

**TESTIMONY of  
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UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE—NATURAL RESOURCES AND  
ENVIRONMENT  
BEFORE THE  
UNITED STATES SENATE  
COMMITTEE ON ENERGY AND NATURAL RESOURCES**

**March 12, 2024**

**Concerning  
The Wildland Fire Mitigation and Management Commission**

Chairman Manchin, Ranking Member Barrasso, and Members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today to discuss the Wildland Fire Mitigation and Management Commission’s (Commission) recommendations to Congress. We appreciate the Committee’s interest in the Commission’s work and in our efforts at USDA and with partners to reduce wildfire risk and increase resilience. I am testifying today in my capacity as a Co-Chair Designee of the Commission.

The 2021 Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (Bipartisan Infrastructure Law) created the Commission and charged it with developing, within one year of its first meeting, a comprehensive set of recommendations for Congress about how to support our nation as we prepare for, respond to, recover from, and live with wildfire. The Commission was co-chaired by the Department of Agriculture (USDA), the Department of the Interior (DOI) and the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA). I led the Commission as Co-Chair Designee on behalf of Secretary Vilsack, alongside DOI Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary Joan Mooney, and U.S. Fire Administrator Dr. Lori Moore-Morrell.

I’d like to start by thanking Congress for establishing this Commission. It has been an honor to serve alongside my fellow commission members and Co-Chair Designees, each of whom brought unique knowledge, skills, perspectives, and lived experiences to this effort. The 50 Commission members were selected from more than 500 applicants, representing federal agencies, state, local, and Tribal governments, wildland firefighters, public health experts, public utilities, emergency management, the private sector, non-profit organizations, academia, and other areas of expertise. Together, they represent a broad and diverse group of subject matter experts spanning nearly every facet of wildland fire mitigation and management. Commission staff and numerous subject-matter experts were also invaluable to the Commission’s deliberations.

Commission members put in an estimated 9,000 hours of time over one year to meet the deadlines set by Congress, delivering an [Aerial Equipment Strategy Report](#) in January 2023, and a final Wildfire Mitigation and Management Commission Report in September 2023. Working together, the Commission members were able to come to unanimous consensus on the 148 recommendations in the Commission’s final report to Congress. These recommendations are comprehensive and interrelated, reflecting the urgency and scale of the challenge we face as a nation.

For decades, the wildland fire crisis has been growing, with larger and more severe wildfires devastating communities and ecosystems, and threatening lives and livelihoods across the country. Exacerbated by climate change, catastrophic wildfires threaten lives, homes, communities, and infrastructure. Agricultural impacts are increasing. Impacts to human health are also becoming more significant and widespread, as we saw from the smoke that filled our skies last summer. Increasingly intense and destructive wildfires also threaten the environment, impacting water availability and quality, carbon storage, wildlife habitat,

soil stability and watershed function, and creating the conditions for cascading disasters, including post-fire flooding, landslides and debris flows. In some cases, we see long-term deforestation from large, high severity wildfires.

This is an urgent crisis. Our best science indicates that the frequency, size, and severity of wildfires are projected to increase, including in areas that have little to no history of wildfire. This is a challenge that crosses the natural and the built environment, from rural and urban communities to the lands that surround them.

At the same time, fire is also a critical part of the solution to this challenge. The Commission recognized that returning fire to the land, including through prescribed fire and cultural burning, is necessary to restore fire-adapted ecosystems and reduce the risk that high-severity fires pose to communities. In discussing the importance of restoring a different relationship with fire, the Commission recognized the historic role of Indigenous stewardship related to fire and emphasized the continued importance of Indigenous stewardship of fire-adapted landscapes into the future. Indigenous Knowledge and the cultural use of fire are key drivers in natural fire regimes and therefore must be acknowledged and addressed in the development of targets.

The Commission spent a significant amount of time thinking about partnerships and collaboration among federal agencies, States, Tribes, local governments, and many other partners, recognizing that this is a multi-jurisdictional issue. No one entity, including the federal government, can meet this challenge alone: it will require an “all hands, all lands” approach. Across the board, the Commission focused on the need to invest in community and collaborative capacity to work together across jurisdictional boundaries, and to pair investments in the natural environment with investments in communities and in mitigating ignition sources in communities to prevent urban conflagrations.

The Commission also recognized that wildfire risk is not experienced or shared equally: catastrophic wildfires and the cascading disasters that can come from high-severity events, including post-fire floods and landslides, along with public health impacts, disproportionately impact underserved communities. The Commission recommended changes that increase equitable access to resources through improved technical assistance, capacity, and investments. For example, the Commission recommended structural changes to how programs operate, such as waiving match requirements and creating alternatives to the reimbursement funding structure, to help ensure Federal programs reach those who need them most.

Throughout the Commission’s work, members highlighted the essential importance of our workforce. I thank Congress and members of this Committee for the work you have done to date to support wildland firefighter pay and benefits. The Commission made recommendations related to pay, benefits, housing, mental health, and the long-term well-being of our firefighters and the entire workforce engaged in mitigation, response and recovery. Congressional action on the policy proposals in the President’s FY24 and FY25 budget requests would address a number of the Commission’s recommendations, including making pay increases permanent to support our wildland firefighters.

The Commission’s work was informed by and builds on USDA’s [Wildfire Crisis Strategy](#) and existing leadership bodies, such as the Wildland Fire Leadership Council (WFLC), which advances the National Cohesive Wildland Fire Management Strategy for resilient landscapes, fire adapted communities, and safe and effective wildfire response; and the White House Wildfire Resilience Interagency Working Group (Wildfire IWG), which continues to pursue a collaborative all-of-government approach to wildfire risk reduction and resilience.

## Themes and Recommendations

The Commission's charge was to provide recommendations to Congress to improve how our nation prepares for, responds to, and recovers from wildfire. The final recommendations received unanimous support from Commission members and were informed by public input and numerous subject-matter experts.

The Commission identified seven overarching themes that cut across its recommendations:

- *Urgent New Approaches*: Significant and urgent change is needed to address wildfire as a cross-cutting issue, including land management, the built environment, public health, and public safety.
- *Supporting Collaboration*: Better involvement of and support for collaboration and partners at every scale of society is necessary to be successful.
- *Shifting from Reactive to Proactive*: Pre-fire planning and mitigation, in both the built and natural environments, and proactive post fire recovery are as important as suppression and need substantial and sustained investment in funding and people.
- *Enabling Beneficial Fire*: Fire is both the challenge and an essential part of the solution – practitioners need to be able to implement prescribed fire, manage wildfire, and enable cultural burning to restore fire-adapted ecosystems and foster fire-adapted communities, with co-investments in smoke-ready communities to address public health impacts related to smoke.
- *Supporting and Expanding the Workforce*: Wildland firefighters must receive increased pay and health benefits; robust workforce investments are also needed for pre-fire risk mitigation and post-fire recovery; and agencies need new authorities, practices, and resources to support recruitment and retention, as well as housing affordability and availability.
- *Modernizing Tools for Informed Decision-Making*: Agencies need improved coordination and delivery of technology, modeling, research, and data management.
- *Investing in Resilience*: Increases in spending are needed across all aspects of wildfire mitigation and management to reduce costs in the long run.

The themes and recommendations span all phases of the wildfire challenge, from mitigation to response and recovery. The Commission also made recommendations for protecting public health; supporting a comprehensive workforce; integrating science, data, and technology; making sustainable and long-term investments; and improving coordination and collaboration.

The Commission recognized that addressing the wildfire crisis requires an urgent, societal approach, responding to the complexity of the problem with an integrated set of solutions. The Commission intended the recommendations to be seen as holistic and reinforcing of each other. The recommendations in the Commission's final report to Congress are not prioritized for this reason: the Commission urged an "all of the above" approach.

## Topic Highlights

The Commission's report to Congress and its recommendations were informed by ongoing work across the Federal government, along with non-Federal partners. While Congress considers the Commission's recommendations, we are in action on the underlying issues identified as part of the Commission report, within our existing resources and authorities. I would like to highlight some of the areas where we are advancing work in the wildfire space, while laying the groundwork for further action on the Commission's recommendations.

### *Supporting the Wildland Firefighter, Mitigation and Management Workforce (Recommendations 84-103)*

Ensuring that our workforce is paid what they deserve and receive the benefits they need is a top priority for USDA and the Administration. We appreciate Congress's recognition of the importance of investments in people on the front line. The supplemental pay authorized under the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law (BIL) has provided a lifeline for Federal wildland firefighters and is critical for Agency recruitment and retention. USDA, DOI, and OPM worked closely to institute a new firefighter pay series, also as provided for under BIL. The Wildland Firefighter Occupational series aims to clearly define the duties of wildland firefighters and provide them with a path to career advancement. BIL funding has enabled USDA and DOI to develop a Joint Wildland Firefighter Behavioral Health Program, which will increase access to services that build personal resiliency, improve mental preparedness and prevention, recognize the importance of self-care, and provide incident stress and post-traumatic stress support.

However, there is critical work still to be done. Federal wildland firefighters need the certainty that comes with a permanent pay solution, along with other important benefits. The lack of affordable and available housing is urgent and acute. Lack of housing contributes to instances of temporary homelessness for individuals in our workforce and poses a significant barrier to the recruitment, hiring, and retention of personnel. The Commission made a number of specific recommendations for Congressional action to support workforce pay, benefits, housing, mental and physical health, training, work-life balance, and long-term well-being.

Last year, the Administration submitted to Congress proposed legislation to comprehensively improve the pay of Federal wildland firefighters on a permanent basis, which is in line with Commission recommendations. The President's 2025 Budget carries forward this legislative proposal and again proposes significant reforms to increase the Nation's investments in the wildland fire management workforce. The cornerstone of these long-term reforms is a permanent increase in pay. Specifically, the Administration's legislative proposal would:

- Establish a special base rate salary table for wildland firefighters;
- Create a new premium pay category that provides some additional compensation tied to incident response;
- Establish a streamlined pay cap that provides waiver authority to the Secretary using specific criteria; and
- Provide permanent authorization to grant paid rest and recuperation leave to employees returning from certain multi-day incidents related to wildland fires.

We appreciate Congress's action last week to extend the BIL supplemental pay through the end of this Fiscal Year, and ongoing bipartisan work, including by members of this Committee, to address the need for a permanent pay solution, promote affordable housing, and make other investments in the health and well-being of our workforce.

### *Investing in Strategic Fuels Work (Recommendations 17-23)*

The Wildfire Crisis Strategy aims to increase science-based fuels treatments by up to four times the previous treatment levels, especially in those areas most at risk. This strategy is ambitious and calls for treating up to 20 million additional acres of National Forest System lands, and working with partners, including colleagues at Interior, to treat up to 30 million additional acres on adjoining lands of multiple ownerships, while building a long-term maintenance plan. The intent for these treatments is to reduce the

wildfire risk to communities, critical infrastructure, municipal water sources, and natural resources, and to restore and maintain fire-adapted landscapes so they are more resilient in the face of climate change.

The Commission also identified the need to significantly expand fuels treatments. The BIL and the Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) provided an essential downpayment for this work, though additional, sustained investment from Congress will be needed to reach the goals outlined in the Strategy and described in the Commission's report. The critical BIL and IRA funding for fuels treatments allowed the Forest Service to invest in 21 high-priority landscapes across the west. Additional investments using annual appropriations, including [Collaborative Forest Landscape Restoration Program](#) (CFLRP) and [Joint Chiefs' Landscape Restoration Partnership Program](#) projects also allowed us to accomplish work in multiple states. Thanks to these investments, we completed treatments on an agency-record 4.4 million acres nationally in Fiscal Year (FY) 2023, including treating a record number of acres with prescribed fire. This work is beginning to reduce wildfire risk for some 550 communities, 2,500 miles of power lines, and 1,800 watersheds that supply drinking water to millions of Americans.

Secretary Vilsack recently announced \$500 million in additional investments using BIL and IRA funding, including \$400 million going to the 21 high-priority landscapes, and an additional \$100 million to be allocated under a new [Collaborative Wildfire Risk Reduction Program](#). This new program is inspired by the success of CFLRP and will allow us to expand work in high-risk wildfire areas outside the 21 priority landscapes. National forests will work with States, Tribes, underserved communities, and local partners in 24 qualifying states to propose projects under this new program.

Community investments are also an important part of the Wildfire Crisis Strategy. The first round of the new [Community Wildfire Defense Grant](#) (CWDG) program authorized in the BIL, which funds community wildfire planning and key implementation actions on non-Federal lands, had over 400 applicants, demonstrating the significant need and desire for action. USDA's Forest Service selected 100 applicants in the first round of CWDG awards. We expect to release our next round of funding in the next few months.

This work represents significant progress, but the Commission identified a number of recommendations so that we can sustain momentum and do this work at the scale needed. The Commission recommended sustained, long-term investment in fuel treatments, building on the downpayment provided through BIL and IRA. It highlighted opportunities to expand programs like CFLRP and the Joint Chiefs' Restoration Partnership Program. The Commission report identified barriers including internal staffing capacity, lack of markets for small-diameter wood, and high post-fire workloads from previous seasons. The Commission also recommended programs that support wood processing facilities, biomass utilization research and development, expanded targeted grazing, and other important actions that can play an important role in facilitating fuels treatments to reduce wildfire risk on our landscapes.

*Expanding Partnerships (See, for example, Recommendations 1, 12, 24-26, 30, 48-50, 58, 67-68, 103, 117, 126, 139)*

Partnerships are essential for advancing better stewardship of forests and grasslands across all ownerships and improving community resilience. The Forest Service has focused on collaboration and shared stewardship: for example, we have entered into more than 450 good neighbor agreements with Tribes, states, and counties to accomplish restoration work, including to address wildfire risk and resilience. Partnerships with States, Tribes, counties, non-profit organizations, industry, academic institutions, workforce development and conservation corps partners, and others have all been essential to delivering our work on the ground.

Interagency collaboration is also critical, and BIL funding has helped support interagency work. For example, the Forest Service has entered into an agreement with DOI's U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) to facilitate Endangered Species Act (ESA) consultation in wildfire crisis strategy landscapes. Additionally, USDA and DOI are leveraging BIL funds and collaborating through the Wildland Fire Leadership Council (WFLC) and the National Invasive Species Council (NISC), to promote the integration and coordination of wildland fire and invasive species management efforts.

Recognizing the importance of partnerships, collaboration, and working at scale across multiple jurisdictions, the Commission made more than 30 recommendations for systems, processes, funding, and capacity to enable partnerships for pre-fire mitigation, wildfire response, post-fire recovery, community engagement, ecosystem restoration, and more. These recommendations included building on and expanding existing authorities, for example, extending Good Neighbor Authority to additional Federal land management agencies, providing additional investment in the CFLRP, and creating new stand-alone authorities for USDA to enter into co-management agreements with Tribes.

The Commission recommended direct investments in community capacity and resilience, including creating a new Community Wildfire Risk Reduction Program to increase ignition resistance of the built environment. The Commission also recommended that Congress expand the ability for funding to be used across boundaries, for example, to accomplish slope stabilization and post-fire hazard mitigation; and recommended changes to improve response coordination across jurisdictions.

*Expanding Tribal Stewardship (See, for example, Recommendations 16, 28, 29, 30, 48, 49, 96, 115, 119, 127, 128, 140, 141)*

USDA recognizes the importance of our government-to-government relationship with Tribes and is committed to implementing the Forest Service's Tribal Action Plan and the Joint Secretarial Order 3403 on Fulfilling the Trust Responsibility to Indian Tribes in the Stewardship of Federal Lands and Waters, including through recognizing the importance of Indigenous Knowledge and advancing Tribal co-stewardship. Over the last two years, the Forest Service has used existing authorities, including the Tribal Forest Protection Act and the Good Neighbor Authority, to sign 180 co-stewardship agreements with Tribes and to significantly increase investment in those agreements, many of which address key land management issues related to fire.

In addition to work within USDA and the Forest Service, and building on the Commission's work, the WFLC, which USDA and DOI co-chair, has also been working to bring focus to the barriers and opportunities related to Indigenous fire stewardship and cultural burning; WFLC's most recent meeting highlighted this topic.

The Commission recognized that more needs to be done to ensure that the system is fully inclusive of and responsive to Tribal priorities, rights, resources, and needs. There are recommendations specific to Tribes in almost every major section of the report. For example, the Commission recommended expanding authorities for federal agencies to engage in co-management and co-stewardship, Tribes' participation in response systems, and Tribal prescribed and cultural burning programs; providing funding to enable this work; and improving ways for Tribes to share information without compromising confidentiality.

*Expanding Prescribed Fire (Recommendations 10-18, 41-44, 55, 57, 84)*

Prescribed fire has a critical role in mitigating wildfire impacts to both landscapes and communities and restoring fire-adapted ecosystems. In many places, it is the most economical, ecologically appropriate, and effective fuel treatment available. It can be combined with other forms of treatment to moderate

future fire behavior, benefit ecological health and resilience including for water and wildlife, and improve future public health outcomes. It is also an important tool for maintaining treatments over time.

The Forest Service has been working to expand prescribed fire. In June 2023, the Forest Service released the *National Prescribed Fire Resource Mobilization Strategy*, a new path for more efficient deployment of resources to assist with prescribed fires using similar processes to fire suppression. Last month, the Forest Service released the *Strategy to Expand Prescribed Fire Training in the West*, which will help to expand our prescribed fire workforce and ensure burn bosses can use the latest technology such as unmanned aircraft systems. The Forest Service has also acted to implement the recommendations in the National Prescribed Fire Learning Review, to support practitioners' ability to carry out prescribed burns safely and effectively.

This work is already starting to pay off. In Fiscal Year 2023, the agency treated 1.95 million acres with prescribed fire nationally, an all-time record for the Forest Service. Interagency conversations are occurring through WFLC on opportunities for cross-jurisdictional cooperation and resource ordering for prescribed fire. In addition, USDA and DOI recently updated and signed a memorandum of understanding (MOU) with the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and the Department of Health and Human Services' Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) with a shared commitment to enable the expansion of prescribed fire, alongside investments in public health.

Despite the importance of prescribed fire to reduce wildfire risk and restore fire-adapted ecosystems, the Commission identified a number of challenges, from the lack of hazard pay for prescribed fire activities and liability for burn practitioners and landowners, to coordinating resources during narrow burn windows. The Commission detailed numerous recommendations so that the system is supportive of workforce capacity and the health and safety of fire practitioners, neighboring landowners, and communities. The Commission's Aerial Equipment Strategy report also recommended improvements to expand use of Uncrewed Aerial Systems (UAS) along with greater availability of aviation resources for prescribed fire.

#### *Protecting Public Health (Recommendations 34-46)*

There are many public health intersections with the wildfire crisis, from the potential loss of life from catastrophic events to the well-being of our workforce, to impacts on water quality and availability, to the impacts of displacement and trauma after a catastrophic event. Air quality impacts from smoke are growing, as Americans across the country experienced last summer. These impacts disproportionately affect underserved communities.

One area of significant discussion within the Commission was how to align the dual and mutually reinforcing objectives of increasing prescribed fire as an investment in public health, while protecting communities and vulnerable populations from potential smoke impacts. The Commission identified a need for the EPA, USDA, and DOI to work more closely together, and within weeks of the release of the Commission's report, USDA, DOI, EPA, and CDC signed the Air Quality Coordination MOU. This MOU reflects the Commission's recognition of the critical need to address health impacts of smoke and invest in community health needs while enabling expansion of prescribed fire, establishing a joint strategy for achieving alignment.

Building on the work of the Commission's discussion of public health across all phases of the wildfire crisis and related recommendations, WFLC met last week at the CDC headquarters in Atlanta, Georgia, to focus on public health and how we can better connect the public health community and the wildfire community before, during, and after wildfire events.

The Commission’s recommendations would support expanded capacity for this coordinated effort, and related data, research, outreach, and education tools, such as the AirNow map developed through a Forest Service and EPA partnership.

*Wildfire Science, Data, and Technology (Recommendations 104-119)*

The Forest Service is investing in wildfire science, data, and technology, including through a number of interagency pathways. However, the Commission recognized there are significant needs outside the scope of current funding and authorities. The Commission recommended creating a new entity, called the “Fire Environment Center” in the Commission’s Report, to provide real-time, science-based, and data-rich scientific and technical analytic services, decision support, and predictive services to inform land and fuels management, community risk reduction, and fire management and response. With new funding, new authorities, and new governance, the intent for this entity would be to connect, but not centralize, data within the land management, fire management, and community risk reduction spaces. This would allow for data to be more timely, more easily shared, enable better collaboration with the private sector, and improve support for both federal and non-federal decision-makers. Additionally, the Aerial Equipment Strategy report recommends exploring use of technology to increase operational effectiveness. The Commission’s recommendations would enable increased integration across agencies and better translation of science into practice.

While Congress considers these recommendations, agencies are working together through WFLC to host a Meeting Science and Technology Needs for Wildland Fire Risk and Resilience workshop in June 2024, focused on near-term opportunities to close urgent gaps and improve interoperability, build connections to reduce redundancy and leverage resources and expertise across federal and non-federal partners, and jointly define the strategic information, data, and tools needed to accelerate the development of new technologies. To build on these efforts, the Administration’s FY 2025 budget includes a \$5 million request, split evenly between the Forest Service and DOI, to establish a new joint office for wildfire science and technology.

*Post-fire Recovery (Recommendations 60-83)*

As we continue to see larger and more severe wildfires, we are also seeing a commensurate increase in the complexity and scale of post-fire recovery. Severe wildfires can leave behind dangerous conditions resulting in cascading disasters, such as flooding, debris flows and landslides, air and water quality impairment, and impaired conditions that increase the risk of future fires. These significant impacts cross communities, working forests and farms, and ecosystems. The Commission recognized that the watershed emergency, for example, can continue for years after a catastrophic event.

The White House Wildfire Resilience Interagency Working Group (Wildfire IWG), established in 2021 to facilitate an all-of-government response to fire, is working to improve coordination among federal agencies and integrate Federal post-fire programs within the framework of current funding and authorities, with a focus on making it easier for communities to navigate the many agencies and programs involved in post-fire recovery efforts.

While the Wildfire IWG looks to bring needed change and clarify to the Federal system, the Commission has determined that significant changes to authorization and funding are needed to fully enable a system matched to severe impacts we are seeing today. The Commission developed a comprehensive suite of recommendations to address post-fire impacts across agencies and scales and improve accessibility and timely deployment of aid. For example, the Commission recommends authorizing and funding the cross-jurisdictional assessment of burned areas. Current limitations make it difficult or impossible for agency



employees to assess and take actions on risk outside their jurisdiction, which can leave downstream communities, drinking water supplies, and critical infrastructure at risk from post-fire hazards like flooding.

The Commission also recognized the importance of reforestation, building on the investments provided in the BIL. For example, the report recommends establishing the nursery and seed capacity to support revegetation to restore post-fire landscapes. USDA has developed a national reforestation strategy that identifies existing needs and gaps and outlines actions to address the already significant backlog of wildfire driven reforestation needs.

*Equitable Access to Federal Resources (See, for example, Recommendations 53, 54, 79, 85, 142, 143, 144)*

USDA has taken several actions within our authority to ensure our programs are accessible to communities that need them most. In 2022, the Forest Service issued interim policy direction to waive or reduce non-statutory match requirements, including waiving non-statutory match requirements for agreements with Tribes. The Agency is also expanding consideration of all the valuable contributions a partner may bring to a mutual-interest relationship, some of which may have been overlooked or undervalued in the past. The Forest Service also recently launched a Community Navigators program to help remove barriers to Forest Service programs, providing assistance to communities to help identify funding opportunities, develop proposal ideas, provide guidance on completing applications, support financial and reporting compliance, and conduct training to help communities and organizations be better positioned to access federal funding, programs, and other resources in the future.

The Commission recommended expanding actions like these that increase accessibility of Federal programs. For example, the Commission recommended giving the Secretary the authority to waive existing statutory match requirements for post-fire recovery programs, recognizing that funding for recovery should not be limited to communities who have assets on hand to meet match requirements.

*Fire Funding Fix and Investing in Resilience (Recommendations 120-134)*

The Wildfire Suppression Operations Reserve Fund, better known as the “fire funding fix,” was created in 2018 to end the practice of “fire borrowing” by creating a separate fund for emergency transfers to cover wildfire suppression cost overruns during severe fire seasons. This fix, championed by bipartisan Members of Congress, including many members of this Committee, has been vital for stabilizing the Forest Service budget, but it is set to expire in 2027. The Commission recommends making this fix permanent.

More broadly, the Commission stressed the urgency of addressing the growing wildfire crisis through adequate funding and authorities for agencies to continue building on the progress achieved through the historic BIL funding package. The Commission stated that the wildfire crisis needs to be funded, staffed, and acted upon like the national emergency it is, with sustained support from Congress to maintain the investments we’ve made while expanding our efforts before, during and after wildfires to reduce risks to people, communities and natural resources, and restore resilience.

### **Need for Congressional Action**

USDA is committed to working for people and communities and with our partners towards a safer, more sustainable, and resilient future through the funding and authorities we have. With initial investments through BIL and IRA, we have already accomplished historic levels of fuels reduction through our Wildfire Crisis Strategy and provided a necessary boost for our wildland fire workforce. But there is more

work to do. The Commission recognized the need for long-term, sustained and societal investments and new authorities for transformational change, so that together we can realize a future in which we have a different experience of wildfire risk and resilience and can restore fire-adapted ecosystems.

National leaders will be meeting at the National Wildfire Summit on March 13th to discuss how to continue to move this work forward. While the Commission is coming to a close, USDA, our fellow commission members, and the interagency community stand ready to work with Congress on carefully considering all 148 recommendations included in the Commission's final report.

## **Conclusion**

The Wildland Fire Mitigation and Management Commission was created to examine what actions Congress can take to change the trajectory of growing catastrophic wildfire. The Commission answered that charge. The Commission's work represents one of the most comprehensive reviews of America's wildland fire management framework to date.

The Commission's recommendations cover every phase of the challenge, from pre-fire mitigation, to response, to long-term recovery. They address the urgent needs of and for a comprehensive workforce. They address the need to integrate public health and invest in community capacity and preparedness. They recognize the importance of working collaboratively across jurisdictional boundaries and at a landscape scale, including by working with States, counties and local governments and by enabling the expansion of Tribal co-stewardship and co-management. And they cover the systems, structures, relationships, research, tools, and support needed for this work to be effective and maintained. Every recommendation was developed with consensus from members.

We need healthy landscapes; we need healthy and resilient communities that are built with fire in mind; and we need systems for recovery that don't leave anyone behind. While the wildfire challenge can at times seem insurmountable, there is a path forward to a better future where wildfires do not become catastrophes. The Commission designed their reports and recommendations as a map to that more secure future.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today about the Commission's recommendations. We appreciate Congress' support for our wildland fire workforce and programs and look forward to continuing to work with you on a path to resilience. This concludes my statement. I welcome any questions from the Committee.