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**Before the House of Representatives Appropriations Subcommittee on
Interior, Environment, and Related Agencies**

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On behalf of the National Association of State Foresters (NASF), I am pleased to present you with our views on the National Fire Plan. First, on behalf of NASF, thank you Mr. Chairman and members of the Subcommittee for your recent actions to restore funding for important programs that were greatly reduced in the President's FY 2006 budget. Pertinent to today's hearing are your measures to restore funding for Cooperative Fire Protection for State and Private Forestry. In addition, the President's budget also proposed to reduce National Fire Plan appropriations for State Fire Assistance by approximately \$10.7 million. Your Committee's action will restore this item to FY 2005 levels.

The National Fire Plan is an important element in assuring the protection of lives and property from wildland fire and assuring the long-term viability of the forest resource. Much of the national direction and expression of priorities for wildland fire management is embodied in that plan. The core principles of the National Fire Plan and goals associated with the companion 10-year Comprehensive Strategy remain valid. Emphasis is placed on measures to improve suppression and prevention capabilities, reduce hazardous fuels, and restore fire adapted ecosystems. To accomplish these purposes, the plan promotes private and public sector collaboration, risk assessment, increased accountability, and close working partnerships with impacted communities.

The National Fire Plan has been an important step forward in establishing national wildland fire policy and priorities. However, a recent report by the Government Accountability Office notes that the National Fire Plan consists of several agency initiatives that are somewhat independent and could benefit from a "cohesive strategy" to identify long-term options and funding. State Foresters concur with this observation and would expect that such efforts would continue to involve State Forestry organizations.

Funding the high costs of the few fires that escape to become large, costly, and damaging has severely impacted other Forest Service programs, including State and Private Forestry. State Foresters believe fire suppression costs should be fully covered in fire suppression budgets, including emergency fund accounts. There has been a prior history of using other program accounts, such as State and Private Forestry, to remedy budget deficits, and we trust that adequate budget controls are now in place to avoid the necessity of "fire borrowing."

There are operational and institutional challenges in the implementation of a national wildland fire strategy. Heavy emphasis is understandably placed on the large western federal landholdings. However, other regions of the country also have a heavy fire load. For example, the southern region experiences more wildfires than any other region of the country. The South averages in excess of 45,000 wildland fires per year, 94 percent of which are state jurisdiction fires that are the responsibility of state forestry agencies. Due to the fact that nearly 90% of the forestland in the South is privately owned, wildland fire typically poses a threat to improvements such as homes, businesses, and communities. State Foresters are concerned that with all its successes, the National Fire Plan has disproportionately favored federal lands.

One of the most important priorities for State Foresters is our ability to keep wildland fires small by quickly responding and suppressing them. States' ability to take advantage of other resources, primarily volunteer fire departments, is critical to meeting this goal. Federal programs that support the capacity of volunteer fire departments, whether through training, equipment, communications, or coordination, are necessary to ensure the states' ability to quickly respond to small wildfires. Such key programs include State Fire Assistance, Volunteer Fire Assistance, Rural Fire Assistance, and the Federal Excess Personal Property Program.

Volunteer fire departments are rarely equipped, trained, or authorized to independently engage in large-scale wildfire suppression. In recent years, assistance through the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) has significantly improved equipment and training for volunteer fire departments and related emergency responders. Some discussions before House and Senate Appropriations Committees this year suggested that reductions in State Fire Assistance could be mitigated by expanding funding to local fire departments through FEMA grants. While somewhat improving capability within the wildland-urban interface, volunteer fire departments are not prepared or inclined to assume conventional forest fire suppression. Moreover, the administrative and operational difficulties of coordinating hundreds of volunteer organizations with mixed capabilities in a mutual aid relationship for statewide forest fire control would be highly problematic.

Flexibility in program implementation must be an important aspect of any wildland fire management strategy. Allocation procedures and program guidance must correspond to regional differences in resources and demographics. Fire protection organization and response focus on different strategies in across the country. National Fire Plan support for preparedness is typically more important than hazard mitigation in much of the country, while hazardous fuel reduction, particularly within the wildland-urban interface, remains a priority in the West.

State Foresters are dedicated to protecting communities from the threat of wildfire. A key mechanism to meet that goal is the Community Wildfire Protection Plan. This mechanism, as defined by Title I of the Healthy Forests Restoration Act of 2003, provides local, state, and federal fire managers with a model for everything from hazard mitigation and community preparedness to wildfire response and structure protection. Funding and technical support are critical for helping communities develop these plans. With the exception of the so-called “Stevens Funds,” State Fire Assistance grants are the only source of federal funding available to help support community protection outside of federal ownership.

The National Fire Plan is working and the goals are being achieved. However, hazardous fuel reduction and ecosystem restoration are long-term processes, not one-time fixes. Continued effort will be needed to sustain the progress that is being made. Fuel reduction at the single home “lot level” alone will not get the job done. While continued focus on community protection through planning and fuels treatment must continue, another key to protecting communities in the wildland-urban interface is the presence of well-managed forests on state, private, and federal lands.

NASF is committed to protecting communities and helping to ensure an adequate firefighting capacity, two goals which are shared by this committee. I believe that well-placed federal investments will help the states achieve these goals.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman and members of the Subcommittee, for the opportunity to present our thoughts.