

Chairman Mike Simpson
US Forest Service FY12 Budget Hearing
March 11, 2011
Opening Statement

Today we meet to discuss the President's FY12 Budget for the Forest Service.

I'd like to start out by saying that we are very happy to have the Chief here today and we're thankful you are healthy and clearly on the mend.

First, I'd like to highlight a positive story in Idaho. On the Salmon Challis National Forest, the Salmon Valley Collaborative has made some great progress putting together projects to protect communities, improve forest health, and reduce the threat of catastrophic wildfire. The Forest Service has been working with the BLM, Fish and Wildlife Service, state agencies, the community, industry, environmental groups, and numerous others to solve problems. To me, this is exactly what the Forest Service should be doing. Chief, I applaud these efforts and hope to work with you to expand and build upon these success stories.

This is one of many positive examples of things the Forest Service is doing in my state and across the country. I am concerned, however, that the Forest Service's FY12 budget reflects a major shift in priorities by putting land acquisition before fulfilling the Agency's mission of managing forest health. I support the President's America's Great Outdoors initiative and recognize the value of providing opportunities for people to connect with our forests, National Parks, and amazing natural resources. But it doesn't make sense to me that we would use this initiative to dramatically increase land acquisition instead of focusing our limited resources on desperately needed efforts to improve forest health and address the maintenance backlog, grazing permit backlog and numerous other problems across the country.

At a time when our forests are significantly overstocked and unhealthy, the Forest Service proposes reducing spending on hazardous fuels, forest health, grazing, and fire

suppression. Many of these programs support private jobs in rural communities—from ranching and forestry to recreation and wilderness management. These important programs, so valuable to rural communities, should be the priority.

The budget also proposes taking \$328 million out of discretionary funds for the Secure Rural Schools Act, which up until this proposal, has been a mandatory program. This program is critical for many rural counties in the west, and I appreciate your recognition of that. I am concerned, however, that this proposal moves this program from mandatory to discretionary spending, essentially taking funding away from fire and hazardous fuels to make counties whole. I would like to work with the Administration on a better solution that doesn't sacrifice firefighting for the counties.

I have a couple other concerns about this budget. The combination of line items under the National Forest System, known as the Integrated Resources Restoration budget line item is also concerning to us—mostly because the Forest Service has difficulties explaining how FY10 and FY11 funding and line items would be changed as a result. The Forest Service will need to demonstrate accountability and robust performance measures before the Subcommittee can support this proposal. We are the stewards of taxpayer dollars and need to accurately report for them.

As you know, Travel Management Plans were defunded in HR 1—mostly because members of Congress are hearing complaints from their constituents. I don't think defunding travel managements plans is the solution, but I do know this issue will continue to come up again—very likely on the House Floor. I know there are Forests that have done a good job handling travel management plans, including some forests in my district, but others have ignored the public and concern from local officials. That's not right and, in my opinion, where the Forest Service hasn't adequately addressed the concerns of the community, they should re-do these plans. Chief, again, I'd like to work with you on solutions to this problem.

In closing, I'd like to commend the Forest Service employees in Idaho. They do a great job in an environment that is making it increasingly difficult for them to do so. I reiterate my concern about the report that came out a few years ago ranking Forest Service employees as some of the most dissatisfied employees in the federal government, and I hope that you are taking steps to address these issues. If anyone should love their job, it's a Forest Service employee. I look forward to working with you on many of these issues and thank you and your staff for their hard work and assistance.