

STATE OF COLORADO FOREST HEALTH BRIEFING BEFORE THE JOINT COMMITTEE ON

AGRICULTURE AND NATURAL RESOURCES

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE – FOREST SERVICE

ROCKY MOUNTAIN REGION

BRIAN FEREBEE, DEPUTY REGIONAL FORESTER

Chairman Sonnenberg (Sen. Jerry Sonnenberg), Chairman Vigil (Rep. Ed Vigil) and  
Members of the Committee:

Good morning, I am Brian Ferebee, Deputy Regional Forester for the Rocky  
Mountain Region of the United States Forest Service. Thank you for the  
opportunity to come before you today.

In Colorado, the Rocky Mountain Region has the honor and responsibility of  
overseeing 11 National Forests and two National Grasslands. I am honored to  
have public land management responsibilities in Colorado, and I appreciate the  
close working relationship we have with you and your constituents.

I'd like to note that our final budget numbers for this year support our  
collaborative work and serve as a positive signal for our work across this Region  
and the State of Colorado. As we look forward, the President's Budget for 2016  
continues to emphasize restoration treatments and the infrastructure needed to

protect and restore healthy, resilient ecosystems—ecosystems capable of furnishing abundant and clean water; resisting damage from fire, insects, and diseases; and maintaining a strong industry, thereby supporting economic opportunities for rural communities.

## **RESTORATION**

Ecological restoration is one of four regional priorities, and guides much of our work in the field. Public service is another priority that focuses on relationships with our customers and partners and our commitment to providing much valued products and services to the American public.

In 2014, the region harvested close to 477,000 CCF of timber, with almost 50% of that accomplishment coming from our national forests here in Colorado.

This harvest equates to:

- 69,000,000 board feet of sawtimber in Colorado - enough to build 3,200 houses.
- 48,000,000 board feet was harvested as fuelwood, posts, poles and biomass for fuel pellets.

Timber sales and stewardship contracts are two important tools we use to accomplish restoration goals. Our restoration work would not be possible without the four biomass facilities and 38 mills in Colorado.

## PROJECTS

Last week the Forest Service and the Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS) awarded funding for a project on the San Juan National Forest.

This project provides for fuel treatments near heavily populated communities with moderate to extreme risk of wildfire. Treatments will mitigate uncharacteristic wildfire behavior and improve forest health. Strategic location of treatments within the watershed will protect the Dutton ditch drainage and Pagosa Lakes, which are domestic water sources for the majority of the Archuleta County population.

The project funded by this award allow us to collaboratively achieve more in restoration toward safer communities, healthier watersheds, and more vibrant public and private lands.

Additional forest health work in Colorado includes:

- The Grand Mesa, Uncompahgre and Gunnison (GMUG) National Forests on the Western Slope accelerated restoration activities and promoted resiliency resulting in a 20-year high sale volume of nearly 61,000 CCF in 12 timber sales. This work occurred from Garfield County to Hinsdale County, and from Saguache County to the Utah border.

- Looking to the future, the GMUG is proposing a multi-year project to treat insect and disease affected areas. Approximately 120,000 acres are being considered in the analysis. In addition to accomplishing much needed forest health work this project would provide a steady stream of timber with a positive impact to the local economies. With the scale of forest health issues and the need to support local industry, the Region has provided additional funding to the GMUG over the past two years.
  
- The **Long-Term Stewardship Contract** awarded to Confluence Energy of Kremmling, Colorado, further demonstrates our commitment to restoring ecosystems. The long-term nature of this contract provides certainty to an emerging wood pellet industry.

That is one example of four Long-Term Stewardship Contracts the Forest Service has across the state of Colorado. Over 7,000 acres per year of fuels reduction work in the Wildland Urban Interface (WUI) is being implemented through these contracts.

- Additionally, in partnership with Denver Water, we completed over 24,000 acres of vegetation management and hazardous fuels treatments over the last five years. Another 12,000 acres of fuels and restoration projects are currently underway.
- I am very encouraged by the work to date and excited about the expansion of the partnership to include Colorado State Forest Service as we advance much needed work across all lands to improve critical watersheds.
- In the southern part of the state, the **La Garita Hills Vegetation Project**, is an analysis of nearly 200,000 acres across Forest Service (Rio Grande) and BLM (San Luis Valley) land. The project focuses on maintaining, improving or restoring rangeland and forest health, wildlife habitats, as well as improving stream, riparian and watershed health.
- Across the Front Range, the Pike and San Isabel National Forests are working with multiple water providers, government agencies, nonprofits and other stakeholders to form a collaborative for the entire Arkansas River Basin. This group will likely function as a subcommittee of the Arkansas Roundtable and share information about watershed health projects in the Basin.

## **INDUSTRY**

I want to again emphasize that the Region values the timber industry as one of our key partners in restoring landscapes and creating resilient forests.

From working with the largest mill in the state, Montrose Forest Products, to the many small operators such as Entermountain Enterprises in Del Norte, the Region recognizes that a diverse and viable forest products industry is vital to the health of Colorado's forests and economy.

## **FIRE**

We also work year-round with the Colorado Division of Fire Prevention and Control for preparedness and suppression of catastrophic wildfire. In 2014, the Forest Service completed over 40,000 acres of hazardous fuels reduction treatments on federal lands in Colorado to mitigate wildland fire risk. Of those treatments, approximately 54% occurred in the Wildland Urban Interface.

Additionally, over the last three years, the U.S. Forest Service awarded approximately \$2.3 million dollars in grants to Colorado State Forest Service for non-federal land treatment in the Wildland Urban Interface. The Forest Service works with local communities in the development of Community Wildfire Protection Plans and during forest planning opportunities for state and local involvement.

In preparedness for suppression, the Region has over 365 firefighters and 68 fire engines and is part of a large interagency network with many more resources.

Through the regional interagency coordination center, we can draw on over 1,000 firefighters from local, state, and other federal agencies. Additional resources can be pulled from almost anywhere in the country.

This year, Congress has also appropriated \$65 million to the Forest Service for airtankers. In 2015, the Forest Service expects to have up to 29 large airtankers (LATs) available for wildfire suppression nationwide.

## **USES**

Restoring and protecting our forests and rangelands strengthens rural economies – by supporting jobs, timber, clean water, habitat for wildlife, and a range of other values and benefits that people want and need.

For example, in Colorado we have 600 permits for seasonal livestock grazing. We are committed to working closely with these permittees in upholding ranching as part of the Colorado heritage.

Additionally, since 1978, we have worked closely with the Colorado State Forest Service supporting urban and community forestry. In the past five years, we have invested \$1.5 million with funds leveraged by the state and partners to achieve enhanced diversity and resiliency.

Healthy resilient forests provide the backdrop for recreation and tourism visitation to National Forests and communities throughout Colorado. We are seeing an increase in visitation and demand for services including healthy lifestyle activities.

Earlier this month Colorado was the world stage for thousands of international visitors, as we hosted the 2015 International Alpine Ski Championships in Vail and Beaver Creek in Eagle County. The ski races took place on the White River National Forest. Attendance numbers for this recent event indicate over 200,000 spectators in Colorado with a television audience of over a billion viewers.

The 2014 visitation records indicate that across the Rocky Mountain Region, we had 30.7 million visitors to Forest Service lands – the vast majority of those were in Colorado.

## **CONCLUSION**

In closing, the National Forests in Colorado provide many benefits to the people of this country and to this state. Our goal remains healthy forests through conservation, sustainability, research, providing wood and forest products, managing fire behavior and sustainable forest management. We are committed to increase the pace and scale of restoration – working across jurisdictions – leveraging partnership resources that result in healthy, diverse and more resilient



forests to benefit today and future generations. Our work together will enhance and improve the condition of Colorado's federal, state and private forests and support local communities.

Chairmen, this concludes my prepared remarks, I welcome questions from you and your committee.