

Senate Agriculture, Nutrition and Forestry Committee

U.S. Forest Service Oversight

June 2, 2024

Highlights:

The hearing examined the Forest Service's preparedness for an active wildfire season, focusing on increased staffing, expanded fuels reduction, and support for policies like the Fix Our Forests Act to improve forest management. It also raised bipartisan concerns about agency reorganization, workforce losses, and research facility changes, with only limited discussion of tribal engagement primarily through partnerships and shared stewardship agreements.

Key points:

- Collaborations with Tribes
 - Tribal issues were not a central focus of the hearing, but there were several relevant references.
 - The discussion acknowledged that wildfires cross federal, state, Tribal, and private lands, underscoring the importance of coordinated, cross-jurisdictional response efforts.
 - The Forest Service also noted ongoing collaboration with Tribes through shared stewardship agreements, including partnerships with three tribal nations.
 - Additionally, interagency coordination during wildfire response includes working with Tribal entities and the Bureau of Indian Affairs, reflecting the role of Tribes in broader land management and emergency response systems.
- Fire Fighter Staffing
 - The Forest Service testified that it has increased firefighter staffing to more than 11,000 personnel and expanded the number of red-card-certified staff to strengthen response capacity. The agency also highlighted investments in hazardous fuels reduction, including prescribed burns and other forest management practices, as part of a broader strategy to reduce wildfire risk and protect communities
- The Proposed Reorganization of the Forest Service
 - USDA plans to relocate the agency's headquarters to Salt Lake City and transition from a regional structure to a state-based model.
 - According to the Forest Service, the goal of this shift is to move decision-making closer to local communities and improve coordination with partners on the ground.
 - However, senators raised bipartisan concerns about how this restructuring could affect workforce stability, disrupt operations, and reduce overall capacity, particularly during an already demanding wildfire season.
- Workforce Issues
 - Lawmakers pointing to recent staff reductions and the loss of experienced personnel, including those qualified to support wildfire response.

- While the Forest Service acknowledged past attrition, it maintained that current staffing levels are stronger heading into 2026 due to increased hiring and targeted efforts to expand red-card certification.
 - Still, several senators expressed concern that workforce instability could undermine preparedness and limit the agency's ability to meet growing demands
- Fix Our Forests Act
 - This legislation is intended to streamline project approvals, reduce litigation delays, and expand the Forest Service's ability to carry out wildfire mitigation and forest health projects. Agency leadership indicated that FOFA would provide helpful authorities to accelerate work on the ground, particularly in high-risk areas.
- Closures or Consolidations of Forest Service Research Facilities
 - Lawmakers emphasized the importance of region-specific research in addressing local forest conditions, invasive species, and wildfire risks.
 - The Forest Service clarified that it is evaluating facilities rather than eliminating research programs, but concerns remain about whether consolidations could reduce scientific capacity and weaken long-term forest management outcomes