

## **Opening Statement of Homer L. Wilkes Before the Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry**

**August 5, 2021**

Chairwoman Stabenow, Ranking Member Boozman, and members of the Committee, I want to thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today, and for your consideration of my nomination to be Under Secretary for Natural Resources and Environment at the United States Department of Agriculture. I would like to thank Senator Roger Wicker from the great State of Mississippi for his kind introduction. I want to also thank all those who are responsible for my success in life, especially my family and the many men and women who I have served with during my tenure at USDA.

A special thanks to my wife Kim and our three sons. I thank President Biden for nominating me to serve in this role and Secretary Vilsack for his support. If confirmed, I look forward to working with Secretary Vilsack and Congress to build upon this Administration's commitment to rural America through the conservation of our national forests and grasslands.

I have been a public servant for more than 41 years serving as the State Conservationist for the State of Mississippi, Acting Associate Chief of the Natural Resources Conservation Service, and Director of the Gulf Coast Ecosystem Restoration Division. I understand how important of a role USDA plays in the conservation of America's natural resources. Like our working lands, America's forests both public and private, are vital to the economic prosperity of rural America. Forests provide clean water, wildlife habitats, recreational opportunities, and a host of other benefits.

It is a critical time for the work of the Natural Resources and Environment mission area at USDA. I would like to highlight a few priority areas I intend to focus on if I am fortunate enough to be confirmed. First and foremost, wildfire management and prevention. Second, providing a safe, inclusive work environment for employees. Third, addressing forest sustainability and supporting and creating markets for forest products.

We are facing steep challenges when it comes to wildfire management and prevention. Managing longer fire seasons is increasingly challenging to USDA and the entire wildland fire management community. Many of our forests in the west are overstocked due to decades of excluding all fires. On top of this, record setting temperatures and drought are contributing to intense fire activity already this season. Last month, the National Multi-Agency Coordination Group moved the Forest Service to Preparedness Level 5, the highest level available, because of significant fire activity occurring across multiple geographic areas and other factors. This is the earliest we have reached Level 5 in 10 years.

It is important to protect from the loss of life and property and to ensure the safety and support of the thousands of personnel battling wildfires in multiple regions across the country. We must ensure agencies like the Forest Service fighting fires are well-equipped with the resources needed to ably handle the monumental task we've given them.

In addition, we must make sure to have the resources in place to take necessary steps to prevent wildfires, and then when they happen, we have the capability to properly recover. If confirmed, not only will it be my priority to make sure our men and women on the front lines have what they need, but so will be advocating for increasing the scale of forest restoration and fuels reduction activities on Forest Service lands. This is how we will protect at-risk communities and make them more resilient.

If confirmed, I pledge an unwavering commitment to working with members of the Committee to addressing the challenges in front of us when it comes to combating, preventing, and recovering from wildfires, and making sure our communities are protected.

My second priority is to support a safe, inclusive work environment for all employees. If confirmed, I will be personally responsible for providing leadership to ensure that everyone is treated fairly, that instances of harassment are quickly identified, and accountable actions are taken. If confirmed, my first briefing from NRE staff will be on these issues to assess current state.. Secretary Vilsack has strongly stated his commitment to racial justice and equity and, if confirmed, I too pledge to not tolerate discrimination in any form within the U.S. Forest Service.

Our national forests play a critical role in the economy of local communities by providing opportunities for all types of outdoor recreation, demand for which has skyrocketed in the face of the coronavirus pandemic. And management of lands supports markets for wood products. If confirmed, I will increase sustainable active land management on public and private lands and ensure we working to support the outdoor economy.

The U.S. has a natural resources treasure that is unique, and if I am confirmed, I pledge to see that these forests and grasslands have a sustainable future. If confirmed as Under Secretary, I will continue to emphasize the importance of partnership and collaboration with farmers, ranchers, forest owners, forest industry, and local communities to conserve our working lands and our forests.

I will conclude by once again thanking President Biden and Secretary Vilsack for their confidence in me and thank you Madame Chairman, Senator Boozman, and members of the committee for the opportunity to appear before you today.

I look forward to answering any questions.