



November 5, 2015

Testimony of Trout Unlimited to the Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry
hearing on: Wildfire: Stakeholder Perspectives on Budgetary Impacts and Threats to Natural Resources
on Federal, State and Private Lands

Chairman Roberts, Ranking Member Stabenow, and Committee Members:

My name is Chris Wood. I am the President and CEO of Trout Unlimited. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today on wildfire management on Forest Service lands. The Committee is right to focus on this issue. High levels of wildfire spending, including wholesale borrowing from other National Forest budget items are substantially undermining the ability of the Forest Service to conserve our valuable National Forests.

I offer the following testimony on behalf of Trout Unlimited and its 155,000 members nationwide. TU's mission is to conserve, protect and restore North America's trout and salmon fisheries and the watersheds they depend on. Much of this work occurs on federal lands – including through a very productive partnership with the Forest Service on National Forest lands.

As CEO, I have the great privilege to help guide TU's conservation work on the ground in our outstanding National Forests. But to add to my good fortune, prior to my role with Trout Unlimited, I worked at the Forest Service as an advisor to Chief of the Forest Service, Mike Dombeck for 5 years, and before that I worked for the BLM for 5 years. Service to the public lands is in my blood. I can assure you that love of our public lands is deeply rooted in millions of Americans and especially among TU members. Forest Service managed lands are immensely important to Trout Unlimited members as 50 percent of the nation's blue-ribbon fisheries cross Forest Service lands, and native trout, in many cases, find their last and best remaining habitats on the green lands.

Through the lens of these combined experiences, I have gained a broad perspective on both the benefits and challenges of managing our national forests. The most important point I'll make today: The guiding

A mission to conserve, protect, & restore North America's coldwater fisheries and their watersheds.

National Office: 1777 N Kent St., Suite 100, Arlington, VA 22209
T: (703) 284-9406 F: (703) 284-9400 smoyer@tu.org www.tu.org

principle of the federal government’s action regarding wildfire—and all other management activities—should be to ensure the long-term ecological health of the lands and waters upon which we all depend.

The challenge as defined by Gifford Pinchot is to manage for the “greatest good for the greatest number for the longest time.” Many forget that the Organic Act of the Forest Service made water and watershed protection a primary objective for the Forest Service. The critical role forests play in the carbon cycle and moderating climate change is perhaps the most recent value we must take seriously. The severe drought in California and parts of the West and other extreme weather patterns are reminders that maintaining and protecting forests and their sound management is of the utmost importance to our own health and well-being.

Our national forests remain a valuable source of clean water for communities across the country; these forests provide habitat for fish and wildlife, recreational opportunities for hunters, anglers and outdoor enthusiasts and, when properly managed, a sustainable source of jobs and revenue for local communities.

Fire-Borrowing: The Challenge of Wildfires on the ground and in fire budgeting and forest management policies.

It is important to put the fire borrowing problem in context. From World War II through the 1980’s, the Forest Service put a premium on timber harvest. The all-time high was reached in the late 1980’s with harvests approaching 12 billion board feet per year. Through that same period, wildfires were extinguished as soon as they were discovered. The general rule was all fires should be out by 10am. The combination of past timber management practices and fire suppression have put our forests out-of-whack. Our solutions should seek to bring them back into balance. The guiding principle of my testimony is the need to manage for the long-term health and sustainable productivity of the land.

Wildfire budgeting is based on a 10-year rolling average – relying on costs from the previous 10-year period to predict expenses in the following year. However, this approach to budgeting leaves the agencies underfunded more and more frequently as the severity and extent of these fires increases out-pace from the previous 10-year averages.

Wildfires are becoming increasingly larger and more severe. Contributing factors include changing climate conditions - hotter, drier summers, variations and unpredictability in precipitation, longer more severe droughts; increasing development in fire-prone areas, and a legacy of past timber management and fire suppression policies that, despite good intentions, have left many of our forested acres vulnerable to wildfires.

Changing climate conditions have led to fires seasons that are now nearly 80 days longer on average than in 1970. The six worst fire seasons since 1960 have all occurred since 2000. One to two percent of fires consume 30 percent or more of annual costs.

The rising frequency and magnitude of wildfires has placed growing and unsustainable strain on agencies as they are forced to re-allocate ever-increasing percentages of their budget to fire response. As the cost of fighting fires increase, so does “fire borrowing” –when the Forest Service runs out of money to fight wildfires and must take funds out of other non-fire accounts, such as restoration programs or other operational budget items. Funding for non-fire programs has not kept pace with the increased cost of fighting fire.

Over the last two decades, wildfire management costs (firefighting and other fire-related activities) more than tripled in its portion of the overall Forest Service budget – jumping from only one-sixth in 1995 to more than half in 2015. A recent report (August 2015) from the agency predicts that by 2025, the Service will spend two-thirds of its budget on wildfires. Along with this shift in spending, there has been a corresponding shift in staff – while fire-related staff increased 114 percent between 1998 and 2015, this same period of time saw a 39 percent reduction in all non-fire personnel.

This system of budget raiding to fight fires significantly disrupts the mission of the Forest Service and the very health of the forests under its jurisdiction. Ironically, the more money that is transferred or reallocated to fighting fires, the less money that is available for restoration activities that would help improve forest resiliency and minimizing the severity and impacts of fires.¹

¹ Specific program reductions outlined in USFS August 4, 2015 report – including 95% reduction in Deferred Maintenance; 68% Reduction in Facilities; 46% reduction to Roads; 18% Reduction in Wildlife & Fisheries Habitat Management;

This approach to wildfire funding has real on the ground impacts. The depletion of non-fire programs to pay for the ever-increasing costs of fire has implications not only for the Forest Service's restoration work that would help prevent catastrophic fires, but also for the protection of watersheds and cultural resources, upkeep of programs and infrastructure that support thousands of recreation jobs and billions of dollars of economic growth in rural communities, and support for the range of multiple uses, benefits and ecosystem services, as well as research, technical assistance, and other programs that deliver value to the American public.²

A few examples of how on-the-ground project work has suffered because of fire-transfers:

- In Georgia, a recent road decommissioning project, adjacent to one of north Georgia's mountain trout streams, was put on hold indefinitely due to a shortfall in resources to combat fires in the west.
- In California, long-term restoration activities and projects on forests damaged by fire and third party negligence (including road repair and trail repair, recreation facility repair and watershed and stream restoration and habitat improvements) were deferred or cancelled.
- Nationally, over the last 10 years fire funding as a part of the Forest Service budget has grown, there has been a continuing reduction in technical staff in the agency with positions not being backfilled due to retirement or departure. So much of the regular budget is dedicated to fire related work that funding for road maintenance and fish passage projects have seen a dramatic drop off in recent years. Road and fish passage projects have dropped from approximately 250 a few years ago to 40 nationwide last year, and that number may be reduced by half next year. Watershed restoration projects were reduced by 35% last year alone.
- In Michigan National Forests: Inventory and monitoring of plants and wildlife to facilitate management of threatened, endangered, and sensitive species was deferred or canceled. Landscape classification surveys to coordinate and integrate resource inventories for land and resource production capability and response to management actions was canceled or deferred. Numerous partnerships and agreements were impacted, resulting in delayed erosion control work, delayed NEPA inventories, delayed or canceled wetlands restoration, road decommissioning, and wildlife habitat maintenance.

These are just a handful of examples of how fire-borrowing significantly disrupts the Forest Services' stewardship mission. This approach creates uncertainty for partners and planners, delays vital project

² USDA, The Rising Cost of Wildfire Operations: Effects on the Forest Service's Non-Fire Work, August 4, 2015, p.3.

work, and can even ultimately increase the risk and severity of catastrophic fires. This approach is not sustainable.

Recommendations

As discussed above, there are two primary policy-level problems that are contributing to the worsening fire borrowing crisis. 1) Budgeting issues related to mid-season, unplanned fire-borrowing; and 2) Investments and prioritization of on the ground Forest Management actions. These two problems are very much connected and solutions are needed for both.

New Budget Model is Needed to Eliminate Impacts from Fire-Borrowing

Congress must solve the problem of funding fire response without starving other agency land management priorities and programs. We applaud inclusion of \$700 million in emergency funding as part of the Continuing Resolution (HJ Res. 61) to repay the Forest Service programs that were forced to transfer funds to pay for the FY 2015 fire season. However, the Emergency Supplemental Appropriation is a one-year fix. What is needed is a consistent budget planning process that is designed to support the necessary activities, without the annual uncertainty of reallocation and reprioritizations of funds to wildfire response.

We need to put the money back into the Forest Service budget, so that the agency can get to work on the projects needed to help ensure healthy, resilient forests in the years to come. A solution to fire funding would:

- allow access to disaster funding;
- eliminate the negative impacts of funding transfers; and
- address the increasing costs of suppression over time.

The Wildfire Disaster Funding Act (WDFFA) S. 235 is the right solution to solve this problem.

Forest Management - Investments in Forest Service Stewardship Programs and Partnerships

In addition to solving the fire-funding problem, we must accelerate the pace of restoration to ensure that our forests are managed to improve fish and wildlife habitat, promote resiliency, and to support the many values and uses of our national forest system.

The recent Farm Bill created opportunities for this restoration, including a small exemption from NEPA analysis for certain projects, permanent stewardship contracting authority, and the expansion of good neighbor authority. Policies such as broad NEPA exemptions are difficult for us to support because the public process is vital to support sound public land decisions.

We can accelerate the pace of restoration without sacrificing environmental protections. The Forest Service has taken significant strides in recent years to promote restoration projects effectively and efficiently despite increasingly constrained budgets. For example, the Forest Service recently established new categorical exclusions to expedite the NEPA process for restoration work, demonstrating that we can move these projects forward without eliminating environmental laws or public participation.

We support the use of timber harvest to accelerate restoration goals, but such actions need to involve the public, be targeted, provide a net benefit to fish and wildlife habitat, and be done in collaboration with communities of place and interest. Collaboration and collaborative stewardship work. The Forest Jobs and Recreation Act introduced by Senator Tester is a good example of bringing conservation interests and timber interests together to protect wilderness quality lands; promote hazardous fuels treatments; and ensure more stability in timber management from certain forests in Montana. The Siuslaw National Forest in Oregon has a ten year record of restoration that provides jobs, salmon recovery, owl benefits, and significant economic opportunity.

Real restoration, however, will focus on larger topics than just thinning. Cutting trees alone will not restore our forests. Restoration must be approached by looking at how best to recover ecological processes that keep the land healthy. Closing or relocating roads; fixing culverts; removing unneeded small dams and fixing obsolete water diversions; ensuring adequate flows of water; and thinning are all part of an integrated forest restoration strategy. The temptation we should resist is to try and cut our way to healthy forests.

Fundamental to forest restoration is the fact that many forests are fire-adapted, and in fact *need fire* to remain healthy. Our general approach should be to allow fires to burn in remote areas so long as they do not pose risks to communities. The overwhelming majority of hazardous fuels reduction and fire suppression should be focused on urban-wildland interface areas, including educating landowners about steps they can take to make their homes fire-safe. Homeowners and local governments must bear more responsibility for the proliferation of homes in fire prone areas and help work to reduce the risk to homes and fire fighters. Such an approach would help to restore natural fire cycles in at least part of the forest, save tens of millions of dollars, and minimize risks to fire-fighter safety.

This is not to say that a let-it-burn strategy should prevail. The challenge is to put fire back on the land in a way that minimizes risks to people and communities while mimicking natural fire regimes to the extent practical.

Conclusion

Thank you again for this opportunity to provide testimony on this important issue. We appreciate the interest taken by the committee in exploring the causes and potential solutions to alleviate the frequency and severity of wildfires through improved forest management and to improve the approach to funding and planning for responsible actions when fires occur. We support S. 235, the Wildfire Disaster Funding Act of 2015 as a critical and necessary improvement to the existing fire budgeting process and urge the committee to advance this bill.