

[Senator Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry](#)

Legislative Hearing to Review S. 1462, Fix Our Forests Act

6 May 2025

Witness: [Chris French, Acting Associate Chief USDA Forest Service](#)

Chris French, Associate Chief of the Forest Service, discussed the challenges facing national forests, including severe wildfires, insect outbreaks, and invasive species. He expressed USDA's support for the Senate draft of the Fix Our Forest Act (FOFA), highlighting the need for streamlined procedures, expanded categorical exclusions, and improved forest management tools, while also noting some areas for technical changes and concerns about certain provisions.

Issues Raised:

- **Categorical exclusions**
 - [Senator John Boozman \(R-AR\)](#) asked French to explain the Forest Service's use of categorical exclusions and if congress should consider additional categorical exclusions.
 - French explained the use of categorical exclusions (CEs) under the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), which are used for projects deemed to have non-significant environmental impacts.
 - He emphasized that CEs still require compliance with other environmental laws and are transparent to the public.
 - French highlighted that litigation, particularly in certain regions, significantly delays forest management projects and increases costs.
 - He supported the FOFA for providing tools to address large-scale forest health and wildfire issues more effectively and reducing susceptibility to litigation.
 - [Senator. John Hoeven \(R-ND\)](#) discussed the use of categorical exclusions for grassland and forest management, emphasizing the need for flexibility and a robust forest products industry to handle cut trees.
 - French agreed on the importance of predictable supply for the industry and highlighted programs that subsidize transportation and offer loans for mill retooling.
- **Good Neighbor Authority and local authority**
 - [Senator Amy Klobuchar \(D-MN\)](#) inquired how will changes to Good Neighbor Authority (GNA) and stewardship contracting provide more long-term

certainty to the Forest Service partners and assist with forest restoration efforts.

- French said that the changes proposed recognize the costs that go with the state so they can use the receipts to fund the program they're doing to help manage federal lands appropriately.

- [Senator Micheal Bennet \(D-CO\)](#) raised concerns that the Fix Our Forest Act might undermine local community engagement in forest management decisions.

- French reassured that the Forest Service is committed to working collaboratively with local communities and that the bill would not change this approach.

- **Staffing Concerns**

- Senator Klobuchar inquired about potential workforce reductions at the Forest Service and their impact on wildfire response.

- French assured that wildfire response remains a top priority, and that the agency is working to fill gaps and maintain readiness.
- He emphasized the importance of additional resources for watershed and wildfire management programs and noted that future forest treatment efforts will rely more on private partnerships and state involvement due to funding constraints.

- [Senator Roger Marshall \(R-KS\)](#) asked about the role of mills in forest management, to which French highlighted their importance in reducing wildfire risk and supporting local economies.

- French noted the decline in the number of mills due to market conditions, housing markets, and supply issues.

- Senator Bennet expressed concerns about the adequacy of personnel for the upcoming fire season and the impact of workforce reductions on fire suppression efforts.

- French assured that wildfire response remains a priority and emphasized the importance of local knowledge and interagency collaboration.

- [Senator Peter Welch \(D-VT\)](#) highlighted the issue of significant workforce reductions in the Forest Service, which could impact the agency's ability to manage forests effectively.

- French acknowledged the workforce reductions and their impact, noting a 25% decline in non-fire workforce.

- He further explained that the agency has about 36,000 employees and 35,000 of them have been exempted.

- **Economics**

- Senator Klobuchar raised concerns about proposed budget cuts to the National Forest System and questioned whether states have the capacity to assume greater forest management roles.
 - French responded that the USDA is in constant collaboration with state foresters and that capacity varies by state.
- Senator Marshall discussed the Reforestation Trust Fund and its role in sustainable forest management without impacting other programs.
 - French agreed with the approach and confirmed ongoing technical assistance.
 - Marshall also inquired about state representation on the wildfire intelligence center board, which French supported, emphasizing the importance of interagency collaboration.
- Senator Hoeven inquired about cost savings from the Fix Our Forest Act and the permanence of emergency wildfire mitigation actions.
 - French confirmed are beneficial and codified in the bill. French suggested statutory authority for tree removal categorical exclusions for greater effectiveness.
- [Senator Jim Justice \(R-WV\)](#) emphasized the urgent need to address economic issues related to forest management, highlighting the loss of industries like flooring and cabinetry. He stressed the importance of leveraging the economic benefits of healthy forests, which clean the air and support wildlife, and suggested exploring subsidies to credit forests for their contributions. Justice called for innovative ideas to drive economic solutions and improve forest health.
 - French acknowledged the economic challenges and the importance of healthy forests. He emphasized the need for innovative solutions and agreed that economics play a crucial role in forest management. French highlighted the Forest Service's commitment to addressing these issues and working towards sustainable forest management practices.
- [Senator Adam Schiff \(D-CA\)](#) expressed concerns about the lack of funding for fire mitigation efforts and the potential focus on timber harvesting in the Fix Our Forest Act. He questioned the safeguards in the legislation to ensure it prioritizes fire mitigation over timber harvesting.
 - French responded by emphasizing the numerous safeguards in place, including forest plans, consultations with various agencies, and compliance with environmental laws. He assured that the focus

remains on fire mitigation and forest restoration, with timber harvesting being a small part of the overall efforts.

- [Senator Mitch McConnell \(R-KY\)](#) highlighted the impact of tariff wars on Kentucky's bourbon industry, which supports various sectors and relies heavily on white oak trees for barrel production. He introduced the [White Oak Resiliency Act](#) to ensure the preservation of white oaks, requiring coordinated research and conservation efforts by the Department of Interior, USDA, and Forest Service.
 - French responded by expressing USDA's support for the act and mentioned minor technical adjustments needed to align it with existing laws, without changing its broader intent.
- Senator Schiff asked about budget cuts that the Forest Service is facing.
 - French responded that they are facing a 63 percent cut of the current budget. He said that they are going to need a lot of help from state and other community partners.
- **Wildfire prevention and reduction**
 - Senator Hoeven inquired on what provisions are in the FOFA to prevent and reduce fires in the grasslands.
 - French answered that there is not a statutory authority in FOFA to streamline the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), but FOFA does provide mechanisms with GNA to work with the states on the issues. The Intelligence Center described in FOFA will also help with the response time for fires.