

**LEGISLATIVE HEARING TO REVIEW S. 1462,
FIX OUR FORESTS ACT**

HEARING
BEFORE THE
**COMMITTEE ON AGRICULTURE,
NUTRITION, AND FORESTRY**
UNITED STATES SENATE
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FIRST SESSION

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LEGISLATIVE HEARING TO REVIEW S. 1462, FIX OUR FORESTS ACT

TUESDAY, MAY 6, 2025

U.S. SENATE
COMMITTEE ON AGRICULTURE, NUTRITION, AND FORESTRY
Washington, DC.

The Committee met, pursuant to notice, at 3:02 p.m., in Room 328A, Russell Senate Office Building, Hon. John Boozman, Chairman of the Committee, presiding.

Present: Senators Boozman [presiding], McConnell, Hoeven, Marshall, Justice, Klobuchar, Bennet, Smith, Welch, and Schiff.

STATEMENT OF HON. KLOBUCHAR, U.S. SENATOR FROM THE STATE OF MINNESOTA, U.S. COMMITTEE ON AGRICULTURE, NUTRITION, AND FORESTRY

Senator KLOBUCHAR. [Presiding.] I am going to call the hearing to order, and Senator Boozman is on his way. He was just voting.

I want to thank our witness, Mr. French, for being here. I know we will be introducing you shortly as Acting Associate Chief French. That is a long title. Thank you. Thirty-four years of service at the Department of Agriculture, thank you for appearing before our Committee.

The Fix Our Forests Act that we are going to be considering here today is the first major standalone forestry bill Congress has debated in more than two decades, and that is why we look forward to hearing your testimony. We also appreciate the bipartisan work of Senators Hickenlooper, Padilla, Curtis, and Sheehy to introduce a Senate version of the bill.

As everyone knows, in the country earlier this year, wildfires raged across Los Angeles, killing dozens of people, devastating homes and businesses. This spring, wildfires threatened homes and communities in the Carolinas and Georgia. Rising temperatures, drier summers, longer wildfire seasons, and earlier snowmelt are driving these fires as forests depart from their historical conditions. There are growing threats across the Nation.

We have seen threats to forests in other ways, and in the last farm bill, I supported improvements to the Good Neighbor Authority, a bipartisan effort, and the execution of vegetation management projects to reduce wildfire risk. Now the size and scope of these fires and the level of need for forest restoration make it clear that we must do more to improve current tools, like the Good Neighbor Authority, and we must invest more in wildfire prevention.

In recent years, I have supported additional permitting flexibilities and investments in wildfire risk prevention. As a result of these laws, a record-breaking 4.28 million acres were treated for wildfire last year alone. Unfortunately, we are seeing from this Administration cuts to the Forest Service. The recently released budget proposes deep reductions in National Forest system funding, popular programs that strengthen state and private capacity for managing forests, and forestry research.

Eliminating the successful bipartisan collaborative Forest Landscape Restoration Program is something that the Fix Our Forests Act seeks to improve, and the budget sadly recommends moving wildfire operations out of the USDA's Forest Service. These are concerning proposals that have an impact on lives and livelihoods.

Equally concerning, the Forest Service has reportedly lost more than 4,000 employees since January, and while many wildland firefighters have been exempted from workforce reduction initiatives, I am concerned that many Forest Service employees with so-called red cards have departed the agencies. These employees are crucial.

Funding is another important consideration as the Committee discusses this important bill, the Fix Our Forests Act. In its latest update on the Wildfire Crisis Strategy's implementation, the Forest Service reported that in some areas there is more work to do than workforce capacity. Regardless of what the USDA calls its wildfire strategy, what remains the same is the need for tree thinning and prescribed fire to occur on some acres.

The new wildfire intelligence center, fireshed assessments, increasing the pace and scale of forest restoration work, and reforestation, all of these new authorities demand resources. We can all agree that more active forest management is needed, but we must make sure we have the resources to do it and we keep the employees to do it.

I just want to thank you, Mr. French, for being here. Again, we are really pleased that there has been such good work done on a bipartisan basis, and I am sure some of our colleagues will be here soon.

Now I am going to introduce you, Mr. French, or should we wait?

Okay. Mr. French serves as the Acting Associate Chief for the U.S. Forest Service at USDA. Prior to this assignment, he served as the Deputy Chief of the National Forest System, where he was responsible for policy oversight and direction for natural resource management and public service delivery programs across the 193 million acres of national forests and grasslands in the National Forest System. He has spent a 34-year career, as I mentioned, at USDA, working in a number of positions within the Forest Service, and his testimony today will be invaluable.

Again, thank you for being here this afternoon, Mr. French, and you are recognized for your statement. Then I know we will look forward to hearing from Chairman Boozman. Thank you, Mr. French.

**STATEMENT OF CHRIS FRENCH, ACTING ASSOCIATE CHIEF,
U.S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE FOREST SERVICE,
USDA FOREST SERVICE, WASHINGTON, D.C.**

Mr. FRENCH. Thank you, Ranking Member Klobuchar and Members of the Committee. My name is Chris French, and I am the Associate Chief of the Forest Service, and I appreciate the opportunity to provide the perspective of the USDA Forest Service on the Senate draft of the Fix Our Forests Act.

Our national forests are facing great challenges: uncharacteristically severe wildfires, insect and disease outbreaks, invasive species, and many other stressors. Although the Forest Service has been working diligently with resources and authorities it has been given, there is still much to be done to improve the health and productivity of our Nation's forests.

President Trump's Executive Order 14225 and Secretary Rollins' Secretarial Memo 1078-006 help the agency take immediate action to mitigate risk, protect public health and safety and critical infrastructure, support local and rural economies, and mitigate threats to natural resources on the National Forest System lands.

The Senate draft of Fix Our Forests Act works to address these issues, as well as a variety of other new programs and amendments to existing authorities. The bill compiles several separate bills related to wildfire breaks, forest health, forest management, and other provisions. USDA supports the bill and would like to continue to work with the Subcommittee on technical changes. I will highlight a few areas.

USDA strongly supports streamlining NEPA procedures under the National Environmental Policy Act and expanding existing categorical exclusions to reduce wildfire risk and improve forest health. In order to expedite the implementation of the categorical exclusion for high-priority hazard trees proposed in Section 213, we would encourage the Committee to establish the categorical exclusion statutorily rather than directing the Secretary to do so within a year.

USDA also supports the proposed fix to the problematic Cottonwood decision and would like to work with the Committee and our federal partners on technical changes to address the issue once and for all.

USDA supports provisions of the collaborative tools in Title I(b). We support the changes to Good Neighbor Authority and would support adding a provision that would allow retained timber receipts to be used for the construction of roads, as we saw in the House draft.

In addition, we support extending the maximum length of stewardship and result contracting projects from 10 to 20 years, as we see in Section 112.

Further, we support raising the threshold at which timber sales must be advertised and would encourage the Committee to add a provision to make annual increases to the threshold to account for inflation.

USDA sees prescribed fire as a critically important tool to support wildfire risk reduction and forest management. We support the subtitle on prescribed fire as it would support our work to reduce the risk that wildfires pose to our communities and resources.

Specifically, this subtitle would strengthen our fire workforce by streamlining certification requirements and increasing their interoperability with our non-federal partners, as well as offering our prescribed fire managers more liability protections. We will be able to strengthen our partnerships with a variety of entities through the new cooperative agreements and contracts authorized by this section.

We would like to work with the Committee to clarify a few sections, including on the use of pile burning and the nexus to prescribe fire has with regulatory compliance.

Last, though USDA is largely supportive of our Fix Our Forests Act, USDA does not support the incorporation of containerized systems into our suppression response under Section 306 given firefighter safety and other operational concerns.

Chairman BOOZMAN, Ranking Member KLOBUCHAR, Members of this Committee, thank you for the opportunity to present USDA's views on this proposed legislation, and I look forward to answering your questions.

[The prepared statement of Mr. French can be found on page 26 in the appendix.]

Chairman BOOZMAN. [Presiding.] Thank you, Mr. French. Thank you, Senator KLOBUCHAR, for getting us off to a good start.

STATEMENT OF HON. BOOZMAN, U.S. SENATOR FROM THE STATE OF ARKANSAS, CHAIRMAN, U.S. COMMITTEE ON AGRICULTURE, NUTRITION, AND FORESTRY

Chairman BOOZMAN. We are here to review S. 1462, the Fix Our Forests Act, commonly referred to as FOFA. I welcome our witness, Mr. Chris French, Acting Associate Chief for the U.S. Forest Service, for being here today. I know you are a busy guy, but we appreciate you coming and sharing your insight.

Members and staff on both sides of the aisle and both chambers of Congress have invested significant time and efforts to bring this legislation in front of our Committee today. I want to thank my colleagues, Senator CURTIS, HICKENLOOPER, PADILLA, and SHEEHY for their tireless efforts in developing and introducing this bipartisan Senate bill.

I also want to thank Senator MARSHALL and Senator BENNET for your work as Chair and Ranking Member at the Subcommittee regarding the hearing you convened in March on H.R. 471, the House-Passed Fix Our Forests bill.

Finally, I want to thank my friend and fellow Arkansan House Natural Resources Committee Chairman BRUCE WESTERMAN, who, along with Congressman SCOTT PETERS of California, led an exhaustive bipartisan effort to construct and pass H.R. 471 on the House floor with 279 votes in January of this year.

As we all know, wildfires are indifferent to federal, state, tribal, and private property lines or political subdivisions. The Fix Our Forests Act provides us with a unique bipartisan opportunity to modernize and right-size some of the tools and processes our federal land management agencies, states, counties, tribes, rural and urban communities, and private partners across the country need to mitigate the frequency and intensity of catastrophic wildfire

while helping to keep our forests healthy and working for generations to come.

Similar to the House-Passed legislation, S. 1462 identifies and prioritizes the most fire-prone landscapes and provides federal land-grant management agencies with improved authorities and technologies to mitigate those risks as exponentially as possible. It enhances the Federal Government's public-private partnership authorities to increase the pace and scale of the work needed on the ground.

S. 1462 rectifies certain processes to mitigate frivolous litigation and remove duplicative review processes to facilitate the Forest Service's ability to proceed with its statutorily required environmental review process for projects on the National Forest System lands.

This legislation also elevates the critical need to incentivize innovation and resilience in our Nation's forests by prioritizing initiatives such as biochar, nursery capacity, and white oak restoration.

This legislation reflects the bipartisan efforts and ideas to mitigate the frequency and intensity of catastrophic wildfire, and I am pleased Members of the Committee will have this opportunity to further explore FOFA and hear from the Forest Service on how the legislation will reduce catastrophic wildfires and improve forest health.

I am grateful for the work our colleagues have done on both sides of the Capitol and the aisle that brings us to this point. I look forward to working with my colleagues through the Committee process before the end of this work period to deliver these essential improvements and modernized tools to our federal land management agencies.

With that, we will start with our questions, if I can find them. Okay. I need all the help I can get here.

Mr. French, can you please help the Committee gain a full understanding of the agency's use of categorical exclusions and what actions must still be taken in order to use them, regardless of size?

How will the categorical exclusions in S. 1462 help advance the pace and the scale of forest management, and should Congress consider additional or even increasing categorical exclusions?

Mr. FRENCH. Sure. Okay, thank you, Senator. A categorical exclusion is one of the ways that you comply with the National Environmental Policy Act. It does not exempt you from the National Environmental Policy Act. It is an approach for documenting and being transparent to the public about what the effects are of the project you are going to do. It is for projects that we have found to be, or Congress has found to be, routinely non significant. For a project that may be considered significant under NEPA, we may look at an environmental assessment, or we may look at an environmental impact statement.

A CE is a project that has been found to be non significant, and we are disclosing the effects of that project to the public through the categorical exclusion process. You have to comply with the National Historic Preservation Act, the Clean Water Act, the Clean Air Act, and the Endangered Species Act, and you have to be regulated and go through the processes with those agencies on any of those projects.

Chairman BOOZMAN. Very good. Mr. French, can you explain how frivolous litigation has slowed down the Forest Service's ability to conduct proper forest management to reduce fuels and how this legislation would help alleviate these delays?

Mr. FRENCH. Litigation, especially in certain parts of the country, add a lot of additional process and analysis to the projects that we do. I will give you a few examples of this. The most litigated areas that we have in the National Forest System are up in Montana, Idaho, Region One, California, Oregon, Washington. In these areas, what we generally find is that the level of analysis and disclosure we do through NEPA is considerably longer and more extensive than we do in other places because we are defending ourselves from litigation that we often will get on vegetation management fuels reduction projects.

This will add about \$100,000 to \$125,000 onto the cost of every project. It generally doubles the cost it takes us to deliver, let's say, a board foot from an area that is not litigated than it does to an area that does. It adds considerable burden in terms of timeframe. For a community that is looking for us to perform a hazardous fuels reduction project in and around their community, we may propose it and be ready to implement it within about a year and a half, but if it goes under litigation, we may not actually be able to implement it for three to four years or longer.

Chairman BOOZMAN. Very good. Mr. French, can you help the Committee understand why, despite limited emergency authorities provided in prior legislation, enactment of FOFA and greater certainty at the agency is necessary?

Mr. FRENCH. Well, I think FOFA does a few things for us. One, it recognizes the size of the problem that we have across the National Forest System in terms of fire and forest health and appropriately sizes the projects and authorities we have to the problem at hand. We are having fires that are impacting sometimes a million acres. We have fires that are 100,000 acres that are no longer considered exceptional.

The work that we have to do both to prevent those and to respond after is no longer something that is 250 acres or even 3,000 acres but is much grander and much larger than that if we are going to be effective. FOFA recognizes that and puts together the set of tools for both us to plan where we need to do our work and how to do it more quickly, and it puts it in statute so it is not as susceptible to litigation.

Chairman BOOZMAN. Very good. Senator Klobuchar.

Senator KLOBUCHAR. Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Mr. French, the Fix Our Forests Act improves the Good Neighbor and stewardship contracting authorities that leverage state, tribal, county, and industry partners to achieve more forest restoration. I have long helped champion improvements to these tools, which are a priority for my state and Senator Smith's state, same state, where active forest management is needed to enhance the health of Minnesota. Yes, I did not mean Wisconsin. They often confuse Senator Baldwin and Senator Smith, whole other story—to enhance the health of Minnesota's forests.

Mr. French, how will changes to Good Neighbor Authority and stewardship contracting provide more long-term certainty to the

Forest Service partners and assist forest restoration efforts? Understanding that you may want some changes to the bill, there may be other changes proposed here, but talk about that issue.

Mr. FRENCH. Yes, I mean, forest management across this country is a very collaborative effort between local, state, and federal agencies, and especially for us. We found the Good Neighbor tool to be exceptionally helpful, working with state agencies to implement forest management work on National Forest System lands. It allows us to essentially do a lot more and more efficiently and effectively given the staffing that we have.

The changes that are being proposed here recognizes the costs that go with the state so they can use the receipts to actually fund the program they are doing to help manage federal lands, and that is appropriate and helpful. Otherwise, they are just getting limited resources.

Senator KLOBUCHAR. Okay. As I noted, the President's budget—and I do not expect you to be the commentator on that—proposes cuts to National Forest System management, staffing, and facilities, state, private, tribal forestry assistance, forestry research. This includes eliminating a program that has reduced wildfire risk across five million acres.

Then part of the budget notes that there will be a shift to the state. Has the USDA evaluated if states have the capacity and resources to assume a greater role in forest management?

Mr. FRENCH. We are in constant discussions and collaboration with state foresters across this country. In fact, we just sat down last week and talked through them about better ways for us to work together to share capacity. It is mixed. From state to state, they have different capacity. I think some of the changes that are associated with FOFA actually gives them the tools they need to bring that up.

For us, we found the work that we do with counties, tribes, and states through Good Neighbor to be exceptionally helpful, especially when we may have limited capacity on our own.

Senator KLOBUCHAR. Last month, Senator Heinrich and I sent a letter to the USDA expressing concerns and raising questions about potential workforce reductions at the Forest Service. We recently received a response, but I am looking forward to more information on workforce reduction efforts and the funding and hiring freezes at the Forest Service. I think we all know these workers are critical.

Mr. French, how are you planning around the potential staffing cuts to ensure all these major responses continue to be met? Are you concerned about losing employees who hold so-called red cards that allow them to respond to fires?

Mr. FRENCH. Yes, thank you for the question. Our highest priority right now—and we just sat down with our leadership team and assessed the changes that have happened in our workforce and the changes that we have seen or the losses we have had for people that were red-carded to help with fire. Fire is incredibly integrated across the Forest Service. It is not just primary firefighters, but it is thousands of employees across the Forest Service that contribute and help, especially during that season.

We have assessed what that looks like. We have prioritized response to wildfire across the agency to be the number one priority for all employees so that as we are going into this season, we are able to activate, whether that is in support of a camp and the logistics associated with a fire, or delivering the preparedness we need to do on the line. We are working closely with interagency partners. We are actually providing for how we would fill in spaces that we need, but it is going to take an all-hands approach until we rebuild some of those skillsets.

Senator KLOBUCHAR. How would additional resources for programs like Watershed Condition Framework or Water Source Protection Program help the Forest Service meet the goals that it has, especially with changes under the Fix Our Forests Act?

Mr. FRENCH. I mean, I think everyone knows that the Forest Service was founded primarily around the ability to deliver clean water to America and a sustainable flow of timber. The focus that we have on delivering healthy watersheds, funding that goes there helps us expand and maintain that. We know that right now when we have a wildfire that is, like I said, of hundreds of thousands of acres or a million acres, the consequences of sediment flow, the consequences of water delivery to systems downstream are so consequential—

Senator KLOBUCHAR. Okay.

Mr. FRENCH [continuing]. so anything we can do to fix that is helpful.

Senator KLOBUCHAR. All right. Just very quick last question, will the Forest Service be able to continue treating more acres once the additional funding provided in recent years is no longer available?

Mr. FRENCH. You are specifically referring to the supplemental funds we got through IIJA and IRA?

Senator KLOBUCHAR. I am talking about treating the acres against wildfire.

Mr. FRENCH. Yes. We have invested a lot of those funds so that they will be able to provide work over time with a lot of partners right now, so we should see that continue for a little while. Essentially, we are going to have to change our business model for how we are doing some of that work if we are going to maintain the acres that we are doing right now. We are going to have to depend more heavily on private partnerships, on states to do some of that work because the funding levels will not be the same.

Senator KLOBUCHAR. Thank you.

Chairman BOOZMAN. Senator Marshall.

Senator MARSHALL. Well, thank you, Chairman, and welcome, Mr. French, to the Agriculture Committee. I think you are going to find that is not only brighter but much friendlier than the E&R Committee.

I want to talk about our RNGR Support Act, if you are familiar with it. It is a legislation that Senator Hickenlooper and I introduced before. Our bill included a dedicated funding mechanism through the Reforestation Trust Fund to ensure we would not be diverting resources from other essential programs.

Given your leadership on national forestry priorities, would you agree that using the Reforestation Trust Fund offers a sustainable

path to implementing the bill without impacting other critical programs?

Mr. FRENCH. As what I have read thus far and understand it, yes.

Senator MARSHALL. Okay. Next, has the U.S. Forest Service provided technical assistance on how to implement RNGR without pulling from existing state, private, and tribal forestry funding?

Mr. FRENCH. I believe we have. We will have to get back with you on that one.

Senator MARSHALL. Okay, thank you.

Mr. FRENCH. Yep.

Senator MARSHALL. Is the agency open to state representation on the Wildfire Intelligence Center Board, as is the case with other interagency entities in the fire management system, such as the National Multi-Agency Coordinating Group and the National Wildfire Coordinating Group?

Mr. FRENCH. Absolutely. I mean, wildfire is an interagency, it is a local county, it is a state, it is a federal response, and the only way to do this effectively is with that representation within the Intelligence Center.

Senator MARSHALL. Okay. Just kind of a general question, has it been your experience, or do they have the potential—I am referring to mills, whether it be a paper mill or a lumber mill—do they have the potential to contribute to the proper management of forests?

Mr. FRENCH. Absolutely. I mean, having a thriving forest product sector is essential for us to be able to reduce wildland fire risk across this country and to provide jobs to local economies.

You know, essentially what is happening, especially through most of the West, is that when we have been putting out our fires and removing fires, we just have lots more trees than we ever had. Those trees are competing for water, resources. They are dying. They are affected by insect and disease. Thinning those forests are incredibly important for their health, but it is also incredibly important to reduce wildfire. Low-level wildfires we can manage. High, catastrophic, 100,000, million-acre wildfires, they are devastating.

The forest products industry, a diversifying industry, an integrated industry allows us to treat those lands so that they are healthier, they reduce risk, and at a level that is much more reasonable to the American taxpayer because you are able to produce a product to do that work where you are not having to pay as much per acre.

Senator MARSHALL. If we do not have any paper mills or timber mills in Kansas, so I am not familiar with the industry, do they rent the part of the forest and then you are able to take those monies and do good things with it, I would suppose?

Mr. FRENCH. We essentially offer timber or biomass to forest products industry, whether they are making dimensional lumber or they are burning it for energy production. We will offer it through sales, timber sales. The revenues from that go back to things such as reforestation. They go back to doing other work on the landscape like habitat improvement and to the Treasury and to counties for their school funds.

Senator MARSHALL. Okay.

Mr. FRENCH. We also offer it through what are called stewardship agreements where we trade the value of that timber for other work that can be done. We do it through what are called Good Neighbor Agreements where we allow the states to implement that work on our behalf or tribes or a local county. We have a variety of mechanisms that we use in order to essentially remove that material and put it to market.

Senator MARSHALL. Have the number of mills in the country decreased? Are they staying the same? What has led to that stability or instability?

Mr. FRENCH. The forest products industry has significantly constricted since my time of working with the agency. It is based on a number of things, market conditions, housing markets. It can be based on softwood lumber that is coming in from other places like Canada. It can be based on not having local supply. That is usually the issue that can be associated with us.

We generally supply somewhere around six percent of the softwood in the United States. For some mills, they have a very diversified area. They draw from private lands, state lands, from federal lands. Other areas are very dependent on federal lands. When there is a decrease in what we offer, it affects their ability to stay open.

Senator MARSHALL. Okay. Thank you so much. I yield back.

Chairman BOOZMAN. Thank you. Senator Smith.

Senator SMITH. Thank you. Thank you, Mr. French, for being with the Committee today. Thank you, Chair Boozman, and also our Ranking Member for holding this hearing.

Before I get to my questions, what I would like to do is to highlight two small forestry and lands issues that are really important in Minnesota that I am working on. The first is my bipartisan Thye-Blatnik Act. This is a law which ensures that these counties in far northern Minnesota—Lake and Cook and St. Louis Counties—receive a source of revenue for hosting federal forests. They have done this for decades. This is a small bill with a technical fix that would make a huge difference to these counties. It passed through the Senate last year, and we need to move it again this year.

The second bill is a House bill, also bipartisan, passed the House earlier this year, which would just basically facilitate a land exchange between Chippewa National Forest and land held by this family lodge, Bowen Lodge. The exchange is supported by the local community, supported by the local tribal nation, Leech Lake Band of Ojibwe. Since it has passed the House, it also needs a path here in the Senate.

Now, I raise this because I think that it would be smart for us to figure out if we can work together with the Forest Service on a lands package in this Committee before too long. I think it would just make sense that if we are working on this forest management legislation, that we find a way to move some of these noncontroversial and non-expensive bills at the same time. I wanted to raise that and appreciate your attention.

Chairman BOOZMAN. No, we appreciate that. I understand totally. I think every Member of Congress understands these things

are much more difficult than they should be, so we will help you where we can.

Senator SMITH. Thank you very much. I appreciate your attention to that, Mr. Chair.

Let me turn to my questions, Mr. French. I want to ask you about an issue, a Minnesota issue. I have heard from our folks in Minnesota that the Department of Government Efficiency is blocking contracts to distribute seedlings for reforestation in the Chippewa and Superior National Forests in Minnesota. As I am sure you know, these seedlings are harvested and planted to grow into the next generation of trees that support our timber industry. The work is time-sensitive, especially in places like Minnesota, where the planning window depends on a lot of extraneous factors like weather and snowpack and so forth.

Mr. French, can you tell me now or could you respond to me when you can, what does the Forest Service plan to do to address these delays and to make sure that seedling plantings can occur on a schedule that will preserve forest health?

Mr. FRENCH. Thank you, Senator. For all the contracts and other mechanisms that are being reviewed through the Office of Government Efficiency, we are batching those and the priority things such as disaster response, those things that are time-sensitive, such as reforestation, seedlings, and working very closely with them to get them moving and through the review process.

Senator SMITH. Could we follow-up and see about the specific issue and what we can do to make sure that this happens?

Mr. FRENCH. Of course.

Senator SMITH. Thank you very much. The second issue is related to the spongy moth.

Mr. FRENCH. Okay.

Senator SMITH. Okay? Just last month, the Minnesota Department of Agriculture had to cancel plans to treat our forests against this invasive species because federal funding did not come through. Spongy moths cause millions of dollars in damage to forests across the eastern United States, and now they are moving westward. As you may well know, these moths eat all of the leaves off the trees. That kills the trees and then, of course, it increases the likelihood of wildfire as a result. We are about, sadly, to miss the small window of time where we can effectively treat our forests while the caterpillars are still small. This is a problem. It puts livelihoods and our entire forests at risk. My question is, how does the Forest Service plan to address forest health and wildfire risk for invasive species like this when we are seeing these funds being cut and personnel being cut?

Mr. FRENCH. I think, you know, in terms of the funds you are talking about, which essentially become assistance for states for dealing with forest health issues, we are advocating, as are state foresters across the country, for the importance of addressing forest health issues and the role that these funds play.

Senator SMITH. That advocacy is useful, of course, but advocacy without the funds to accomplish the work will not accomplish the work. I am not going to put you on the spot because I understand the position—

Mr. FRENCH. That is fine.

Senator SMITH [continuing]. that you are in, but, I mean, would you agree that we need to be able to figure out how to pay for this stuff?

Mr. FRENCH. I would say is that in the 2026 budget that the President has released, they have made the policy oversight about how they want to see those funds very clear. In the current set of funds, they are going through reviews through the Office of Government Efficiency. We continue to deliver on those that we have already made commitments on and advocate for why they are important for broader forest health.

Senator SMITH. Well, this will be a conversation that will continue. This to me is an example of something that is very economically sensible to make this investment in order to protect forests so that we can then get the economic benefit from these forests down the road.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Chairman BOOZMAN. Thank you. Senator Hoeven.

Senator HOEVEN. Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I do not want to spend too much of my time on it, but I did want to tell the Senator from West Virginia that Roger Marshall did just take off on his scooter, so in case his staff wanted to get out there and commandeer it. Yes. I tried to stop him, but he pushed me down.

First off, Mr. French, thanks for being here. Thanks for the work that you do. You have been out to our state a number of times. You have been responsive, you have taken action, and I want you to know we appreciate it very much.

Though in regard to this issue, wildfires, you know, we always think of those as forest fires, you know, Smokey Bear and all that stuff. We had over 100,000 acres burned in North Dakota on the grasslands. It not only killed cattle, but two people were killed in those fires. These grassland fires are a real thing. They move, you know, lightning quick——

Mr. FRENCH. Very fast.

Senator HOEVEN [continuing]. and we have dry conditions. I know you know about it. That leads to my first question, which is in the Fix Our Forests Act, it primarily, you know, focuses on forest fires, but talk to me about what it is going to do to prevent and reduce fires in our grasslands.

Mr. FRENCH. Okay. You know, there is not really the statutory authorities in Fix Our Forests that would be helpful for streamlining, let's say, the NEPA side of things there, but it does provide us mechanisms working with the state and GNA to help. It has some very specific pieces around prescribed fire that would be very helpful. The Intelligence Center would help us be more responsive to fires across the country so that we are able to move resources into those areas, pre-stage them more quickly.

Senator HOEVEN. The Chairman asked you right off the jump there about categorical exclusion. Does that help us at all? Is there any CE authority that would help us in terms of some of the flexibilities and things that we are looking for in the grasslands?

Mr. FRENCH. In the grasslands? If we are going to do pretreatment of those areas, it can.

Senator HOEVEN. Okay. Well, that would be good. Back then on the forest side, how about, you know, if you are going to get in and, you know, cut trees out of there to try to mitigate fires, is there a place for that wood to go? Is that part of the plan? Because, you know, as you cut those trees down, that wood has got to have a home.

Mr. FRENCH. Yep. In some places, we have a pretty robust forest products industry that we can move trees to. In other places, we are pretty challenged because we have lost that industry.

There are programs that we administer right now that help subsidize transportation, especially of low-value products that is very helpful. We offer loans that can help retool mills so that they can handle more variety of wood products. I would say that investments in the wood products industry and creating predictable supply for them is probably the most critical thing to keep them sustainable and thriving.

Senator HOEVEN. Okay. Then, have you done any cost estimates? Wildfire suppression costs have increased about 80 percent over the past decade. Obviously, we are getting more of these fires all the time. Have you done any anticipated cost savings with the Fix Our Forests Act?

Mr. FRENCH. I am not familiar with what those would be, and we could certainly get back with you.

Senator HOEVEN. Okay. Then both President Trump and actually Governor Newsom out in California have taken emergency action on, you know, permitting some of this wildfire mitigation work to go forward. Are those orders something that is also covered on a permanent basis by this legislation so we would see some of those things on a permanent basis?

Mr. FRENCH. Yes, that is one of the strengths of this bill is it actually takes some of the things that we do for emergencies that allow us to move more quickly and codifies them, and that is very helpful for us.

Senator HOEVEN. Is there anything else that is not in this bill that you want to bring up or would recommend that should be included or considered for this legislation?

Mr. FRENCH. Well, I could talk your ear off on a set of things that would make us more effective and efficient on any bills. I would say the one thing here is I do think that the hazard tree removal CE that the Senate has laid out for us here would be more effective if it was statutorily given to us by Congress rather than having us promulgated through regulation.

Senator HOEVEN. Okay. Thank you very much. Again, thanks for being here, and thanks for the good work that you do.

Mr. FRENCH. Thanks.

Chairman BOOZMAN. The Ranking Member on Forestry—

Senator BENNET. Thank you.

Chairman BOOZMAN [continuing]. Senator Bennet.

Senator BENNET. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. and I am glad I was here for Senator Hoeven's questions.

Mr. French, thank you for joining us here today. I know how experienced you are, and I am grateful that you are in the role that you are in.

Protecting our forest, our watersheds, and our communities from increasingly severe wildfires in the West is getting more critical every single day. I really commend the hard work of the sponsors of this bill, including my friend and my fellow Senator from Colorado, John Hickenlooper. I think this bill is a meaningful attempt to put forward solutions and find a path forward on addressing wildfires that put communities like Colorado at risk.

I want to say to the Chairman, though, and I would have said this in front of my friend, John Hickenlooper, I think it is very important for this Committee to be exercising the jurisdiction that we are over this bill. I think this is a place where we can bring the voice of Senator Hoeven and others to make sure that in the end this is a product that we can all be proud of, and I look forward to working with you on that. I am grateful that you are having this hearing.

I know for most people here, we are familiar with the role of the Forest Service when it comes to reducing the risk of wildfires in the West and also fighting fires themselves, but could you talk a little bit about the importance of that, Mr. French?

My next question is going to be about the reductions we have seen in forests on the Western Slope of Colorado and throughout the Rocky Mountain West and the deep concern that communities have in my state and throughout the Rocky Mountains that we may not have the personnel that we need as this fire season starts.

Mr. FRENCH. Thank you, Senator. Wildfire, as I said earlier, is completely integrated across our entire agency. I started my career in southern Arizona and spent 10 years in my first permanent position in wildfire, and you learn when you are in a position like that that when you are running a local engine or you are part of a shot crew, that those communities really depend on you to know the land, to respond quickly, and to be able to essentially take care of things in a way that are thoughtful about the community and neighbors that you are a part of.

As we have seen wildfire grow across the agency, the interagency approaches and the role that we play in coordinating those have become incredibly important. Forest Service manages 75 percent of the wildfire resources in this country. Almost all the aerial contracts that we have that states and other federal agencies depend on.

More importantly, when you look at that system, we are the people that, in most of your forest communities where we have large fires, they are the ones staffing along with folks like CAL FIRE and others, that local station that is providing a response that people have come to depend on.

I will kind of get to your second question maybe preemptively is that during the workforce reshaping that we have been asked to do, we have made it a priority to exempt our primary firefighters, and we have made it a priority to essentially look at other skillsets in the agency that are being left as people are taking some of the programs right now of prioritizing our workforce as the most important piece that we need to do is provide adequate fire suppression response.

Senator BENNET. I appreciate that. It has been deeply, deeply disappointing to us to see the numbers of Forest Service personnel

with red cards who have been separated from the agency at this moment. I think I heard you use the word primary when you described the firefighters who were being protected. My view is that those red card holders are the backbone of our fire suppression efforts, and they are going to be hard to replace. We are already counting on local communities, as you know, in partnerships in places like the White River and other forests in Colorado, and now more of the burden is actually going to fall on us, I think, and that is going to be a real challenge for local communities.

That brings me to my second question if the Chairman will let me ask it. I see the leader is here. Just one more.

As you were saying, I think it is important to have local knowledge and important to have regional knowledge. Colorado communities really know the risk of wildfire well. We have been devastated in recent years by the Cameron Peak, these troublesome—and Pine Gulch fires, but we also have a long track record of working successfully to establish the kind of partnerships that I was just talking about between state, local, and federal partners to reduce wildfire risk. It is in that connection that I have heard from 30 local officials just last week in my state that provisions of the Fix Our Forests Act might undermine their ability to meaningfully engage with their federal partners in the development of forest projects.

I am worried that the decisions are going to be made by the bureaucracy in Washington, DC, without the input of people on the ground in Colorado and in these communities that have been engaged with these incredible partnerships with the U.S. Forest Service all these years.

I would ask you, Mr. French, whether you believe that, as we consider this, the Forest Service can guarantee that this bill is not going to limit opportunities for local communities to continue to engage—the contribution of local communities in these decisions that are, of course, most important to them than anyone else.

Mr. FRENCH. Yep, I can. I mean, that is not who we are. We are a part of these communities, and when we are designing projects and when we are advocating for projects, we have got to do that in concert with the community that we are a part of. I do not see anything in Fix Our Forests that would change that commitment of working collaboratively with our local governments and with the people that are there. I get it changes some of the fixed processes, but that does not change sitting down in a town meeting, talking about what needs to be done up the canyon, and taking care of it.

That is who we are as an agency. We are a very local, decision-made-type approach with our districts and our forests. These lands will persist when they are relevant to the communities they are a part of. If we do not make sure that we are doing that, then anything we do is out of step.

I would also just say on the firefighter piece, we are very, very, very cognizant of the experience and skillsets that have walked out the door. We are very focused on how to adapt and manage through that, especially with our state and other federal partners. I am not going to say it is easy—

Senator BENNET. Yes.

Mr. FRENCH [continuing]. but we are prepared.

Senator BENNET. Okay. Well, thank you for your testimony, and thank you for your long service as well.

Mr. FRENCH. You are welcome.

Senator BENNET. I look forward to our work together.

Mr. FRENCH. Thanks.

Chairman BOOZMAN. Senator Justice.

Senator JUSTICE. Thank you so much, Mr. Chairman, and thank you, Mr. French. Thank you for coming.

I normally start off, you know, have hopefully a good statement, and then I ask a question. I am going to lead off with just this question because it is going to lead me to where I think we should go, and that is just this. In regard to all the aspect of our forests today, especially our fires, you know, because we are looking at a Fix Our Forests Act. If we are deeply considering the fire component and then considering our forest component, are we winning the battle?

Mr. FRENCH. I think we are making a good try but not yet.

Senator JUSTICE. I know you are brutally honest, but I would think if we were all brutally honest, we would say, no way, we are not winning this war.

If I could just tell you that I am the most impatient guy in the room, I mean, really and truly. I rolled in up here with white hair, and I am not here for any reason that would be anything to do with me. I can tell you we have got a big problem. That is all there is to it. You know, when I was the Governor of West Virginia, I was the Governor for eight years. It was a big-time honor and everything. A lot of times people would say to me, they would say, what is the biggest responsibility you have? I would say the same is true right now for this. Get the economics right because the economics drives a lot of this boat, and we are missing it in a lot of ways.

You see, we have got all kinds of forest problems. I am an outdoor guy. I am a wildlife guy. I can absolutely sit and talk that with anybody because I have done it over and over and over. With all that being said, if you are the most impatient guy and you do not want anything, and you are a real believer in economics being upside down, in this country today we have lost our flooring, cabinetry. We have lost our furniture business. All of this stuff is going on in every country of the world, but it is not going on here.

Right here, right in this right here, all this carbon is frozen. If everybody is worried about the carbon and everything, think about what happens with a forest fire. All this is frozen. We have all kinds of issues with the health of our forest today, and they are affecting our wildlife, and they are affecting so many different things, our waters and on and on and on. Yet in West Virginia, we are cutting 1/3 of our growth, 1/3 of our annual growth, you know? The trees are growing three times faster than we are cutting them. They are falling on the ground. They are causing all kinds of issues. As soon as a small fire goes through, all the carbon is released right into the sky when it could be frozen right here. We could have industry right here, and we could have jobs right here, and we could have healthy forests right here. We have got to get the economics right. I will promise you, at the end of the day, the

economics are upside down, and I will promise you we are losing the battle.

Now, how do we get the economics right? There is all kinds of different ways, but our forests in West Virginia alone cleanup an equivalency of 21 coal-fired power plants a year. It is unbelievable what they do. That is our hardwoods. You know, there are issues all across this country with all kinds of different things, but our forests should be applauded every day for what they do. Our forests are doing so much for all of us, it is off the chart. I am a real believer in this. Play to your strengths. For God's sakes, you have a winning team. You have the most winning team on the planet.

The last thing I would tell you is just this. Now, think about it. Think about West Virginia for just one second. Think about Jim Justice in West Virginia. I am a basketball coach. West Virginia has great, great, great people, unbelievable natural resources, four of the greatest seasons on the planet, and it is located within a rocks throw of 2/3 of the population of the country. It really is. Yet, we continually struggled with being dead last. How could it be? You have got the same kind of team.

Now, we have got to do something about it. We have got to come up with an idea, an idea to drive the economics right, to make the forest healthy again. We have got to come up with an idea. You know, just to say, well, we need to do this about the fire or this about—we are not going anywhere. We have to come up with a real, live idea and an idea that would be something along the lines of, if we could find a way to create some level of—and God forbid this is a taboo, bad name—but a subsidy to credit our forest, to credit what our forest are giving us that would bridge us to absolutely doing something that would bring health to our forest.

We have got to come up with something, and at the end of the day, it is all going to be one thing, absolutely, period. You wait and see. It will be driven by the economics. Get the economics right.

Thank you so much, sir.

Chairman BOOZMAN. Thank you. Senator Schiff.

Senator SCHIFF. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

I appreciate your being here. I represent California, and in particular two areas that have been very recently devastated by fire, so this is an issue that is near and dear to my constituents. I am trying to figure out a way to phrase this question in a way that you can answer it.

Mr. FRENCH. Okay.

Senator SCHIFF. Let me just posit both my interest and my concern. My interest is in making sure that we can better manage our forests so that we can reduce the incidence of fire and how devastating those fires are. I appreciate all the important work that has been done to improve the Fix Our Forests Act since it left the House.

My concern is that we are laying off federal firefighters. We are clawing back grants that are used for brush clearance. A lot of the laudable things that are established in the Fix Our Forests Act are not funded with any additional money, so there are laudable collaborative agencies established but nothing to provide them resources.

My concern is that the bill is used to accelerate the timber industry without a particular focus on reducing fire. Now, some of the timber that will be harvested will be useful to be harvested in terms of making our forests more resilient, but of course there will be interest in the timber industry to go beyond that and harvest timber having nothing to do with fire mitigation. That is not my priority. It is the priority set out in some of the executive orders, but that is not my priority.

I guess my question to you is, are there any safeguards in this legislation? What would a safeguard look like to make sure that this is really about fire mitigation and not just about timber harvesting? That is my question, and I know there are some pitfalls in how you can answer that, but to whatever degree you can answer it, I would welcome your answer.

Mr. FRENCH. Yes, I appreciate the question, Senator. You know, as stated before, I have worked for the agency for 34 years. I have worked in multiple places in the agency. I was trained as a biologist. I have worked in forestry and fire, recreation, wilderness, the whole gamut. I know our system. I am also acutely aware of the issues in California and the situation of the health of our forests and the way our communities right now are at risk.

There are so many safeguards in our system right now, whether it is the forest plan that limits what you can do or not do on the ground, regardless of what Fix Our Forests says. Any project we put out there has to follow the safeguards and the parameters that are established in that forest plan. What does that mean? That means there are certain areas you cannot treat. There are buffers that you have to put around creeks. There are species that you have to thin in different ways in order to meet the outcomes, like the California spotted owl. It is a broad safeguard for any project we are doing.

We are still, under this bill, on any project we do, we have to consult with the Fish and Wildlife Service. We have to consult with NOAA fisheries. We have to consult with the EPA for the Clean Air Act and Clean Water Act with our state and local regulatory agencies. All of that still stays. Like I said, there are multiple, multiple requirements that we have to meet in here in order to do any one of these projects.

In the last years, if you look at the number of acres that we have treated, it has greatly increased, and that is addressing fire. That is under multiple Administrations. Yet the number of sawlogs we produce have actually gone down. Because the focus of most of our work is on restoration, if you are reducing wildland fire risk or you are trying to restore forests for healthy forests, you are removing a vast amount of material that is not actually commercial. We do need investments in the forest products industry in biomass and low-value wood in order to utilize that.

If you look at the amount of material that we remove through timber sales, we harvest less than 1/10 of 1 percent of our national forests on any given year. It is somewhere between 200,000 and 250,000 acres. That is such a low number when you look at what our forest plans actually would allow.

I tell you this as a lifelong career person, as an advocate for our forests, for the habitat within our forests. We do things well and

right, and there are just a litany of safeguards that are in place. Most of the arguments that I see around our work is where is it occurring, is it happening fast enough, and whether we philosophically agree that removing material or timber harvest is appropriate on a national forest.

Senator SCHIFF. Thank you. If there is time later, I would love to ask another question. Thank you.

Chairman BOOZMAN. Senator McConnell.

Senator MCCONNELL. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

If people around the world have heard of Kentucky, it is usually for two reasons, the Kentucky Derby, which was last Saturday, and bourbon. Bourbon has a lot of challenges right now because of the tariff wars. For example, up in Canada, they have taken bourbon off the shelves, so I think it is safe to say people in that iconic Kentucky industry are not happy about the tariff wars and hope that it will be over soon.

I want to raise something I am sure no one has heard of. Our iconic bourbon industry is critical to us. Ninety-five percent of the bourbon in the world is made in Kentucky. The \$9 billion industry supports agriculture, forestry, manufacturing, distilling, bottling, construction, and transportation jobs, just to name a few.

Kentucky bourbon is synonymous with the white oak tree, which is used to age our state's signature spirit in wooden barrels. Unfortunately, 75 percent of the Nation's white oak population is rated as mature, meaning that there will be a shortage of white oaks within 30 years.

Congress must act to ensure the preservation of this invaluable resource, so in February, I introduced the White Oak Resiliency Act with Senator Warner. The bill requires the Department of Interior, USDA, and the Forest Service to coordinate research and conservation efforts, ensuring the white oak a stable supply and a viable future. I am pleased to see, Mr. Chairman, that my bill is included in the underlying act.

Mr. French, in your written testimony, you stated that USDA was supportive of the White Oak Resilience subtitle but would like to work with the Committee on minor technical adjustments. What changes would USDA like to see regarding white oak provisions?

Mr. FRENCH. Thank you, Senator. We are very supportive, especially with the loss that we are seeing across the country. It is minor stuff in the way it is written that would make it more effective within the context of the laws we have right now. What I mean by that is the National Forest Management Act and some other pieces, it is pretty minor, but it does not change any of the broader intent of what we are asking.

Senator MCCONNELL. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Chairman BOOZMAN. Thank you. Senator Welch.

Senator WELCH. Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman.

Thank you very much for the good work you do.

I am hoping we get this bill to a place where I can vote on it. One of the changes that is made is the 10,000-acre designation.

Mr. FRENCH. Sure.

Senator WELCH. In Vermont where we do not have the vast expanses of these forests that are so typical in the western States, that would mean that literally all but one of our projects would be

in the exemption. We are not 10,000 acres. Is there a way that you could suggest where it would not be a one-size-fits-all? I mean, a lower number, I think, would be appropriate for Vermont, but I would not want Vermont to interfere with what would be good for California or good for Colorado. A couple of our sponsors are from there. Could you speak to that? We would like to have public participation but not have it get in the way also of a legitimate desire to move ahead.

Mr. FRENCH. Yes, thank you, Senator. I know that forest well. I spent time in Manchester as the district ranger there.

Senator WELCH. Yes. Beautiful.

Mr. FRENCH. I think that if you look at how these CEs are set up, the context of how they would be used will vary from each geographic place. If I am a forester up in Vermont and I am looking at something, one, I may not even be able to fit within these categories because of the way they are set up for wildfire risk and some of the other pieces. It does not mean that you have to do 10,000 acres. What it essentially means is it is not that it is excluded from NEPA. It just means that it fits within a category that is not considered significant.—

Senator WELCH. This is what I do not understand. It is not significant if less than 10,000 acres is excluded from the inquiry about significance, right?

Mr. FRENCH. Right.

Senator WELCH. What I am saying is that that would mean that basically any project in Vermont would be in that category.

Mr. FRENCH. If it qualifies for the parameters of what that category is. My knowledge of projects up there, many of them would not. In fact, probably most would not.

The other thing about this is that from—

Senator WELCH. Can you elaborate a little bit on that so I understand?

Mr. FRENCH. Yes. I mean, so if you look at the way these are set up, they are specifically for things like hazard tree removal or they are specifically if you are reducing wildland fire risk within these parameters while maintaining certain size classes and things like that. That would not be applicable in most places on the Green Mountain National Forest.

The other thing to recognize here, too, is that, you know—and we will get into a little bit of the NEPA side of things—most of the projects that are done—in fact, all of the projects, I think, that are done on the Green Mountain use environmental assessments. They are from, you know, thousands of acres. Every one of those environmental assessments come to a singular conclusion, a finding of no significant impact, okay? That is essentially what a categorical exclusion is saying, is that projects up to a certain size under certain conditions will not be significant if you meet ESA, if you meet Clean Water Act, and you go through a set of tests called extraordinary circumstances that look to see what are the effects on floodplains, what are the effects on wilderness areas. It goes through an entire series to make sure that it is actually routinely not significant.

Senator WELCH. Okay. Let me get to just two other things. Thank you for that.

Mr. FRENCH. Yes, you are welcome.

Senator WELCH. Along the lines of Senator Schiff, I am having a hard time dealing with the conflict of 5,200 Forest Service folks having left their jobs or been fired or whatever term it is we want to use. We have got about 5,200 fewer people, so the work that needs to be done, we do not have the people to do it. I would also respect that you cannot necessarily answer that question, but it seems pretty obvious. If you do not have the personnel, the work's not going to get done.

Mr. FRENCH. Well, right now, we have seen a decline of about 25 percent of our non-fire workforce across the agency for folks that have voluntarily taken the deferred resignation and other programs. It is not the same in all places. We have some places where we have lost considerable staff and other places——

Senator WELCH. Well, as we proceed, I mean, at some point we are going to want to get an assessment of how this is affecting the functionality——

Mr. FRENCH. Of course.

Senator WELCH [continuing]. of the work that you do, and that is not your decision.

The third thing is going from 6 years to 150 days——

Mr. FRENCH. Say that again, 6 years to 150 days?

Senator WELCH. Well, this is on the judicial review.

Mr. FRENCH. Okay.

Senator WELCH. This bill, as I understand it, used to be six years. It will go down to 150 days. I am flexible on that. There is no magic in the number, but that is a big drop, and that is a period of time within which affected groups can bring their case forward. Do you have any experience or examples of how that reduction from 6 years to 150 days will be helpful or harmful?

Mr. FRENCH. I mean, I cannot give you anything specifically, but I can generally tell you that for projects that are forest management, veg management, and honestly, recreation as well—let me put it to you this way. We win about 80 percent of our cases, but——

Senator WELCH. You what?

Mr. FRENCH. We win about 80 percent of the litigation that is brought against us on our projects. That is a pretty good record. The consequences that we see is that often those projects will take anywhere from four, five, or six years to be implemented once they have gone through their analysis as they get through the court system. I think that is really a question for Congress and communities of whether that timeframe, especially if you are trying to do wildland fuels risk reduction to a community that is at risk is acceptable.

Senator WELCH. Thank you.

Mr. FRENCH. You are welcome.

Senator WELCH. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Chairman BOOZMAN. Senator Schiff.

Senator SCHIFF. Thank you, Chairman. I appreciate the opportunity, and really following up on Senator Welch's questions, which are largely what I wanted to explore further. Did I understand you to say there was a 25 percent reduction in the workforce?

Mr. FRENCH. Non-fire workforce. The agency has about 35,000 employees. We have exempted all of the wildland primary fire-fighters from the workforce reshaping. That workforce is in place. It is the non-fire workforce that can also help support the fire workforce where there has been a little over 5,000 positions that are people that have taken the voluntary outs.

Senator SCHIFF. That is really striking. One-fourth of the non-fire workforce—

Mr. FRENCH. Non-fire workforce.

Senator SCHIFF [continuing]. have taken advantage of the fork in the road to leave the Forest Service?

Mr. FRENCH. That is currently what we are seeing?

Senator SCHIFF. Then you have got the additional people that got the probationary letter, or have they been rehired?

Mr. FRENCH. All the probationary employees have been rehired if they chose to come back.

Senator SCHIFF. I think the budget includes another cut to the Forest Service, does it not?

Mr. FRENCH. It cuts us down about 63 percent.

Senator SCHIFF. About 63 percent.

Mr. FRENCH. I believe so, on the current budget.

Senator SCHIFF. How would it be possible to do anything other than timber harvesting contemplated on this bill with those kind of reductions?

Mr. FRENCH. We are going to need a lot of help from our state partners, our community partners, and others in the work that we do.

Senator SCHIFF. I mean, do your state partners do the kind of other mitigation work that we are talking about in the national forests?

Mr. FRENCH. Through Good Neighbor, they do, yes.

Senator SCHIFF. Wow, that is just staggering.

One last question to follow-up on Senator Welch's question because I had the same concern about going from 6 years to 150 days. Generally, how soon after there is a decision is litigation initiated? That is, it may take a long time to get through the suits that are brought, but generally how soon after decision is litigation brought? Is the problem more how long it takes to get to the end of the litigation than the length of period after which you can file suit?

Mr. FRENCH. I do not have that data, but we can follow-up with you with the specifics on that. What I can tell you is, you know, there are three general effects that we see. The first is it increases our costs considerably in areas that are highly litigious in terms of the price per unit of what we are trying to deliver like a fuels reduction, a trail, or a timber volume. It increases the time considerably in those areas for the amount of work you have to do to get yourself prepared for a project to hit litigation, so you are doing a higher level analysis with more analysis so that you do better within the court system. The cost per project is generally going to be \$100,000 or so more than a place that we do not have a litigation.

Then generally what we are going to see is that for those areas where we have high litigation, like I think there is about 360 million board feet of timber product that is held up in Region One right now under litigation, generally with injunctions, those might

last, you know, three to six years. It is that period of time and the unpredictability it can create to the forest products industry but also to the communities that are looking for that work.

Senator SCHIFF. Let me ask you one other thing. I was in the far north of the state and visited one of the dead forests where there was aerial seeding. The forest—I think it was mostly spruce that grew up—was so dense, light could not get to the forest floor, and it is essentially a dead forest. There are a lot of trees still standing in that dead forest that have no limbs that are crowding out the rebirth of redwoods. What has impeded the ability to log those trees? Why are they still standing? Is it just not lucrative enough for the timber industry?

Mr. FRENCH. Well, I mean, no. I mean, this is a huge issue for us. You know, and I talked earlier about areas that we have fires—and you have seen this—from northern California to southern California. Like, look at those fires up the Feather River Canyon that go up to Quincy and places like that. We cannot get in there effectively and salvage that timber.

The importance of doing that, by the way, is not just about driving economic value for what is left in those logs, but it is about going in there and reforesting. It is about removing hazard trees where people cannot drive on roads. Like, I cannot put a crew in there to plant trees because of the risk of those trees falling on them, so you have to use aerial seeding.

We cannot go in and effectively salvage those trees because we generally get sued. Those trees lose their value about a year to two years after the fire has gone through. If I put all the effort into doing an EA or an EIS that is going to take us somewhere between a year and a year and a half, and then we get sued, which is pretty common on salvage sales, all the value is lost, and we have put all that effort in and hundreds of thousands of dollars to get that thing cleared, and then nobody will buy it because all the wood's deteriorated. You have to move quickly to salvage timber.

What you saw, if you look at like what Sierra Pacific and some of the other local entities do in California, they will be in there within six months to a year to remove that timber. We have even tried to take some of that timber and move it out of state to mills that need wood because there was so much left over from fires.

Honestly, the issue is the amount of time it takes it to get through the clearance process for NEPA and all the other regulatory pieces we have, and then litigation that keeps us from actually doing it at scale. It is one of the biggest criticisms that industry has on us is all that standing dead timber.

Senator SCHIFF. Thank you.

Mr. FRENCH. You are welcome.

Senator SCHIFF. Thank you, Chairman. I appreciate the added time.

Chairman BOOZMAN. Thank you. Senator Klobuchar?

Senator KLOBUCHAR. No, I do not have anything to add. I just wanted to, Senator Schiff, thank you for your questions. We know how personal all this is in your state, and just thank our Committee Members for working well on this issue with your Committee Members as well, Senator Boozman, so thank you.

Senator SCHIFF. Thank you very much.

Chairman BOOZMAN. Thank you again, Mr. French, for your time and insights, to our Committee Members for your participation in today's important hearing.

I request unanimous consent to submit letters of support for FOIA to the Committee record. Without objection, so moved.

[The letters can be found on pages 32–35 in the appendix.]

Chairman BOOZMAN. Questions for the record are due Thursday, May 8th, by close of business, and the hearing record will remain open for five business days.

Again, thanks to you, and thanks to the Committee for, I think, a really thoughtful, really good hearing today.

With that, we are adjourned.

[Whereupon, at 4:20 p.m., the Committee was adjourned.]

A P P E N D I X

MAY 6, 2025

STATEMENT OF
CHRISTOPHER FRENCH
ACTING ASSOCIATE CHIEF OF THE FOREST SERVICE
U.S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE, U.S. FOREST SERVICE
BEFORE THE
UNITED STATES SENATE
COMMITTEE ON AGRICULTURE, NUTRITION, AND FORESTRY

S. 1462 – “FIX OUR FORESTS ACT”

May 6, 2025

Chairman Boozman, Ranking Member Klobuchar, Members of the Committee, thank you for inviting the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Forest Service, to discuss the Fix Our Forests Act. USDA defers to the Department of the Interior (DOI) on provisions pertaining to DOI.

S. 1462, “Fix Our Forests Act”

Our National Forests are in crisis due to uncharacteristically severe wildfires, insect and disease outbreaks, invasive species, and other stressors whose impacts have been compounded by too little active management. President Trump’s Executive Order 14225 and Secretary Rollins’ Secretarial Memo 1078-006 help the agency take immediate action to mitigate risk, protect public health and safety and critical infrastructure, support local and rural economies, and mitigate threats to natural resources on National Forest System lands.

The Senate bill, “Fix Our Forests Act” (FOFA) works to address these issues as well through a variety of new programs and amendments to existing authorities. The bill compiles several separate bills related to wildfire risks, forest health, forest management, and other provisions included in the following titles and subtitles.

TITLE I—LANDSCAPE-SCALE RESTORATION

Subtitle A—Addressing Emergency Wildfire Risks in High Priority Firesheds

Subtitle A would provide for the designation of certain areas as fireshed management areas (Sec 101), provide for a publicly accessible Fireshed Registry including interactive geospatial data (Sec 103), and establish a Wildfire Intelligence Center (Sec 102). This subtitle would also direct USDA to utilize existing shared stewardship agreements, or modify or create new ones, with States, Counties, or Indian Tribes to manage wildfire risks in areas designated as fireshed management areas (Sec 104). Fireshed assessments for each fireshed management area would be required within 120 days (Sec 105). Section 106 of this subtitle authorizes the Secretary to carry out fireshed management projects in designated fireshed management areas using expedited authorities including emergency NEPA authorities. This subtitle would also increase the maximum project size under the existing categorical exclusions for fuel breaks, insect and disease projects, and wildfire resilience to 10,000 acres, from 3,000 acres. It also would increase the area

for conducting vegetation management activities to protect the greater sage-grouse or mule deer habitats to 7,500 acres, from 4,500 acres.

USDA supports the use of firehatched data in helping set priorities for where to apply resources, recognizing that firehatched data is dynamic. The USDA supports the goals of the Wildfire Intelligence Center. USDA strongly supports streamlining procedures under NEPA and expanding existing categorical exclusions to reduce wildfire risk and improve forest health. USDA would like to work with the committee on technical changes to aid in their implementation.

Subtitle B—Expanding Collaborative Tools to Reduce Wildfire Risk and Improve Forest Health

Section 111 of Subtitle B would allow the Secretary to enter into a Good Neighbor Agreement with Special Districts in addition to States, Counties, and Tribes. This section would also allow the retained receipts by States, Counties, Tribes, and Special Districts to be used for the administration of the good neighbor authority program. Section 112 of Subtitle B would extend the maximum term for agreements and contracts executed under the Stewardship End Result Contracting Projects authority from 10 years to 20 years and would direct the Chief to pay a 10 percent cancellation or termination cost for any long-term agreements or contracts that are cancelled or terminated. Section 113 of this subtitle would direct the Secretaries to jointly establish intra-agency strike teams to address NEPA reviews, consultations under the National Historic Preservation Act and under the Endangered Species Act, site preparation work, and the implementation of firehatched management projects. Section 114 of this subtitle would raise the threshold at which timber sales must be advertised from a sale value of \$10,000 to \$55,000. This title also reauthorizes the Joint Chiefs Landscape Restoration Partnership Program (Sec 115), the Collaborative Forest Landscape Restoration Program (Sec 116), and the Water Source Protection Program (Sec 118). Section 117 would direct the Chief of the Forest Service to develop a strategy to increase opportunities to utilize livestock grazing as a wildfire risk reduction strategy, including completion of NEPA reviews to allow permitted grazing on vacant grazing allotments during drought, wildfire, or other natural disasters; use of targeted grazing; increased use of temporary permits to promote fuels reduction and reduction of invasive grasses; increased use of grazing as a postfire recovery and restoration strategy; and increased use of advanced technologies to dynamically adjust livestock management. Section 120 amends the 2018 Farm Bill by making permanent the authority for the tribal forest management self-determination demonstration projects by removing the pilot limitation for contracts with federally recognized Tribes and Tribal organizations (as defined by statute) and other technical additions. It also amends definitions and requires agencies to publicly list eligible projects.

USDA supports each of these provisions in Subtitle B and would like to work with the Committee on technical changes to aid in their implementation. In addition, we would like to point out that as compared to the House draft, the Senate draft of the section pertaining to Good Neighbor Agreements (Sec 111) removes a provision that would allow retained timber receipts to be used for construction of new permanent roads. USDA would support adding that House provision into the Senate draft as it would allow the Forest Service to facilitate better access for our forest management work.

Subtitle C – Addressing Frivolous Litigation

Section 121 of Subtitle C would prohibit a court from enjoining covered agency actions pertaining to fire management projects under this bill if the court determines that the plaintiff's claim is unlikely to succeed on the merits. Section 122 of this subtitle also addresses Endangered Species Act (ESA) consultation, stating that the agency is not required to reinstate consultation under the ESA on a land management plan when a new species is listed, critical habitat is designated, or new information becomes available.

USDA supports the proposed fix to the problematic Cottonwood decision and would like to work with the Committee and our federal partners on technical changes to address this issue once and for all. USDA also supports the proposed judicial reforms found in subtitle C and would like to work with DOI, Department of Commerce and the Committee on technical changes to aid in their implementation.

Subtitle D – Prescribed Fire

Sections 131-136 address various aspects of the Forest Service's prescribed fire operations. Section 131 authorizes and supports prescribed fire activities on federal and non-federal lands and prioritizes large, cross boundary projects. Section 132 addresses human resources needs by enhancing the ability of the workforce to work across boundaries and through partnership agreements. Section 133 clarifies liability protections for federal employees and offers training opportunities for employees to learn more about the scope and limits of liability protections. Section 134 facilitates coordination between land management and air quality agencies at all levels and collaboration on fire plans from scientific and cultural experts. Section 135 authorizes the Secretaries of Agriculture and Interior to enter into agreements with various entities to plan and conduct prescribed fire and training on federal lands. Section 4123 authorizes the USDA to enter into a contract or agreement with Tribes to conduct a prescribed burn demonstration project. Lastly, section 136 directs the USDA to conduct prescribed fires and update associated policies in accordance with the 2022 National Prescribed Fire Program Review recommendations.

USDA supports the provisions in this subtitle but would like to work with the committee on some technical changes to aid the implementation of some of these sections. Specifically, the USDA is concerned about the exclusion of pile burning in Section 131. Further clarification of liability coverage for qualified cooperators and Tribes under participating agreements in Section 133 would be beneficial, as well as clarification regarding projects on Indian lands currently overseen by the Bureau of Indian Affairs. Lastly, the USDA would like to work with the Committee to clarify the scope of prescribed fire planning in Section 134 and its nexus with regulatory compliance.

TITLE II: PROTECTING COMMUNITIES IN THE WILDLAND-URBAN INTERFACE

Subtitle A — Community Wildfire Risk Reduction

Section 201 of the second title of the bill would establish an interagency program to support coordination in reducing the risk of fires in the wildland-urban interface. Section 202 of this title would also establish a research program for the purpose of testing and advancing innovative

designs to create wildfire-resistant structures and communities. Section 203 would require the U.S. Fire Administration to submit biennial reports to Congress to improve accountability of the Community Wildfire Risk Reduction Program. Section 204 expands the types of projects eligible for Community Wildfire Defense Grants and limits administrative expenses to seven percent of the obligated funds. Lastly, Section 205 expands the definition of “at-risk community.”

USDA supports each of the above provisions in Title II and wants to work with the Committee on technical changes to aid in their implementation.

Subtitle B — Vegetation Management, Reforestation, and Local Fire Suppression

Additionally, Section 211 of this title would amend the Federal Lands Policy and Management Act of 1976 by increasing the required right-of-way for certain electric transmission and distribution facilities from 10 feet to 150 feet. Further, Section 212 of this subtitle would allow the Secretary to provide permission to cut and remove trees or other vegetation from within the vicinity of distribution lines or transmission lines without requiring a separate timber sale. Further, Section 213 of this title would direct the Secretary to develop a new 6,000-acre categorical exclusion for managing high priority hazard trees. Finally, Section 214 of this title would require the development of an interagency strategy to enhance the domestic supply chain of seeds. Section 216 creates grant opportunities for State, Tribal, and private nurseries and formally authorizes the Forest Service to broadly support the national reforestation supply chain.

USDA supports each of the above provisions in Subtitle B of Title II and wants to work with the Committee on technical changes to aid in their implementation. In order to expedite the implementation, we would encourage the Committee to establish the categorical exclusion outlined in Section 213 statutorily rather than directing the Secretary to do so within a year.

In addition, Section 217 requires the standardization of reciprocal fire suppression cost share agreements. It directs the Secretaries of Agriculture and Interior to establish standard operating procedures related to fire suppression cost share. This is to ensure they are aligned with Cooperative Fire Protection Agreements and that each agreement is reviewed and modified as necessary with State and local fire suppression organizations. The Forest Service already implements these requirements and has policy or handbook direction that accomplishes the elements of the bill. We remain committed to timely repayment of our state and local partners. In many cases, repayment involves a settlement process between USDA and State and local partners, particularly where large, multi-jurisdictional wildfires are involved, that can last beyond the one-year requirement in this section. Overall, this section would reduce flexibility to update agency policy based on efficiencies or changing conditions of the CFPA program and partnership with State and Local government entities.

TITLE III: TRANSPARENCY, TECHNOLOGY, AND PARTNERSHIPS

Subtitle A — Transparency and Technology

Section 301 of the third title would establish a program for certain Federal agencies to enter into partnerships to carry out demonstration projects to support the development and commercialization of biochar. Section 302 of the title would require Federal agencies to publish

an annual report on the number of acres on which hazardous fuels activities were carried out in the previous year. Additionally, Section 303 would establish a demonstration pilot program for new and innovative wildfire prevention, detection, communication, and mitigation technologies. Further, Section 304 would require the Government Accountability Office (GAO) to conduct a study evaluating the effectiveness of Forest Service wildland firefighting operations and the suitability and feasibility of establishing a new Federal agency with responsibility for responding to and suppressing wildland fire on Federal lands. Section 305 would establish that the Secretary would not be in violation of the Forest and Rangeland Resources Planning Act of 1974 solely because more than 15 years have passed without revision of a land and resource management plan. This section would also require additional reporting to Congress regarding the status of land and resource management plans and establishment of a central, publicly accessible website with information on the plans. Section 307 would require the Secretary to carry out a study on the infestation of pine beetles in the Northeast.

USDA supports many of the provisions listed above in Subtitle A of Title III. We recommend that GAO review a broader range of options in terms of reorganizing programs to improve response and suppression of wildland fire on federal lands. We would like to work with the committee on technical changes to aid implementation of this subtitle.

Section 306 of this subtitle would require evaluation and reporting on the container aerial firefighting system (CAFFS) to assess the use of such system to mitigate and suppress wildfires. The agency, in coordination with National Interagency Aviation Committee, has previously studied this system and found significant operational and safety concerns to firefighters on the ground. While USDA appreciates the bill's intent to pursue new ideas in wildland fire suppression, USDA does not support the incorporation of containerized systems into our suppression response given firefighter safety and other operational concerns.

Subtitle B – White Oak Resilience

Subtitle B would establish activities to provide for white oak restoration including establishing a program to adopt a white oak restoration strategy, expand research on white oak, establish a formal USDA initiative on white oak restoration, and launch five pilot projects to restore white oak.

USDA supports this subtitle but would like to work with the Subcommittee on minor technical adjustments.

Conclusion

Chairman Boozman, Ranking Member Klobuchar, Members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to present USDA's views on this legislation.

**DOCUMENTS SUBMITTED FOR THE
RECORD**

MAY 6, 2025



May 5, 2025

The Honorable John Thune
Majority Leader
United States Senate

The Honorable Charles Schumer
Minority Leader
United States Senate

The Honorable John Boozman
Chairman
Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry
United States Senate

The Honorable Amy Klobuchar
Ranking Member
Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry
United States Senate

Dear Majority Leader Thune, Minority Leader Schumer, Chairman Boozman, and Ranking Member Klobuchar:

We write to urge Senate consideration of the Fix Our Forests Act (S. 1462), recently introduced by Senators John Curtis (R-UT), John Hickenlooper (D-CO), Tim Sheehy (R-MT), and Alex Padilla (D-CA). We support this bipartisan legislation that would increase the nation's resilience to catastrophic wildfires, improve land use planning and forest management, and better protect communities in wildfire prone regions.

The undersigned trade associations represent a majority of the property casualty insurance industry, including primary writers, reinsurers, agents, and brokers. Our industry has long been engaged in ongoing efforts to prevent and reduce devastation from natural catastrophes, including wildfires. Our members work to help individuals, families, homeowners, businesses, and governments identify and reduce their wildfire risk, promote preparedness, and assist in post-disaster recovery. This includes the creation and funding of research-focused organizations like the Insurance Institute for Business & Home Safety (IBHS). IBHS is a leader in the development of evidence-based solutions to effectively reduce wildfire risk and other harm to communities.

Over the past decade, population growth in areas at high-risk for wildfires has continued to increase, largely without appropriate risk reduction measures in place, putting more people and properties in harm's way. In the face of growing wildfire threats, Congress took bipartisan action to establish the Wildland Fire Mitigation and Management Commission in 2021. The Commission included representatives from federal agencies; state, local, and tribal governments; wildland firefighters; state fire marshals; forestry non-profits; public utilities; academia; and the private sector. The Commission delivered its final report to Congress in September 2023 with recommendations aimed at reducing the risk of catastrophic wildfires and the harmful impacts to communities and the environment.

As with the House version of the Fix Our Forests Act (H.R. 471), which passed the House with a bipartisan vote in January following the devastating Los Angeles fires, the Senate bill (S. 1462) closely aligns with many of the Commission's recommendations. We appreciate the Senate sponsors' inclusion of additional policy recommendations by the Commission. We strongly support provisions in both bills including those that seek to reduce the fuel loads in our nation's forests and rangelands, to help prevent utility infrastructure from igniting fires by enabling more active vegetation management and removal of hazardous trees in federal rights-of-way, and to support community wildfire risk reduction.

Legislation to reduce the risk of wildfires must address not only forests and rangelands, but also focus on reducing risk to the built environment to prevent or lessen the damage wrought by fires that can sweep through communities and destroy homes, businesses, and infrastructure. We applaud the bill's sponsors for expanding the provisions contained in the House bill to address the built environment, such as the establishment of a Community Wildfire Risk Reduction Program. This interagency program would help advance scientific research on wildfire resilience as well as support the adoption of fire-resistant building methods and standards, promote ignition-resistant materials, defensible space, and other measures to reduce risk.

We are encouraged by the announcement of a legislative hearing on S. 1462 and urge the Committee's swift consideration of it. We also stand ready to work toward final passage of the bill to help reduce the risk of catastrophic wildfires and safeguard lives, properties, and the environment.

Thank you for your leadership and consideration of this important bipartisan legislation.

Sincerely,



Sam Whitfield
Senior Vice President, Federal Government Relations & Political Engagement
American Property Casualty Insurance Association



Jimi Grande
SVP – Federal and Political Affairs
National Association of Mutual Insurance Companies



Nathan Riedel
Senior VP – Federal Government Affairs
Independent Insurance Agents & Brokers of America, Inc.



Nicole C. Austin
Senior Vice President and Director of Federal Affairs
Reinsurance Association of America



Mary 6, 2025

The Honorable John Boozman
Chairman
Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition and
Forestry
U.S. Senate

The Honorable Amy Klobuchar
Ranking Member
Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition and
Forestry
U.S. Senate

Dear Chairman Boozman and Ranking Member Klobuchar,

In advance of your Committee's legislative hearing on Tuesday, May 6, the Congressional Sportsmen's Foundation (CSF) would like to express our support for S. 1462, the Fix Our Forests Act. The House version of the legislation (H.R. 471) passed the House on a strong bipartisan vote of 279 – 141, a sign of the wide-spread support to combat the wildfire crisis we are facing, and we are thankful to see the Senate hold a hearing on the Senate version of this important bill.

As the Committee is aware, more than 117 million acres of our federal forests are fire-prone and need restoration through active management to mitigate severe wildfire risks. As wildfires increasingly degrade the forests, rangelands, and watersheds that America's sportsmen and women depend on for hunting and fishing access, the need to improve how our public lands are managed, in collaboration with other landowners, is paramount. To that end, the Fix Our Forests Act seeks to corner the wildfire crisis by establishing a more proactive management approach through reforms that facilitate increasing the pace of science-based forest restoration work at the landscape-level to improve forest health and resilience to protect communities, conserve fish and wildlife habitat, and improve access for hunters and anglers.

S. 1462 prioritizes hazardous fuels management on landscapes at high-risk for wildfire identified in the U.S. Forest Service's January 2022 "Wildfire Crisis Strategy" and the top 20% of firesheds for wildfire exposure, designated as fireshed management areas. Fuel treatment projects, including mechanical thinning, prescribed fire, cultural burning, and timber harvests, will be conducted at scale through categorical exclusion (CE) acreage increases, including insects and disease, wildfire resilience, and fuel breaks, as well as reauthorizing the successful community-supported Lake Tahoe Restoration Act, to treat forest stands at high risk for wildfire. Increasing the acres of the CEs improves efficiency to enable more acres to be treated, and utilizing these CEs is critical because extended NEPA processes are significantly longer, measured in years. Land managers need expanded authorities to reduce fuel loads on more acres in less time to reduce the threat of catastrophic wildfire.

Forest treatments in fireshed management areas will also take place through shared stewardship agreements with states and Indian Tribes. Additionally, S. 1462 expands several important

collaborative tools that are longstanding priorities for the sportsmen's community, including the Good Neighbor Authority and stewardship contracting, that will improve their effectiveness in reducing wildfire risk in collaboration with states, Indian tribes, and private partners. Supporting collaborative cross-boundary management is critical to address wildfire risk at scale.

The Fix Our Forests Act importantly addresses the 2015 *Cottonwood Environmental Law Center v. U.S. Forest Service* decision that has hindered forest management projects and threatens to require the U.S. Forest Service to revise forest plans for more than 120 National Forests which, as U.S. Forest Service testified in 2021, would cost millions of dollars and take years to complete. Shortly after the 2015 decision, the Obama administration supported a *Cottonwood* fix and stated in their 2016 petition for writ of certiorari to the U.S. Supreme Court that the decision "has the potential to cripple the Forest Service and BLM's land management functions and to impose substantial and unwarranted burdens on FWS and NMFS." S. 1462 would not obviate the need for Endangered Species Act consultation the project level, but it would allow projects to move forward without having to revise a U.S. Forest Service forest plan or Bureau of Land Management resource management plan. *Cottonwood's* duplicative analysis diverts limited agency resources and holds up wildfire risk reduction projects, which ironically, negatively impacts wildlife as habitat improvements projects that have been enjoined have subsequently had catastrophic wildfires occur in the same analysis area. We appreciate your past work to remedy *Cottonwood*, and we look forward to working with you to overcome the time-consuming hurdles, created by the decision, that delay forest restoration projects without any conservation benefit.

S. 1462 includes provisions to provide important guardrails for the litigation of forest management projects, which are challenged in court more than any other public lands management project case brought under NEPA. Litigants lose more than 75% of their cases, resulting in increased costs and delayed implementation of critical hazardous fuel reduction work. Without these changes, which do not remove public input, the U.S. Forest Service is unlikely to meet its forest restoration goals.

S. 1462 requires federal land management agencies to improve reporting on hazardous fuel reduction work, which is important to have accountability to track progress. Additionally, S. 1462 encourages the U.S. Forest Service to revise out of date forest plans and improve public access to information about forest plans and amendments. Last, the legislation advances efforts to restore white oak species, which are critical for wildlife, by supporting research and pilot programs to improve white regeneration.

In closing, CSF thanks the Committee for holding a hearing on the bipartisan Fix Our Forests Act, which is strongly supported by CSF and many of the nation's leading sporting-conservation organizations, and we look forward to working with the Committee and the bill sponsors to see the Fix Our Forests Act signed into law.

Sincerely,



John Culclasure
Senior Director, Forest Policy

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

MAY 6, 2025

U.S. Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry
 Legislative Hearing to Review S. 1462, *Fix Our Forests Act*
 May 6, 2025
 Questions for the Record
Mr. Chris French

Senator John Boozman

1) Your testimony mentioned a provision on road construction under Good Neighbor Authority included in H.R. 471, the House-passed Fix Our Forests Act (FOFA), but was not included in S. 1462. Will you please explain why the Forest Service supports including this provision in S. 1462. Please provide any real-world examples demonstrating the utility and importance of this provision, and please explain how removing this provision might negatively impact the agency's ability to conduct proper forest management, improve public safety, and/or help mitigate the frequency and intensity of catastrophic wildfires?

Response: Timber receipts could be used for construction of new permanent roads where a road realignment is required to address environmental issues such as riparian areas, to provide additional public access and for future fire suppression and forest timber and fuels projects, such as maintenance of fuels reduction treatments. The receipts could also be used for reconstruction of road components (bridges, retaining walls) that have reached the end of their lifecycle.

A real-world example would be on the George Washington and Jefferson National Forests, which seeks to partner with the Commonwealth of Virginia, Department of Transportation, to restore roads and other critical infrastructure impacted by Hurricane Helene under a Good Neighbor Agreement. Proposed activities will include improvements, maintenance and restoration of existing roads, replacement and improvements of culverts, new bridges or aquatic organism passages where appropriate, repairs to impacted bridges, road brushing, motor grading, road drainage improvements, guardrails, gravel, paving, or reconstruction of impacted roads. Realignment due to environmental conditions, such as changes in streamflow patterns and expected precipitation levels, issues may be included, which would replace the previous route with a new permanent road to prevent future resource damage.

2) During the hearing, you stated Forest Service Land Management Plans provide safeguards to ensure projects follow proper management and any harvesting or cutting of trees that would be conducted under FOFA authorities wouldn't be for the sole purpose of harvesting timber. Will you please provide more information on the process the agency undertakes to identify and inform projects allowed under Land Management Plans? How does a Land Management Plan's timber allowance compare to the actual level of timber sales conducted across the National Forest System?

Response: Land management plans guide ongoing, integrated resource management of the resources within the plan area in the context of the broader landscape, giving due consideration to the relative values of the various resources in any particular area (36 CFR 219.1(b)). The plan itself does not compel any action or authorize any site-specific projects or activities (including timber harvest). However, the

National Forest Management Act, 16 U.S.C. 1604(i), requires projects and activities to be consistent with the plan.

Land management plans consist of components to guide project planning to ensure statutory requirements are met, such as providing for diversity of plant and animal communities and ensuring that timber only be harvested where protections exist for soils, watersheds, reforestation, fish and wildlife, recreation, aesthetics, and other resources. Projects proposed by the Forest Service are subject to the National Environmental Policy Act's analysis and disclosure requirements, as well as the requirements of related statutes like the Endangered Species Act and the National Historic Preservation Act.

Land management plans identify either an Allowable Sale Quantity (ASQ) or Projected Timber Sale Quantity (PTSQ). ASQ was used in Land Management Plans (LMP) that pre-date the 2012 Planning Rule (this scenario is most common). Allowable Sale Quantity is the maximum volume potentially available as part of regularly scheduled timber harvest from lands suitable for timber production. It is an annual average based on the land management plan's initial 10-year estimate and does not take the planning unit's fiscal capability and organizational capacity into account. ASQ is not a timber target but rather an upper limit. Plans developed after 2012 use the PTSQ, which is the estimated quantity of timber expected to be sold. It is an annual average based on the land management plan's initial 10-year estimate. The PTSQ (unlike ASQ) is based on the planning unit's fiscal capability and organizational capacity.

The total of ASQ and PTSQ is approximately 8 billion board feet (BBF). The average timber volume sold from FY20-24 was 3.0 BBF. The discrepancy between the two figures is due to ASQ not taking into account budgets and staffing, the impacts of fires and insect and disease activity, and other factors.

3) S. 1462 adds various prescribed fire sections directing efforts to properly train both federal and non-federal prescribed fire personnel and another addressing liability protection for prescribed fire personnel. Will you please speak to the importance of prescribed fire across the landscape as well as how these provisions in S. 1462 will improve the ability for prescribed fire to be utilized to prevent wildfire?

Response: Prescribed fire is a critical tool in reducing wildfire risk and creating and maintaining fire adaptive ecosystems. Research indicates that prescribed fire, which often follows mechanical treatments, is the best way to reduce wildfire risk in many ecosystems. Prescribed fire is the most cost-effective tool for reducing wildfire risk and provides a multitude of benefits such as wildlife habitat improvements and protection of water quality and quantity. Modeling the change in wildfire risk within high risk firesheds clearly demonstrates the greatest wildfire risk reduction occurs as a result of fire. The removal of non-merchantable material from firesheds is critical to reduce wildfire risk. S. 1462 continues to build on the work the Forest Service currently achieves through partnerships with other Federal, State, Tribal and local Governments. Fire does not recognize jurisdictional boundaries so wildfire risk reduction must occur across all jurisdictions at a pace and scale that will have an impact. Increases in capabilities to complete prescribed fires on all jurisdictions is critical. The continued development of a system that trains both federal and non-federal personnel to achieve this work will help close the gap between the current capabilities to complete prescribe fire and the need for these treatments. In addition, liability protection for properly trained personnel doing this work is critical to ensure we have personnel willing to engage in

this work. Prescribed fire has a level of risk that can never be eliminated but personnel who are properly trained and willing to conduct this critical work help mitigate this risk.

USDA supports the provisions in this subtitle but would like to work with the committee on some technical changes to aid the implementation of some of these sections.

4) The National Forests in Alaska are unique in their climate and wildfire risk to other national forests across the Western United States. Will you please explain how the new statutory authorities provided under S. 1462, if enacted into law, will help the agency improve forest health on National Forest System lands in Alaska?

Response: S. 1462 provides benefits to Alaska as it does to all other states in the form of expanding forest health and wildfire risk reduction efforts. Specifically, it expands upon the existing designated fire management areas to include Alaska, which previously were not included.

5) How does prolonged litigation uncertainty impact the Forest Service's ability to initiate or complete hazardous fuels projects and other critical work on National Forest System lands? How would limits on frivolous litigation timelines assist the agency in conducting critical wildfire prevention projects?

Response: Even when the best available science and community feedback align on the proposed approach, projects may be delayed, stopped, or modified because of litigation. The Forest Service commits substantial resources (budget and staffing) to prepare for and defend legal challenges. These resources would otherwise go towards more work on the ground, more recreational services to the public, and more projects to protect communities from catastrophic wildfires. When a lawsuit is filed or an injunction is imposed, often the same staff that would otherwise prepare for the next project to reduce catastrophic fire risk or protect a community watershed, must instead help the agency prepare to go to court. One often overlooked impact from litigation is the delay to similar projects that are in development, where work is stopped until the outcome of the lawsuit is determined. The result is projects that cost too much, take too long, and a loss of trust from the communities within and around our National Forests. This is particularly true of communities which work with us to collaboratively develop projects that are challenged in litigation by national organizations philosophically opposed to any timber harvest, grazing, or recreational motorized access on National Forests.

6) What impacts do hazardous, dying, and/or dead trees have on forest health and what limitations does the Forest Service face in conducting salvage operations on National Forest System lands? Will S. 1462 help improve this work and does the Forest Service recommend further legislative flexibilities to improve these efforts?

Response: Dead and dying trees that have been damaged by fire, storms, or infestations of insects or disease pose threats to forest health, including by being potential vectors to other healthy trees for insects and disease. These trees become hazard trees when they have a structural defect that makes them likely to fall, in whole or in part, and pose a direct safety risk to the public—whether they are along roadways, recreation sites, trails, or other infrastructure.

Removing these trees must be done quickly for a variety of reasons: to expeditiously reduce wildfire risk and remove public safety hazards. Salvage of merchantable timber needs to occur quickly in order to recover economic value from the wood. However, the environmental analysis requirements under NEPA as well as frequent litigation limit the agency's ability to conduct salvage operations. S. 1462 would improve our ability to do this by directing the Forest Service to develop a categorical exclusion to comply with NEPA for this type of work. However, as acting Associate Chief Chris French stated in the hearing, establishing this CE statutorily as part of FOFA would make this authority available to the agency immediately and be quicker than directing the agency to develop the CE administratively.

Senator Ben Ray Lujan

1) When the President released his budget last week, he recommended a \$300 million cut to the Forest and Rangeland Research program. At a time when megafires are devastating the Western United States, I am disappointed that President Trump has proposed cutting research that advances our understanding of forest and rangeland ecosystems. Members of this Committee have heard me raise this issue before but let me do so again. As a country, we spend billions improving our understanding of hurricanes and tornadoes. But we don't invest at the same level for catastrophic wildfires. That must change. I believe that next-generation fire and vegetation research is critical to preventing wildland fires. That is why I am leading the bipartisan Regional Leadership in Wildland Fire Research Act with Senators Sullivan, Sheehy, and Padilla.

1A) Will the U.S. Forest Service still be able conduct this vitally important research if the President's Budget is realized and this fund is zeroed out?

Response: At the U.S. Forest Service, we are getting back to basics and that includes managing our national forests for their intended purposes of producing timber, clean water, recreation, and other necessities for the American taxpayers. The President's budget recommendations on discretionary funding levels for FY2025 (May 2, 2025) reduces Forest Rangeland Research by \$300 million but maintains funding for Forest Inventory and Analysis, a longstanding census of forest resources and conditions. FOFA includes several provisions that will assist the Forest Service with implementing priorities related to timber production and hazardous fuel removal on the National Forests.

1B) Can you speak to the importance of developing next-generation fire and vegetation models to support wildland fire management and rehabilitation?

Response: Next-generation fire and vegetation models and data are critical for all aspects of wildland fire management. The Fix Our Forests Act recognizes this and includes requirements to produce maps that identify areas of high wildfire risk. The U.S. Forest Service, along with partners from DOI, DOD, and NASA, are actively developing nationally consistent next-generation fire models and data for fuels, wildfire behavior, fire weather, and smoke.

2) Whenever I'm go back home, folks tell me they are terrified about what the Forest Service's layoffs will mean for New Mexico's fire season. According to a briefing provided by your staff at

the US Forest Service, New Mexico faces above average fire risk for the months of May, June, and August. Wildfire suppression requires a wide variety of support positions – weather forecasting, fire behavior modeling, logistics, planning, finance, safety and more. Many of the people who perform these roles have other jobs the rest of the year and are assigned to Complex Incident Management Teams during the fire season. Unlike primary firefighters, many of these employees – including folks in New Mexico – were offered deferred resignation and voluntary early retirement. As New Mexico faces heightened wildfire risk in the coming months, what is the Forest Service's plan to ensure these critical positions are filled on the Complex Incident Management Teams?

Response: FOFA does not address firefighting personnel associated with wildland fire response. FOFA does provide several important tools to reduce the threat of wildland fire that are supported by USDA. USDA Secretarial Memorandum 1078-011 dated May 20, 2025, affirms the USDA's strong support in ensuring the capacity to respond to and mitigate the threat of wildfire in the coming fire season. The Memo directs all USDA mission areas to assess their ability to assist with wildfire response within 30 days, assess the impacts of voluntary departures, and prioritize and redeploy the non-fire workforce to support wildfire response when reaching preparedness level 3 or higher.

3) Justifiably so, preventing forest fires has been a big focus of this hearing, but I believe that recovery needs to also be a part of that conversation. Tree planting programs are critical to recovering from wildfires, but they depend on a reliable supply of native seedlings. I was glad to see that the Fix Our Forests Act includes provisions to strengthen the domestic seed supply chain and develop a national strategy to address the shortage of tree seedlings. These are great long-term goals, but New Mexico needs reforestation support now. My Seedlings for Sustainable Habitat Restoration Act that I introduced last Congress with Senator Cornyn clarifies that funding from the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law can be used to support the development of seedling nurseries being built today.

Can you speak to the need to invest more heavily in seedling centers and how these centers support forest recovery after a wildfire? Does having seedlings grown in their respective region result in lower mortality rates and greater cost efficiencies for reforestation efforts?

Response: Reforestation is critical to re-establishing forests in the aftermath of wildfires. It is particularly important to use locally-adapted, native seedlings which improve the likelihood of successful reforestation. FOFA provides helpful tools that will assist the agency and its partners with reforestation, nursery and genetic resources support.

4) It is critical that local communities are included in any hazardous fuel management activity in their area. In the past few years, my office has received requests from local communities that want to help conduct hazardous fuel management near their homes and businesses. They've been turned down by the Forest Service. Folks would much prefer to help cull the forest near their community than have the Forest Service conduct prescribed burns – which have a history of getting out of control in New Mexico. I am working on legislation to allow local contractors –

folks with a chainsaw, a truck, and an entrepreneurial spirit – to compete for Forest Service contracts to thin the forest of hazardous fuel and protect their communities from wildfire.

Can you speak to the importance of community engagement when it comes to hazardous fuel management? Would the US Forest Service be supportive of allowing local contractors to compete for hazardous fuel removal contracts?

Response: We agree regarding the importance of community engagement when it comes to hazardous fuels management and support the provisions in FOFA (e.g., Sections 114, 115, 201-205) that facilitate local community and contractor involvement.

5) In recent years Congress made investments into the Forest Service for wildfire risk reduction, forest landowner support, and tree planting in towns and cities. For example, the USDA's Rural Development and Forest Service used these dollars last year to establish a new loan guarantee program to support the reopening and expansion of sawmills. Are awardees of Forest Service funds previously frozen receiving clarity from the Forest Service given the recent court-ordered release of these funds?

Response: FOFA does not include changes to the use of these funds.

6) Recent reports indicate that about 50% of the cost of fuels reduction is disposal. While this bill takes some key steps toward building an offtake market for these materials through biochar, clearly more needs to be done.

6A) Does the Forest Service know how much material needs to be removed from forests?

Response: National Forests are in crisis due to uncharacteristically severe wildfires, insect and disease outbreaks, invasive species, and other stressors whose impacts have been compounded by too little active management. For example:

- The 2023 Wildfire Hazard Potential for the United States report identifies 66,940,000 acres of National Forest System land under a very high or high fire risk.
- Roughly 78,800,000 acres of National Forest System lands are already experiencing, or are at risk of experiencing, insect and disease infestations.

USDA supports the various provisions in FOFA that streamline environmental review and provide litigation relief associated with removing hazardous fuels from National Forest System lands and believes they will assist expediting work to reduce the acres at risk of wildfire.

6B) Do you have a sense of how much more fuels reduction work we could do if biomass off takers were on site making disposal a non-issue?

Response: There would be an increase in the amount of work which could be done to reduce wildfire risk. The exact amount would be difficult to determine without more research. USDA supports finding additional markets for forest biomass such as the biochar provisions included in FOFA.

6C) *Would the Forest Service support helping the private sector to lower the cost of fuels reduction and create valuable products instead?*

Response: Yes, USDA supports additional markets for the private sector to lower the cost of fuel reduction including the biochar provisions in FOFA.

7) *Wildland firefighting is inherently intergovernmental. States and local firefighters respond to 80% of the wildfires in the United States and the State Fire Assistance and Volunteer Fire Assistance programs are critical to that. How will the proposed changes and cuts to the State Fire Assistance and Volunteer Fire Assistance programs further exacerbate the shortage of wildland firefighters for 2025?*

Response: USDA officials will follow up with you separately as FOFA does not include changes to the use of these funds.

Senator Peter Welch

1) *During this week's hearing, you mentioned that the categorical exclusions in the Fix our Forest Act (FOFA) might not apply to projects carried out in Vermont's Green Mountain National Forest. Can you confirm that, if FOFA were hypothetically applied retroactively to Vermont, no forestry projects would be affected? If projects would be affected, please provide examples.*

Response: The Green Mountain National Forest in Vermont does not contain any Fireshed Management Areas as defined by the proposed FOFA language in Section 101, Designation of Fireshed Management Areas. The FOFA proposes to increase the maximum project size for a series of congressionally-established NEPA categorical exclusions (strategic fuel breaks, wildfire resilience, insect and disease infestations, and sage grouse or mule deer habitat). To date, the Green Mountain National Forest has used these categorical exclusions very minimally due to inapplicability either overall or because of specific eligibility criteria. However, the FOFA at Section 213, if passed, will require development of a high-priority hazard tree categorical exclusion, which could apply to forest management activities that mitigate risks associated with high-priority hazard trees on the Green Mountain National Forest.

2) *The Fix our Forests Act would no longer require the Forest Service to reinitiate the Endangered Species Act consultation when a new species or critical habitat is listed, or when new information arises about the condition of a listed species. Given the mission of the Forest Service to sustain the health, diversity, and productivity of the nation's forests, this provision would limit the Forest Service's ability to protect wildlife, threatening biodiversity. The American public deserves to have the confidence that the agency is upholding its responsibility to protect listed species and their habitat.*

In your testimony before the House Natural Resources Committee in April 2024, you wrote that USDA seeks clear consultation processes to assure the public it is protecting listed species while managing forests effectively. How will this bill's reduction of consultation requirements affect endangered species conservation efforts?

Response: The proposed judicial reform offered by FOFA would effectively reduce the workload and costs associated with reinitiating Endangered Species Act consultation on land management plans when a new species or critical habitats are listed or when new information becomes available. Forest plans do not authorize or mandate any on-the-ground activities rendering consultation an unnecessary procedural step at the plan level. Effects of new land management plan standards are analyzed during consultation on plan amendments and revisions. Effects to listed species or critical habitat are considered during project-level consultation. Project-level consultation must occur in any instance where a project may affect an ESA-listed species or its critical habitat, regardless of the status of the consultation completed at the Forest Plan level. This reform will reduce procedural burdens and promote timely decisions which foster the survival and recovery of species and critical habitats afforded by the Endangered Species Act.

Senator Adam Schiff

1) With the significant loss of personnel in connection with the deferred resignation program (DRP) and other voluntary resignations, the Secretary has granted to the Forest Service an exemption to the hiring freeze in several fire-related positions based on their criticality to the national security and public safety responsibilities of USDA. How many employees is the Forest Service seeking to hire throughout the remainder of FY25? How many of these positions are replacing openings caused by the DRP? What is the Forest Service's timeline and plan to expedite this hiring, given the impending fire season?

Response: FOFA does not address firefighting personnel associated with wildland fire response. USDA Secretarial Memorandum 1078-011 dated May 20, 2025, affirms the USDA's strong support in ensuring the capacity to respond to and mitigate the threat of wildfire in the coming fire season. The Memo directs all USDA mission areas to assess their ability to assist with wildfire response within 30 days, assess the impacts of voluntary departures, and prioritize and redeploy the non-fire workforce to support wildfire response when reaching preparedness level 3 or higher.

2) The Fix Our Forests Act impacts all major units of the Forest Service, including state and private forestry and research. The President's budget indicates the Administration is considering moving wildland fire management outside of USDA, consolidating regions and forests, and reorganizing forestry assistance programs within the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS). Has the Administration worked with states and other groups involved in wildfire management on the proposal to move wildland fire management outside the Forest Service? Is USDA considering reorganizing forestry assistance programs within the NRCS, as has been reported?

Response: FOFA does not address moving wildland fire management programs outside of the Forest Service.

3) In its most recent update on the Wildfire Crisis Strategy, the Forest Service noted that while recent investments from Congress were “critical downpayments” for a record-breaking number of acres treated for wildfire, further investments are needed to fully carry out the Wildfire Crisis Strategy. The Fix Our Forests Act does not include additional funding for the Forest Service to complete forest restoration work and doesn’t increase funding authorizations for partnership programs that reduce wildfire risk. Does the Forest Service have an estimate of how much additional funding is needed to implement the fire-shed projects required by the Fix Our Forests Act? Can you describe how recent additional investments from Congress have helped the Forest Service and its partners treat more acres?

Response: The Forest Service has not analyzed the fire-shed projects required by FOFA. In fiscal year 2024, the agency along with partners, communities, and Tribes— treated a total of 4.28 million acres of hazardous fuels. This includes a record of nearly 2.2 million acres of prescribed fire, breaking the previous record of 1.95 million acres that was set just the prior fiscal year. The Forest Service’s preliminary assessments indicated 6.4 million acres require treatment annually. This would require an associated sustained Hazardous Fuels funding level of ~\$2 billion per year to be successful.

4) In his remarks, Mr. French stated that the Forest Service wins 4 out of 5 court cases brought against the Forest Service for forestry management activities. This means that approximately 1 in 5 cases brought against the Forest Service prevail. The Fix Our Forests Act reduces the statute of limitations to 150 days, directs the use of emergency authorities under the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), and increases the scale of projects that don’t need to go through an Environmental Assessment or Environmental Impact Statement.

4A) Given these proposed changes, how does the Forest Service plan to working collaboratively and engaging in strong communication with communities where a fire-shed management project may be carried out? How does leadership at the Forest Service and USDA anticipate ensuring communities will still have a voice on forest management in their communities?

Response: When we propose projects to accomplish our mission that could potentially have significant environmental effects, we engage communities and give the American people the opportunity to help develop projects by participating in field trips and public meetings and offering the opportunity to provide comments before we make decisions. We do this to ensure all voices are heard and considered, and that our projects reflect both science and the public’s views before reaching a decision.

4B) Please also provide data on the percentage and number of fire-shed management cases brought against the Forest Service within 150 days.

Response: Our database does not track fire-shed management cases. But it does show 84 project decisions signed in fiscal years 2015-2024 that were litigated and had “Hazardous Fuels Management” cited as a project purpose. The Forest Service conservatively estimates it conducts more than 5,000 hazardous fuels

projects on more than 2 million acres every year. On average, these lawsuits were filed with the courts 340 days after the subject project decisions were signed; 36 (or 43%) were filed within 150 days.

5) In the last five years, the contiguous U.S. has been at the highest wildland fire Preparedness Level, PL5, multiple times. PL5 means that all national resources are heavily committed, additional measures are taken to support geographic areas, and active geographic areas must take emergency measures to sustain incident operations. In 2024, the U.S. reached PL5 three times – the first time ever – for a total of 59 days. In 2021, the U.S. was at PL5 for 68 days. Being at PL5 means that there are almost no additional resources available for new or increasingly complex or larger fires.

Accordingly, how many seasonal firefighters does the Forest Service hire each year? Will the reduction in USDA funding for fiscal year 2026, as proposed by the White House, reduce the number of seasonal firefighters? By approximately what percentage would the seasonal firefighter hiring number be affected? How will this promote effective and efficient wildland fire management and suppression? How will the U.S. be able to fight fires if there are fewer resources, including staff with “red cards,” to fight them with?

Response: FOFA does not address firefighting personnel associated with wildland fire response. USDA Secretarial Memorandum 1078-011 dated May 20, 2025, affirms the USDA’s strong support in ensuring the capacity to respond to and mitigate the threat of wildfire in the coming fire season. The Memo directs all USDA mission areas to assess their ability to assist with wildfire response within 30 days, assess the impacts of voluntary departures, and prioritize and redeploy the non-fire workforce to support wildfire response when reaching preparedness level 3 or higher.

6) How many full-time, permanent Forest Service staff are expected to be fully employed (i.e., not in administrative voluntary resignation status) at the end of December 2025? How does this projected amount compare to the number of full-time, permanent Forest Service staff as of January 20, 2025?

Response: FOFA does not address the employment status of Forest Service personnel.

7) Since the Rhode Island ruling earlier this year, what is the status of Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) and Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA) funds that were previously frozen? Please share the status of funding related to previously awarded projects, including projects in California, under the Collaborative Wildfire Risk Reduction Program, Hazardous Fuels Transportation Program, Forest Legacy Program, and Urban and Community Forestry.

Response: FOFA does not address these funding sources.

8) It has been reported that Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE) oversight and reviews have led to modifications in Forest Service operations and contracting. For example,

how has reducing most of the staff travel and business credit card limits to \$1 affected units' abilities to purchase office supplies and seasonal contracting work (e.g., trash pickup, toilet pumping, campground host hiring)? How will these changes impact visitors' experience in National Forests?

Response: FOIA does not address DOGE reviews.