projects would conclude as expeditiously as possible. Our plan is to use our current authorities to utilize receipts for future salvage sales that carry out post-fire rehabilitation. We are planning to work with many of the same individuals and groups in monitoring our rehabilitation work.

Provisions of the Bill

Section 4 of S. 1344 would direct the Secretary to prepare a hazard tree and commercial timber evaluation. The evaluation would describe the forest conditions in the Wallow Fire Area and the short- and long-term risks posed by the conditions. The evaluation also would include a map of the areas for potential hazard tree removal, a map of areas for potential fire-damaged commercial tree removal, and a map of areas where harvest should not be considered. In the evaluation, the Secretary would be required to describe one or more proposals for timber removal projects and a

description of the desired outcomes of rehabilitation and tree removal. The Secretary would involve the public in preparing the evaluation and would be required to complete the evaluation within 45 days after initiating it.

Section 5 of S. 1344 also would provide that a timber removal project carried out under the bill would be limited to the removal of hazard trees and the removal of trees that are already down, dead, or severely root-sprung such that there is a high probability of mortality. The bill would require the Secretary to prepare an environmental assessment for a timber removal project carried out under the bill for portions of the Wallow Fire Area that are in a Community Protection Management Area. The Secretary would not be required to consider any alternative to the proposed agency action in the environmental assessment. Any timber removal project carried out in the Wallow Fire Area would be subject to the pre-decisional objection process under section 105 of the Healthy Forests Restoration Act (HFRA). S.1344 also specifies that receipts from timber removal projects be available, without further appropriation for restoration purposes on the Apache-Sitgreaves National Forest in the State of Arizona.

Departmental Perspective on Specific Bill Provisions

While we support the objectives of S. 1344, we note that the Forest Service already has appropriated funds, stewardship contracting authority, and the salvage sale fund to address various forest management scenarios proposed in the bill. In complying with NEPA under current authorities, the Forest Service is utilizing categorical exclusions for tree removal projects in certain high risk areas. We would prefer that any legislation maintain this flexibility. Under current authorities, the Forest Service is required to use a post-decisional appeals process and does not have the option of using the pre-decisional objection process in HFRA except for hazardous fuel reduction projects covered by HFRA. The HFRA pre-decisional review procedures provide the public with an opportunity to raise concerns before a final decision is issued, making the process more collaborative and helpful.

Demonstrated Benefits of White Mountain Stewardship and Anticipated Benefits from the Four Forests Restoration Initiative

As devastating as the Wallow fire was, it could have been significantly worse if it had not been for the thousands of acres that had been treated as part of the White Mountain Stewardship project. The accomplishments of the White Mountain Stewardship project have been significant—50,851 acres treated as of July 23, 2011. The Community Wildfire Protection Plans for the communities of Nutrioso, Eagar, Alpine and Greer provided much of the guidance for the accomplishment of that work. There is no doubt that a significant number of neighborhoods and portions of the forest were spared thanks to this work. The forest fuels thinning and removals in the path of this fire clearly demonstrate what can be accomplished through collaboration and stewardship contracting at the landscape scale. Fire behavior can be modified, communities can be protected, local jobs can be created, and relationships between organizations and individuals can be built. The Four Forests Restoration Project (4FRI) is the next step in expanding this collaborative model. Through the 4FRI is a Collaborative Forest Landscape Restoration (CFLRP) project, the Forest Service aspires to restore approximately 2.4 million acres of ponderosa pine forests on portions of the Apache-Sitgreaves, Coconino, Kaibab, and Tonto National Forests in Northern Arizona over the next 20 years. In the past two years, more than eleven million dollars has been committed to this initiative.

In summary, the Department supports the objectives of this legislation. However, we are already engaged in focusing our workforce and resources to accomplish these objectives in an expeditious manner and we have the appropriate authorities to meet the intent of this legislation.

S. 1090, the Tennessee Wilderness Act of 2011

S. 1090, the “Tennessee Wilderness Act of 2011,” would designate seven parcels totaling 19,586 acres as wilderness in the Cherokee National Forest in east Tennessee. The Department strongly supports this legislation.

S. 1090 would create one new wilderness area and expand the boundaries of five existing wilderness areas:

- 1) The Upper Bald River Wilderness includes 9,038 acres and contains headwaters of streams that drain into the Tellico River.

- 2) The Big Frog Addition to the Big Frog Wilderness includes 348 acres and is a mountain ridge containing the headwaters of Payne Branch, a tributary of Tumbling Creek which is in turn a tributary of the Ocoee River.
- 3) The Little Frog Mountain Additions, NW and NE, to the Little Frog Mountain Wilderness include 996 acres including the headwaters of Deweese Creek and portions of Dry Pond Lead Trail.
- 4) The Sampson Mountain Addition to the Sampson Mountain Wilderness includes 2,922 acres includes a mountain ridge and the Hell Hollow Trail.
- 5) The Big Laurel Branch Addition to the Big Laurel Wilderness includes 4,446 acres and portions of the Appalachian National Scenic Trail.
- 6) Joyce Kilmer – Slickrock Addition to the Joyce Kilmer – Slickrock Wilderness includes 1,836 acres along a mountain ridge and a portion of the Stiffknee trail.

Wilderness management is an important part of the Forest Service mission. There are currently 11 designated wildernesses covering 66,600 acres in the Cherokee National Forest. The areas proposed for wilderness designation in S. 1090 were recommended for wilderness status by the Forest Service in the development of its comprehensive 2004 Land and Resource Management Plan (Forest Plan) for the Cherokee National Forest and have been managed as recommended wilderness since that time.

Public involvement was an integral part of the Forest Plan revision process. Individuals, groups, other agencies and various organizations took advantage of the opportunities to provide input into the overall management of the Forest, including areas proposed for wilderness designation. The final Forest Plan reflects years of collaboration and public participation. Congressional designation of these areas as wilderness would be the culmination of this process.

Thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today and I look forward to answering any questions you may have.