

Chairman Mike Simpson
US Forest Service FY14 Budget Hearing
April 26, 2013
Opening Statement

The Committee will come to order.

Good morning, Chief Tidwell and Ms. Spear, members of the Subcommittee, and those of you in attendance. I'd like to start by again pointing out the beautiful pictures behind me of the Sawtooth National Forest and the Sawtooth National Recreation Area in my district. These were taken by my good friend and Forest Service employee, Ed Canady. This past August I had the pleasure of camping with the Chief in the Frank Church-River of No Return Wilderness. While we were there, a fire ban was imposed and I must let everyone in the audience know that even the Chief complied with the camp fire ban! Unfortunately that meant the mosquitoes had a good meal and we all went to bed a lot earlier.

Chief, I normally try to start with something positive, but the FY14 President's Budget for the Forest Service makes that very difficult. I will say that the new Restoration Partnership program appears to be a positive step towards the Forest Service working closely

with municipalities and utilities to protect vital water infrastructure and utility corridors from catastrophic fire. I do believe this program should require a cost-share and would like to work with you on this.

Regarding the rest of the budget, one thing is clear: as the cost of fire continues to grow, it consumes funding available to manage the National Forests. Every time I'm in Idaho I hear from Forest Supervisors, District Rangers and other Forest Service employees that they cannot manage their forests with the shrinking amount of funding they receive. Their concerns are echoed throughout the West. The bipartisan Western Governors Association have written Secretary Vilsack pointing out that in the mid-1980's roughly 70 percent of Forest Service funding was dedicated to managing the national forests. In 2010 that number was a pathetic 30 percent. Fire is devouring the Forest Service's budget.

Those of us on this subcommittee recognize the challenges you face-- as you know, the House of Representatives included an additional \$513 million in the second FY13 continuing resolution to help pay for wildfire costs and reimburse the Forest Service for

fire borrowing in FY12. Unfortunately, our friends in the Senate stripped out this funding, leaving you with a hole to fill in FY14.

The Senate's decision not to fund fire in the CR did not do you any favors, but this budget proposal doesn't seem to help you either. I realize some of the budget decisions weren't yours and are probably directed by OMB. I'm guessing that is what explains these puzzling cuts. Generally, we know that projects reducing the threats of catastrophic fire also create jobs, generate revenue for the Treasury and reduce future fire suppression expenditures. So I am extremely disheartened by the dramatic cuts in hazardous fuels funding and the targets associated with timber and hazardous fuels. And I'm utterly baffled that while the Administration is cutting almost every item under the national forest system, they have somehow found funding to increase research and land acquisition.

These cuts have real consequences, and they will be felt acutely in communities that depend on public lands for their economic vitality and way of life. In many counties in my district and across the country, public lands make up the vast majority of the land base and is one of the only sources of income for residents. The budget justification makes a point of noting the economic value of

the forests with a pie graph depicting the contribution of the Forest Service by program to jobs and gross domestic product. But then that same budget proposes to cut nearly all of those programs, including recreation, livestock grazing, minerals and energy, and forest products. Essentially the Administration is cutting the programs that have the most positive impact on the economy.

I understand that in this challenging budgetary environment difficult choices must be made and that we must cut spending—and over the past two years this subcommittee has done that. But this budget, which sacrifices forest management for fire, research, and land acquisition, tells me the operation of the national forests is no longer a priority for the Forest Service. I have to disagree. To me, the management of national forests should be the top priority of the Forest Service.

I want to raise a couple of other issues regarding this budget. Let me start with IRR. Two years ago we authorized a pilot for the Integrated Resource Restoration line item. The full-blown proposal is again in the budget. I have to be honest, although I support the theory, I have so far not been impressed by either the results of the IRR program or the difficulty our staff has had in

getting timely and thorough reports on it from the agency. Unfortunately, IRR now appears to be a gimmick to hide additional cuts in the national forest system and hazardous fuels.

Next let's talk briefly about grazing management. For the past two years, we've worked very hard to increase funding for grazing management for both the Forest Service and the Department of the Interior to eliminate a long-standing backlog that is getting in the way of effective land management. I'm dismayed that after all of that work, the budget proposes to reduce funding for grazing by a whopping 36%—and the Forest Service only plans to complete the NEPA on 50 grazing allotments for FY14. How will the Forest Service catch up on permit backlogs, complete required NEPA work, respond to appeals and litigation, and do other much-needed work? How will Forest Service grazing staff complete work needed on sage grouse conservation as we approach a listing decision in FY15?

Also concerning is the decrease for minerals and geology. The dollars appropriated to this line item have the biggest financial return to the taxpayer of any in the Forest Service's budget. In 2011 and 2012, the receipts to the Treasury for this program were \$647 million and \$629 million respectively. These receipts offset

the national debt—yet the budget proposes cutting the program, which will likely reduce revenue to the Treasury in the future.

Finally, Chief, we continue to be very concerned about the future of the heavy airtanker fleet. I know you need to replace the current aging air-tankers now. We expect you to keep us updated and work with us on potential solutions to ensure we have sufficient and safe firefighting aircraft.

This Committee had to make very difficult choices last year, and this year will be even more challenging. We do our best to be thoughtful with the funding allocation we have, but we must focus on the highest priorities. Chief, I ask you and all Forest Service employees to work with me on ways to do more with less.

Again, thanks for being here today.

With that, I'm happy to yield to the gentleman from Virginia, Mr. Moran for any opening remarks he may have.

(Mr. Moran remarks)

Chief Tidwell, we look forward to your testimony. You may proceed.