Testimony for Dean Thomas H. DeLuca before House Committee on Agriculture

Subcommittee on Forestry and Agriculture

"Promoting Forest Health and Resiliency Through Improved Active Management"

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Chairman LaMalfa, Vice Chair Moore, Ranking Member Salinas, Vice Ranking Member Riley, and Members of the Subcommittee. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today on the role of active management in promoting forest health, including wildfire resilience, and on the potential for national forestlands to contribute to additional domestic timber production. My name is Thomas DeLuca; I serve as Dean of the College of Forestry at Oregon State University (OSU).

The U.S. Forest Service stewards approximately 193 million acres of National Forest System lands. Following direction from Executive Order 14225, Immediate Expansion of American Timber Production (signed March 1, 2025), USDA Secretary Rollins issued a memo[1] designating 112 million acres — approximately 60% of the system — as an "emergency situation" to expedite active management and timber production.

I fully agree with the position that the pace and scale of active management on these lands must increase. Our federally managed forestlands look much different today than they would have when European settlers first arrived. Much of today's national forests, with the exception of lands that have been under long-term protection (such as national parks and designated Wilderness areas) have been harvested, densely planted and managed primarily for timber production for decades. However, major reductions in active management starting in the 1980s, combined with deferred maintenance of roads and firebreaks as well as the exclusion of fire and of Indigenous stewardship on these landscapes, have resulted in many forests being dangerously overstocked, vulnerable to insects and disease, and at risk of high-intensity wildfires. Active, science-informed management is essential for restoring resilience and productivity to these forests.

I applaud meaningful policy and actions that can accelerate and increase science-informed management, but we face a key challenge I respectfully encourage this Committee to further consider: Can the federal government effectively achieve the active management outcomes needed on the collective of federal forest lands while simultaneously implementing proposed USDA plans to reduce the workforce and research capacity needed to support this work?

There is a clear and present opportunity to increase timber production on previously managed forest lands and in the process restore forest health and fire resiliency. To restore forest health,

[1] https://www.usda.gov/sites/default/files/documents/sm-1078-006.pdf

reduce wildfire risk, and support a sustainable domestic timber supply, the strategy must be grounded in science and paired with investments in workforce, local capacity, and partnerships. The Forest Service cannot deliver science-based, regionally tailored management without people and resources to plan, implement, and monitor projects at scale. With this in mind, I share three key points for your consideration.

1. Federal reductions in force and restructuring proposals undermine ability to ramp up localized active management.

Secretary Rollins issued a memorandum[2] on July 24 to propose reorganization plans for the Department of Agriculture and the US Forest Service. This proposal outlined key goals, including streamlining agency processes, removing barriers to success, and enhancing the ability of federal employees to interface with their constituents. The USDA reorganization plan to centralize personnel and resources in regional hubs may offer administrative efficiencies; however, this action risks undermining the foundation of effective natural resource management by losing local knowledge and partnerships, trust, and ecological specificity that are critical to natural resource management.

Workforce reductions are already constraining federal capacity. Although the total number of staff departures is difficult to determine, a July Reuters investigation reported that as many as 5,000 USFS employees — or 15% of the workforce — left the agency in the last five months[3]. This is a rapid and destabilizing loss for the agency that is now tasked with ramping up management efforts across the nation's forests.

The cuts that have occurred across federal agencies supporting forestry and natural resource management have disproportionately fallen on early-career staff, often during probationary periods, as well as veteran employees with legacy knowledge nearing retirement. The reduction in both cohorts simultaneously creates not only a significant gap in knowledge transfer within the agencies, but a missed opportunity to onboard young professionals trained in the latest science and management approaches.

Likewise, for forestry and natural resources graduates entering the workforce, the opportunities to contribute the latest scientific knowledge and best practice to the field are dwindling, despite the need for their expertise increasing. Anecdotally, in Oregon State University's job posting system for students, the USDA Forest Service posted more than 270 full-time, seasonal, and internship opportunities for OSU students during the 2023-24 academic year. For the 2024-25 academic year, the agency posted only 13. The impact of the loss of these internship opportunities is still being

[2] https://www.usda.gov/about-usda/news/press-releases/2025/07/24/secretary-rollins-announces-usda-reorganization-restoring-departments-core-mission-supporting
[3] https://www.reuters.com/business/environment/us-wildfires-rage-trump-staff-cuts-force-firefighters-clean-toilets-critics-say-2025-07-21/

assessed, but at a minimum they represent a significant loss in opportunities for students in forestry and the natural resources.

The USDA reorganization proposal also includes moving from regionally located scientists and local field managers in favor of a centralized USFS research and development office in Fort Collins, Colorado. While this may be administratively efficient, it risks ignoring the ecological complexity of distinct forest types across the country. Co-location of regional offices where forest management activities take place fosters collaboration, accelerates innovation, and supports the training of the next generation of scientists and land managers. These partnerships are often rooted in shared landscapes and mutual investment in local outcomes — something that is difficult to replicate from a distant hub.

2. USFS research enterprise reductions hinder science-informed management practices to support forest health and productivity

Second, and closely related to overall USFS workforce reductions in regional field staff, are the implications for the U.S. Forest Service Research Enterprise. Colleagues at the USFS report that headcount in the agency's research and development arm has dropped 25 percent — nearly 400 permanent employees — since 2024. At the Pacific Northwest Research Station specifically, which is co-located at Oregon State University's Corvallis campus, staff declined by 60 positions, or 24 percent, over the same period. Although Congress has allocated funds for additional R&D staff, hiring freezes prevent the agency from filling these critical roles.

The USFS research enterprise plays a critical role in advancing American forestry. Its synergy with universities ensures that science is regionally focused, grounded in local eco-regions, and responsive to the needs of forest-dependent communities. The proposal to further reduce headcounts and centralize USFS staff in Fort Collins, Colorado, risks further weakening the ties that sustain joint research, student mentorship, and rapid knowledge exchange between the agency and universities such as Oregon State University on a local and regional scale.

We cannot manage today's forests without science-based practices that are continuously updated based on ever-evolving threats to our forests, including increasingly hot, dry conditions, novel insects and pathogens, and exotic plants to name a few. For decades, many federal forestlands were intensively managed, followed by decades of minimal management. The resulting landscapes are primed for disease, insect outbreaks, drought stress, and catastrophic wildfire.

Rather than creating efficiencies or improving the ability to readily adapt to changing conditions, centralization would raise costs and reduce opportunities for field-based science — science that is essential to effective forest management, timber production, wildfire risk reduction, and long-term forest health. Research conducted by OSU and the USFS Pacific Northwest Research Station, for instance, demonstrates that carefully applied thinning and the reintroduction of prescribed fire can restore resiliency to these forests. Innovations in wildfire risk reduction, wood utilization, and forest management technologies continue to grow through such collaborative partnerships.

Equally important is the role of the USFS experimental forest network. Long-term ecological data collection at sites such as the H.J. Andrews Experimental Forest have provided irreplaceable insights into how forests function for more than 75 years. The H.J. Andrews leverages approximately three times the money invested by the USFS, including from OSU, to support this work. No other government agency or industry outside of the USFS is positioned or has the incentives to support the scientific work currently advanced by USFS and the associated knowledge generation that supports forestry on both public and private lands. Interruptions to these datasets would represent permanent losses to our collective understanding of forest ecosystems.

Centralization would also reduce opportunities for the local collaborations that make science actionable — partnerships with Tribes, state agencies, industry, and communities — as well as limit training opportunities for graduate students and the next generation of forest stewards. While virtual tools can help, they cannot replace the value of shared landscapes and on-the-ground collaboration. Over time, this shift would narrow perspective, slow innovation, and weaken the scientific foundation for national forest policy.

It is also essential to recognize that forest management challenges differ greatly by region. The nation's strongest concentrations of forestry capacity are in the Pacific Northwest and the Southeast. Centralizing USFS R&D in a single hub ignores this reality and risks one-size-fits-all solutions that fail to account for ecological diversity and regional economies.

Finally, not all forest management is fuels management. Practices must be grounded in science and legal frameworks to balance ecological, economic, and social goals. Federal and state governments, Tribes, universities, communities, non-profits, and industry all offer tools, knowledge, and partnerships to adopt more active and sustainable forest management. But this requires that the USFS research enterprise remain robust, well-resourced, and regionally engaged. Without that, our ability to expand active management at scale — and do it responsibly — will be compromised.

3. Rescinding the Roadless Rule distracts from priority management activities that improve forest health and resilience.

There is a large body of research to strongly support the urgent need to expand active management to restore forest health and reduce wildfire risk, and I again applaud efforts to accelerate this work. But using wildfire mitigation as the justification to rescind the 2001 Roadless Rule is a distraction from where treatments are most urgently needed.

The Roadless Rule restricts new road construction on approximately 58 million acres of the 193 million acres of national forest lands. Removal of protections in these roadless areas has been

proposed with the goal, as stated by Secretary Rollins in an Aug. 27 press release4, to "properly manage our federal lands to create healthy, resilient, and productive forests for generations to come," with a particular concern for wildfire mitigation and timber production.

Rescinding the Roadless Rule risks diverting resources away from urgent priorities, which include restoring resilience where people, homes, communities, economies, and ecosystems are most vulnerable.

While there may be some benefit to both wildfire mitigation and timber supply by accessing roadless areas, the costs far outweigh the benefits from both an environmental and economic perspective. Most of these acres are steep, remote, and costly to access for timber harvest. Historically, roads were built where it was economically viable to harvest and haul timber and areas left without roads were often too costly or impractical to develop. This remains true today. And, if anything, the distance from un-roaded lands to active mills is further today due to the large number of mill closures over the last 30 years.

Rescinding the rule also won't significantly mitigate wildfire risk. Wildfire risk is based on three factors: the likelihood that a wildfire will happen in a specific place, the potential intensity of a fire when it does happen, and the values at risk. The highest priority for reducing wildfire risk is the wildland-urban interface, where people, property, and infrastructure are most exposed. Fuels treatments near communities, watersheds, and critical habitats provide the greatest benefit. By contrast, dedicating scarce resources to build roads into steep backcountry for timber and fire suppression diverts attention from where it matters most (Downing et al. 2022)[5].

This is supported by scientific research indicating that wilderness and inventoried roadless areas experience fewer ignitions than roaded "front-country" areas, where human-caused fires dominate. According to a recent study, 84% of ignitions nationally are human-caused, and they overwhelmingly occur where roads already exist (Balch et al. 2017)[6]. While roads can improve suppression access, they also increase ignition risk, facilitate invasive species spread, and fragment habitat. (Johnston et al. 2021)[7].

Conclusion

The health and resilience of our nation's forests depend on active, science-informed management. After decades of both intensive use and prolonged inaction, our forests face unprecedented stress from wildfire, insects, disease, and drought. To mitigate, we must implement proactive management at a meaningful scale.

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[4] https://www.usda.gov/about-usda/news/press-releases/2025/08/27/secretary-rollins-opens-next-step-roadless-rule-rescission
[5] https://www.fs.usda.gov/rm/pubs_journals/2022/rmrs_2022_downing_w001.pdf
[6] https://www.biologicaldiversity.org/programs/public_lands/pdfs/BalchPNAS-2017.pdf
[7] https://iopscience.iop.org/article/10.1088/1748-9326/ac13ee/pdf

The need to increase pace and scale has been acknowledged across multiple administrations, on both sides of the aisle, and I commend this administration for prioritizing the health and resiliency of federal forestlands. If policy directives alone could achieve this, however, it would have been done by now. Real progress demands investment in the people, science, and infrastructure that make management possible. That means sustaining a skilled federal workforce, supporting the U.S. Forest Service research enterprise and enabling collaboration with research institutions and other partners. It also means ensuring sufficient regional milling capacity and innovative wood products like cross-laminated timber ("CLT"), other mass timber components, and composites to process and use material removed through restoration and fuels reduction treatments. Without these, even the best policy goals cannot be met.

I also want to recognize and commend the administration for advancing programs like the Joint Chiefs' Landscape Restoration Partnership. One of the recently funded projects — the Oregon–Hood River Wildfire & Watershed Project[8], in which Oregon State University's Extension Fire Program is a partner — is a model for how federal investment can align with local expertise to achieve real results. By bringing agencies, research institutions, and communities together, this project will reduce wildfire risk, protect watersheds, and strengthen community resilience. This is exactly the kind of science-based, collaborative work we should be expanding nationwide.

By contrast, cuts to staffing, proposed consolidation of regional offices and research efforts, and distractions such as revisiting the Roadless Rule will not help us reach these goals. They will hinder progress at the very moment we need to accelerate it. We should be focusing instead on scaling treatments in priority landscapes, expanding partnerships with Tribes, states, and communities, and building on the innovations that universities and the Forest Service have already developed together.

If we are serious about restoring forest health, reducing wildfire risk, and supporting rural economies, we must invest in capacity — this includes people, businesses, and resilient communities — not reduce it. By pairing active management with robust science, a prepared workforce, and regional infrastructure, we can truly help "properly manage our federal lands to create healthy, resilient, and productive forests for generations to come," as Secretary Rollins and the administration have stated.

[8] https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/programs-initiatives/joint-chiefs-landscape-restoration-partnership/summary-of-fy25-selected-joint