

FINAL

**STATE OF COLORADO FOREST HEALTH BRIEFING BEFORE
THE HOUSE RURAL AFFAIRS & AGRICULTURE COMMITTEE
SENATE AGRICULTURE & NATURAL RESOURCES COMMITTEE MEMBERS INVITED
U.S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE, FOREST SERVICE
ROCKY MOUNTAIN REGION
STEVE LOHR, DIRECTOR OF RENEWABLE RESOURCES
MARCH 9, 2020**

Chairman Roberts (Rep. Dylan Roberts) and Members of the House Committee and invited members of the Senate Committee.

Good morning, I am Steve Lohr, director of Renewable Resources for the Rocky Mountain Region of the United States Department of Agriculture, Forest Service. I am representing Jennifer Eberlien, acting regional forester for the Rocky Mountain Region, who is unable to be here today.

Thank you for the opportunity to come before you today.

In Colorado, the Rocky Mountain Region has the honor of overseeing seven national forest and national grassland management units. These public lands are central to the identity and prosperity of the State of Colorado. The acting regional forester, Jennifer Eberlien, whom I represent today, has expressed that it has been her honor over the past four months to have the multi-use land management responsibilities in Colorado and surrounding states. She appreciates the close working relationships that our regional staff has with you and your constituents.

We would like to thank our state partners, including Colorado State Forester Mike Lester and his staff, for the productive nature of our partnerships. Together with the Colorado State Forest Service, the wood products industry and our many partners, we are doing tremendous work in Colorado to sustain our nation's forests and grasslands for present and future generations.

Unfortunately, much of our forests are susceptible to the growing threat of wildfire. Changing climate conditions, insect and disease outbreaks, and dramatic population growth compound the wildfire threat. Increased population puts more people on roads, puts pressure on wildlife and recreation infrastructure and increases water demands.

The Forest Service Shared Stewardship strategy finalized in August 2018 describes the importance of addressing these challenges by working with partners across our shared landscape through a three-pronged approach:

1. Determine management needs on a State level.
2. Do the right work in the right places at the right scale.
3. Use all available tools for active management, including timber sales, mechanical treatments, and prescribed fire, to do more work on the ground with our partners.

In October 2019, the USDA Forest Service signed a Shared Stewardship Memorandum of Understanding with the State of Colorado. The agreement establishes a framework for federal and state agencies to collaborate better, focus on accomplishing mutual goals, and respond to ecological, natural resource and recreational challenges and concerns for our 24 million acres of forest lands in Colorado. Under the agreement, over the next five years, the State of Colorado and USDA Forest Service will focus on priority, landscape-scale forest and grassland restoration activities that protect at-risk communities and watersheds across all lands. We have been meeting with Dan Gibbs, Mike Lester, and Dan Prenzlów to work out the details of how we will move together through Shared Stewardship.

Rocky Mountain Restoration Initiative

A new, stakeholder-driven effort called the Rocky Mountain Restoration Initiative, or RMRI, is a great example of Shared Stewardship in action. The Initiative focuses on increasing the resilience of forests, wildlife habitat, communities, recreation opportunities and water resources across public and private lands. Co-convened in May 2019 by the USDA Forest Service and the National Wild Turkey Federation, the Initiative is led by more than 30 partners, including the Department of Natural Resources, Colorado State Forest Service, Colorado Water Conservation Board, Colorado Division of Fire Prevention and Control, utility providers, recreation industry advocates, nonprofit conservation groups and other local, state and federal agencies.

On December 9, the Initiative's stakeholders unanimously selected Southwest Colorado as the first place where it will collectively focus on fuel treatments, prescribed fire and other cross-cutting efforts. The project area encompasses nearly 750,000 acres, stretching 120 miles along Colo. Highway 160, including the towns of Cortez, Dolores, Mancos, Durango and the San Juan National Forest where recent fires, like the 416, have had significant impacts on the communities and the Animas River. The project will serve as a model not only for rural Colorado but for many rural communities throughout the West. It will establish a feasible process to create ecologically resilient landscapes, support local livelihoods and allow communities to live safely with wildfire. In addition to southwest Colorado, the Initiative will pursue how to support recommendations in the Upper Arkansas and Upper South Platte watersheds. We plan to remain engaged with all project proponents to share in lessons learned and opportunities that may come from RMRI efforts. The Initiative aims to overcome barriers that impede working at a greater pace and scale, including the high cost of work, the lack of social acceptance of forest management and prescribed fire, and the lack of a wood-products industry and

workforce. We hope the Initiative's innovative cross-collaborative foundation increases the pace and scale of work across Colorado and beyond.

Preparing for Wildfire in Colorado

We know that uncharacteristically intense and large wildfires are threatening many of the values we care about in Colorado.

Fortunately, there were fewer fires in 2019 due to increased moisture levels and moderate weather. 856 wildfires burned 40,392 acres across Colorado in 2019. Those fires counted for approximately a quarter of the five-year average. Favorable weather conditions last year allowed our land managers in both the Rocky Mountain Region and in Colorado to implement more than double the ten-year average number of acres of prescribed fire on the landscape.

Continuing to take advantage of favorable conditions during moderate years will allow managers to build on the vision of our National Cohesive Strategy *"To safely and effectively extinguish fire, when needed; use fire where allowable; manage our natural resources; and as a Nation, live with wildland fire"*.

Over the last five years, the Region has steadily increased the pace and scale of fuels treatments with an emphasis on protecting communities and watersheds vulnerable to wildfire. In Fiscal Year 2019, Forest Service land managers treated approximately 203,000 acres on National Forest System lands in the five-state Rocky Mountain Region. Hazardous fuels reduction treatments on National Forest System lands in Colorado, both mechanical and prescribed fire, were implemented on over 92,000 acres, representing almost double the acreage accomplished in Fiscal Year 2018. Of those treatments, 45% of them occurred within the Wildland Urban Interface of Colorado. Sharing stewardship with partners, like the Colorado State Forest Service, and water utility providers, such as Denver Water, enhances these treatments.

Beyond our work on federal lands to mitigate impacts of wildfire, the USDA Forest Service also supports State efforts. In 2019, we provided over \$750,000 to the State of Colorado to reduce wildfire risks across jurisdictional boundaries. Through our Cooperative Fire Protection Program, we awarded \$2.9 million for State and volunteer fire assistance.

Additionally, the Forest Service is continuing to improve processes related to Environmental Analysis and Decision Making. The most intensive effort has been for efficiency improvements for the National Environmental Policy Act, also known as NEPA. These include the Agency's effort to revise our NEPA Regulations. The revisions are focused on more efficient NEPA reviews. They include consideration of new Categorical Exclusions for landscape restoration, management of special uses and

facilities. Proposed changes to the regulations and directives take a “back-to-the-basics” approach to implementing NEPA, focusing on legal requirements and deemphasizing extraneous analysis and collection of background information. These changes will provide opportunity in Colorado to expedite NEPA compliance, thereby implementing more projects across the landscape.

We continue to use existing authorities to get more work done on the ground. For decades, the USDA Forest Service has worked with states, local communities and collaborative groups to carry out projects to reduce hazardous fuels and improve forest conditions. Longstanding programs include the Collaborative Forest Landscape Restoration Program and the Good Neighbor Authority.

The 2014 Farm Bill gave the USDA Forest Service the ability to work closely with States through the Good Neighbor Authority, also known as GNA. GNA allows us to provide resources to the states to work on federal lands, many times in conjunction with work on state and private lands, to maximize the impact of treatments. Colorado is one of the leaders nationwide in implementing GNA, and the Colorado State Forest Service has continued to be an excellent partner in developing, establishing and implementing the GNA program throughout the State. In addition, we are in the final stages of developing Good Neighbor Agreements with Colorado Parks and Wildlife and the Colorado Department of Agriculture. The authority allows us work together to accomplish critical work across landownership boundaries.

We have 17 Good Neighbor Projects across Colorado from the Front Range to the Western Slope. Projects include timber sales, hazardous fuels reduction and wildlife habitat improvement treatments. Through these agreements, in Colorado alone, we are investing over \$4.2 million dollars to implement work.

We continue to grow the program. In 2019, the Forest Service and partners initiated seven new GNA projects. One is a second very large timber sale on the Alpine Plateau of the Grand Mesa, Uncompahgre, and Gunnison National Forests totaling 29,663 CCF. Another is an innovative partnership using county funds to pay for work by state partners, including the Colorado State Forest Service, on National Forest System lands adjacent to private parcels on the White River National Forest.

The Collaborative Forest Landscape Restoration Program, also called CFLRP, is another tool that connects the Forest Service with local groups, state and local government and nonprofit organizations. Working together, we have accomplished vegetation management projects resulting in resilient landscapes— projects such as road maintenance, mechanical treatment of vegetation, reforestation in wildfire burn areas, treatment of invasive species, trail rehabilitation and wildlife habitat improvements.

The first ten-year cycle of CFLRP funding ended in 2019. Over the ten-year period, the Forest Service and our partners completed 113,422 acres of restoration and fuels reduction work. We treated approximately 40% of those acres with prescribed fire. Additionally, over that ten-year period, CFLRP funding enabled Forest Service and partners to sell over 135,000 CCF of forest products, decommission 141 miles of roads, improve 1,004 miles of trails and treat 23,087 acres for noxious weeds. Two projects—one for the Colorado Front Range and one for Southwestern Colorado—have submitted proposals for a new ten-year cycle of funding under CFLRP.

Timber harvesting is another important tool for forest restoration, and it is an industry we value. Timber sales provide a variety of positive economic benefits, including jobs, to local communities.

In 2019, Forest Service and partners harvested approximately 167 million board feet of timber from national forests in Colorado. Sawtimber made up 78% of the volume removed—enough to frame 8,115 average size houses.

The Forest Service invested over \$18.6 million dollars in vegetation treatment projects targeting wood product removal efforts in Colorado. 45% of the volume sold in 2019 was salvaging beetle killed material. However, as sawtimber becomes less viable over time in beetle killed stands, programs, such as the Rio Grande and Grand Mesa, Uncompaghre and Gunnison National Forests, must transition away from salvage logging, which is reducing their timber outputs.

We recognize that our timber industry partners are key in helping to create resilient landscapes. We are working closely with industry to develop new markets. As an example, we have worked with industry to develop pine markets in southwest Colorado that include a new mill in Dolores and the addition of pine milling capacity at the Montrose stud mill. There is a tremendous need to treat forests with smaller diameter trees, but we have very few facilities that can take this material due to economic constraints. We are working with two potential opportunities on the Front Range, but without incentives for wood energy, their viability is uncertain at best.

We have been meeting or exceeding our regional timber targets over the past several years. In 2018 and 2019, the Rocky Mountain Region increased our timber volume output to the highest level since 1990.

Coloradans value their national forests and grasslands now more than ever. We are using adaptive management principles to respond to increased demand for resources and recreation opportunities. We are taking steps to improve customer experience by modernizing our systems and employing new technology. We are expediting permit processes and removing unnecessary barriers to minerals development and energy production to promote energy independence, create jobs and support rural economies. We

are investing in infrastructure, facilities and rural broadband to guarantee expanded access. We are also streamlining processes to make environmental analysis, forest products delivery, energy development and wildland fire management more efficient. And finally, we are looking for new and innovative ways to fund conservation work throughout the state.

CONCLUSION

Colorado is a destination for people seeking beautiful mountain peaks, abundant wildlife, amazing recreation opportunities, and its signature Rocky Mountain water—the source for 18 states and two countries. Our national forests and grasslands provide opportunities for hunting, fishing, hiking, skiing and camping, plus access to clean water, timber products, grazing and minerals—all which support jobs and economic activity. Together, with state and local governments, industry, nonprofit organizations, and citizens, we will continue our work to build and sustain resilient landscapes in Colorado for the benefit of Coloradans.

This concludes my prepared remarks. I welcome questions from members of the committees.