

STATEMENT OF
TOM SCHULTZ, CHIEF
U.S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE, FOREST SERVICE
BEFORE THE
HOUSE COMMITTEE ON AGRICULTURE
SUBCOMMITTEE ON FORESTRY AND HORTICULTURE

REGARDING:

“FOR THE PURPOSE OF RECEIVING TESTIMONY FROM CHIEF TOM SCHULTZ, U.S. FOREST SERVICE”

FOR THE USDA FOREST SERVICE

JULY 22, 2026

Chairman Newhouse, Ranking Member Salinas, and Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today to discuss the Forest Service’s current priorities and recent accomplishments.

First, it is important to recognize that our wildland fire community has experienced a profound loss in Western Colorado. While responding to the Knowles and Gore fires in late June, five members of an interagency helitack crew were involved in a burnover that resulted in fire shelter deployments. Two firefighters survived sustaining burn injuries. Tragically, three died - Emily Barker, 38, of Clinton Township, MI; Nick Hutcherson, 27, of Glendale, AZ; and Sydney Watson, 27, of Warrior, AL. Two were Forest Service employees and one served with the U.S. Wildland Fire Service. These young people made the ultimate sacrifice in selfless service to the people and communities we serve every day. Their courage and dedication to public service is extraordinary, and their sacrifice will never be forgotten.

Despite this challenging fire year and our recent tragic losses, wildfire preparedness and response remain at the core of the Forest Service mission, and safety of agency employees and the public remains our top priority. We are in the midst of what is already a very challenging fire year and experiencing higher-than-average national fire activity after a dry winter. Extensive drought and excessive heat across the West are worsening hazardous fuel conditions across large parts of the West.

The agency stands ready to meet these challenges head-on and continues to focus on the work that matters most: keeping people safe; protecting communities from wildfire; actively managing our forests for health and productivity; supporting communities recovering after disasters; expanding access to the outdoors; increasing domestic mineral production; cutting unnecessary red tape; and strengthening the partnerships that bolster our ability to deliver our mission-critical work. The following statement provides an overview of our continued efforts around wildfire preparedness and these additional agency priorities.

Safety and Wildfire Readiness and Response

Our foremost commitment is on safeguarding lives, communities, and natural resources. In its wildfire readiness and rapid response capabilities the agency continues to work to keep fires

small and reduce the likelihood of large, destructive events. To meet the reality of year-round fire seasons, the Forest Service has invested in interagency coordination, contracting, infrastructure, and staffing to enhance operational capacity and support community preparedness.

Our firefighting workforce is stronger than at any point in recent years. As of early July, the Forest Service has hired over 11,800 firefighters—reaching our goal of before the peak of fire season. We are fully staffed and equipped to respond aggressively to every unplanned ignition.

At the same time, the Forest Service is also expanding the use of proven hazardous-fuels reduction strategies—including prescribed fire, mechanical thinning, and cross-boundary treatments that strengthen wildfire resilience and protect communities and natural resources. Fiscal Year (FY) 2025 demonstrated the effect of clear priorities and focused implementation: despite the highest number of wildfire starts on national forests since 2016, total acres burned were held to nearly half the 10-year average—a reduction of nearly 1 million acres. The Forest Service initial attack success rate was the highest in 12 years. In addition, the agency reduced wildfire risk on approximately 3.3 million acres through hazardous-fuels treatments. In FY 2026 we have treated nearly 2.5 million acres of hazardous fuels to date and anticipate meeting our target of 3.6 million acres this fiscal year.

These achievements reflect not only strategic funding and partnerships, but the dedication and bravery of our firefighters, work made even more poignant in light of the lives we have recently lost. This reminds us once again that this work is dangerous and the risks are real. The loss of three of our firefighters reinforces our unwavering commitment to safety above all else. Safety is, and will always be, our first priority.

Our success hinges on continued collaboration with our federal, Tribal, state, and local partners. Through shared stewardship, unified response, and the removal of barriers to active management, we are strengthening our collective readiness and ensuring decisive, coordinated action when fires occur. This commitment also extends to the ongoing Administration effort to modernize the nation's wildland fire management system. In alignment with [Executive Order 14308](#) and congressional direction, the Forest Service is working closely with the Department of the Interior to identify opportunities to streamline functions, reduce duplication, and strengthen interagency wildfire operations as the Administration advances the unification of federal wildland fire responsibilities within the U.S. Wildland Fire Service at DOI.

These efforts are underway without compromising operational readiness. The consolidation of administrative and support functions will not hinder our ability to respond to wildfires this year. Firefighters, incident management teams, and support staff across both Departments will continue to operate under existing, well-established interagency coordination structures. The operational posture for the 2026 fire year remains fully intact, fully staffed, and fully prepared.

In the joint explanatory statement accompanying the FY 2026 Interior Appropriations, Congress directed USDA and DOI to conduct a study examining potential options for consolidating Forest Service fire programs with the U.S. Wildland Fire Service. As part of the directed third-party study supporting this unification effort, USDA issued the formal solicitation on the General Services Administration contracting site on May 19th, with responses due on June 8, 2026. The agency will soon be selecting a contractor to complete the study. The Forest Service is committed to working with Congress and the Department of the Interior to modernize the

nation's wildland firefighting system. Our priority remains ensuring the nation has an effective, coordinated wildfire response that supports federal, state, Tribal, and local partners.

Throughout these transitions, our fundamental commitment remains unchanged: to protect the public, support our partners, and ensure a rapid, effective, and unified response to wildfires across the nation. The Forest Service will continue to bring the full strength of its personnel, partners, and resources to bear as we prepare for and respond to the challenges of the 2026 fire season.

Partnerships and Cooperative Federalism

Wildfires do not respect man-made borders, jurisdictional boundaries, or property lines; they spread rapidly across all landscapes. To address this reality, the Forest Service is working alongside state, Tribal and local governments to manage the nation's forests more effectively. Shared stewardship and local collaboration are essential to improving forest health, wildfire resilience, recreation access and conservation outcomes. In 2025 and 2026, the Forest Service entered into Shared Stewardship Agreements with seven states and four Tribal Nations, continuing to build partnerships that support landscape-scale outcomes.

By the second quarter of FY 2026, the agency had 571 active Good Neighbor Authority agreements across 39 states—445 agreements with states, 70 with counties, 49 with Tribal Nations, and 7 with special districts. These partnerships enhance capacity, remove operational barriers, and enable locally driven restoration work. The agency also announced \$200 million through Community Wildfire Defense Grants across 58 projects in 22 states and two Tribes.

Active Forest Management—Timber Production, Grazing and Reforestation

Active forest management remains essential to creating resilient, productive forests. Timber production—critical to both forest restoration and rural economies—continues to be a core component of our management strategy. In FY 2025, the Forest Service exceeded its timber target, selling 2.95 billion board feet and offering 3 billion board feet. In FY 2026 we have sold 2.2 billion board feet to date and are well on our way to meeting our target of 3.2 billion board feet this fiscal year. The Forest Service supports domestic mills through a stable timber supply. This is critical for strengthening local economies and the agency's ability to carry out effective forest restoration.

Livestock grazing is also a central component of the Forest Service's multiple-use mission. The agency is working to expand access, modernize processes, and elevate producer input to ensure grazing continues to contribute to healthy landscapes and resilient rural communities.

Reforestation remains another essential element of our management responsibilities. The agency is accelerating efforts to restore areas impacted by wildfire and streamline permitting and environmental review processes to deliver results more efficiently. In FY 2025, the Forest Service completed the highest level of reforestation in over 25 years, reforesting almost 287,000 acres and improving timber stands on an additional 165,000 acres. Additionally, the Forest Service has completed 177,112 acres of reforestation to date for FY 2026.

Minerals and Energy Development

National Forests play an important role in ensuring American energy security and supporting innovation. The Forest Service is committed to facilitating responsible development of domestic energy and mineral resources, including critical minerals necessary for national security, technology, and energy. The agency is taking steps to reduce regulatory burdens that slow responsible exploration and permitting.

Recreation Access and Infrastructure

Outdoor recreation continues to grow, and millions of Americans rely on national forests for access to the outdoors. Expanding this access and improving visitor experience is a key agency priority. The Forest Service is modernizing trails, campgrounds, and facilities; improving roads and recreation sites; strengthening on-the-ground engagement; and using tools like [Recreation.gov](https://www.recreation.gov) to help visitors plan safe, enjoyable trips. The goal is simple: more access, better service, and a visitor experience that reflects the pride the agency takes in stewarding its forests.

Our public lands offer some of the best recreational opportunities in the world. National forests alone receive more than 160 million visitors annually, and maintaining safe and reliable infrastructure for these visits and other management activities is critical. As stated in the FY 2027 President's Budget, the Administration is supportive of reauthorization of the seminal Great American Outdoors Act (GAOA) (P.L. 116-152) Legacy Restoration Fund for another five years. The Legacy Restoration Fund has been critical to the Forest Service's ability to repair and upgrade vital infrastructure and facilities in the national forests and grasslands. With these funds in FY 2025 under the GAOA Legacy Restoration Fund, the Forest Service completed 125 deferred-maintenance projects, improving 162 recreation sites and 78 roads and bridges.

Disaster Recovery

When disasters strike, the Forest Service plays a critical role in helping communities recover by restoring damaged landscapes, repairing trails and infrastructure, and supporting community resilience. This work not only addresses immediate needs but also strengthens relationships and reduces vulnerabilities to future disasters.

Following the 2024 hurricane season, the agency reopened more than 1,570 miles of roads, 695 miles of trails, and reopened 34 recreation sites. Across more than 100 disaster-recovery events nationwide, the Forest Service awarded \$1 billion in contracts and \$1.5 billion in agreements to support landscape and infrastructure restoration.

Deregulation and Organizational Efficiency

The Forest Service is taking deliberate steps to reduce excessive administrative processes that constrain innovation and slow on-the-ground results. New attention is being brought to ensure critical projects can be accomplished easier and faster by clearing obstacles that make it hard to do business with the Forest Service.

The agency is currently implementing a sweeping organizational restructuring designed to move leadership and decision-making closer to the communities and landscapes it serves. Key

elements include relocating the headquarters to Salt Lake City, transitioning to a state-based leadership model, establishing a network of Operations Service Centers, and unifying the agency's research programs. This reorganization plan will strengthen local leadership, streamline operations, and improve mission delivery. For an agency whose lands, partners, and operational challenges are overwhelmingly concentrated in the West, this shift represents a structural reset and a common-sense approach to improve mission delivery.

Chairman Newhouse, Ranking Member Salinas, and Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to present these priorities and accomplishments. I look forward to continuing our work together to ensure the health, resilience, and productivity of our nation's forests and grasslands, and I would be pleased to answer any questions.