

**Testimony of Agriculture Committee Ranking Member Bob Goodlatte
Before the House Resources Committee
April 10, 2008**

Chairman Rahall, Ranking Member Young, and members of the Committee, thank you for your time this morning. I'm pleased to be here to discuss H.R. 5648, the Emergency Wildland Fire Response Act of 2008, which I introduced a few weeks ago along with House Agriculture Committee Chairman Peterson, Ranking Member Young, and four of our colleagues on this Committee and the Agriculture Committee.

Mr. Chairman, the wildfire funding problems in the USDA Forest Service are arguably the most challenging issues the Agency faces today. I'm pleased to see that you, Subcommittee Chairman Dicks, and other members of this Committee recognize this issue as crucial and have also introduced legislation aimed at fixing the problem.

As you are well aware, wildfire funding costs have skyrocketed over the last decade due to a combination of unhealthy conditions in our forests, extreme drought, and the increasing influx of people building homes and communities in fire-prone areas. Unfortunately, as these fire costs have risen, the overall Forest Service budget has remained relatively flat. This has resulted in roughly a 23 percent cut to programs that manage wildlife, recreation, timber, and other resources in our national forests. Programs to help the nation's 10 million family forest owners with forest management are facing cuts of up to 58 percent this year alone. Ironically, programs that help prevent fires have also seen dramatic cuts. Nearly all critical elements of the Forest Service mission, from forest research programs to law enforcement, are impacted by this problem. On top of the reductions in the annual budget, more than \$1.8 billion has been "borrowed" from non-fire accounts when the Agency has run out of money since 2001. Roughly \$370 million has yet to be paid back.

Wildfires are not only consuming more forestland, they are consuming the Forest Service.

This is why I started work several months ago with the Chairman of the Agriculture Committee to craft the bipartisan Emergency Wildland Fire Response Act, H.R. 5648.

H.R. 5648 creates a new funding mechanism for catastrophic, emergency fires. Catastrophic wildfires, like the 500,000 acre fire Florida and Georgia experienced last year, are difficult to plan for and are the most expensive. H.R. 5648 recognizes catastrophic fires as true emergencies and establishes a fund to cover the costs of these fires, apart from the Forest Service funds for predictable firefighting activities. With this mechanism in place, we are better able to work through the appropriations and budget process to see that adequate funding is provided for true emergencies.

As we are fixing the funding problem, we must ensure the federal agencies are accountable for their spending. We must do this while not endangering the lives of our

hard working firefighters on the front lines. H.R. 5648 contains both “carrots” and “sticks” for accountability and cost containment in wildfire spending.

Fixing the funding problem is important but we cannot overlook the factors contributing to such dramatic increases in firefighting costs. Most firefighting costs today are associated with protecting lives, homes, and structures. H.R. 5648 encourages communities to step up and ultimately help reduce the bill for firefighting over the long-run.

Another cost driver is our continuing hazardous fuel problem on our public lands. While the Healthy Forests Restoration Act of 2003 has helped, additional partnership opportunities can enhance these authorities and result in more acres being treated. H.R. 5648 provides a new contracting tool for the Forest Service to partner with states to address unhealthy conditions in federal forests that make the federal government “bad neighbors” to adjacent landowners. This authority has been tested in Colorado and Utah where it’s proven to be very effective.

Mr. Chairman, we must provide a comprehensive solution to the fire funding dilemma. H.R. 5648 does that, and does so with strong bipartisan support. I look forward to working with you, Ranking Member Young, and others, as we work in our respective Committees to resolve this critical issue.

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