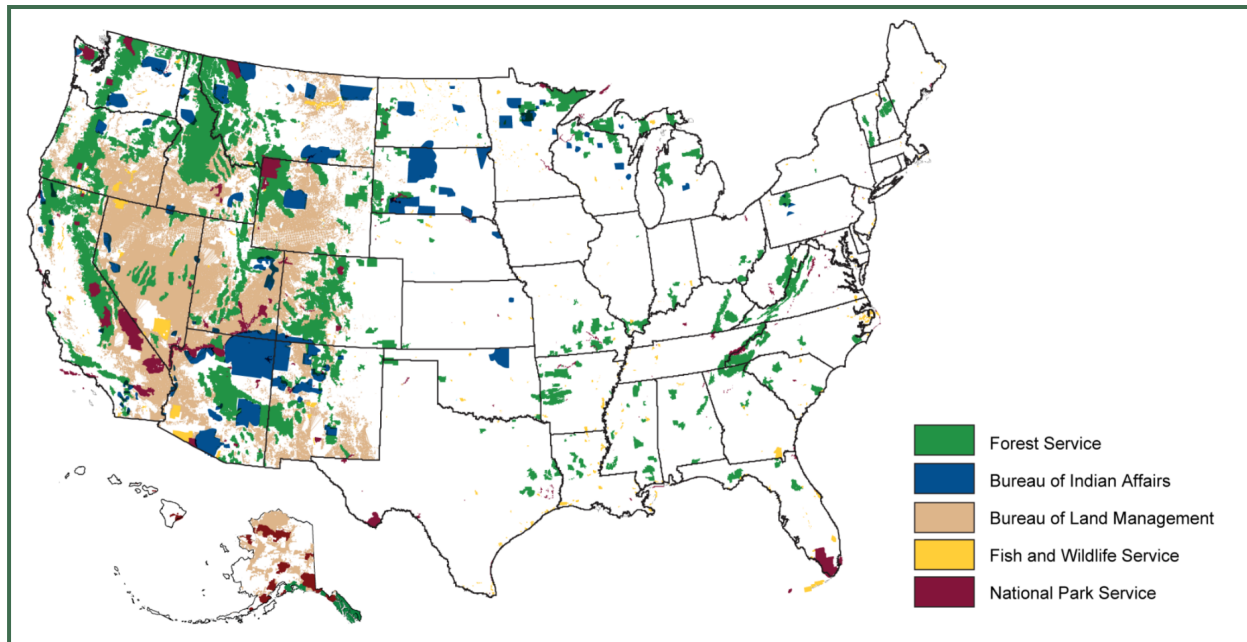




ONE DEPARTMENT FOR WILDFIRE MANAGEMENT

ESTABLISHING A NATIONAL WILDLAND FIREFIGHTING SERVICE

Photo source: Government Accountability Office¹

By Eric Horne, National Policy Director, Megafire Action

Wildfires know no boundaries; but for decades, federal wildland fire management has been constrained by an outdated, fragmented structure that divides decision making between the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) and the Department of the Interior (DOI). This bureaucratic split has led to inefficiencies, inconsistent strategies, and delays in wildfire preparedness, suppression, and recovery. The newly introduced [Fit for Purpose Wildfire Readiness Act of 2025](#), led by Senators Tim Sheehy and Alex Padilla, takes a major step toward fixing this broken system by directing the Secretaries of Agriculture and Interior to "jointly develop a plan to consolidate the authorities of the Secretaries relating to Federal wildland fire preparedness, suppression, and recovery efforts under an agency of the Department of the Interior." By proposing to unify wildfire decision *making* under one department and centralize technological decision *support* under a unified [Wildfire Intelligence Center](#)—Senators Sheehy and Padilla have prompted Congress to fundamentally reimagine how the federal government plans for and responds to wildfire.

The Fit for Purpose Wildfire Readiness Act of 2025 marks the beginning of a broader discussion among Congress, federal agencies, firefighters, land managers, Tribes, and forestry/wildfire policy groups on how to best modernize and streamline federal wildland fire mitigation and management. The bill directs the Secretaries of Agriculture and Interior submit a plan with three primary elements—

- 1) a budget for the National Wildland Firefighting Service;
- 2) a description of the qualifications required for an individual to be appointed to be the Director of the National Wildland Firefighting Service, who shall be appointed by the President, by and with the advice and consent of the Senate; and
- 3) a description of the resources and authorities necessary to consolidate Federal wildland fire response efforts of the Secretaries in the National Wildland Firefighting Service.

The plan that comes out of this process will require careful coordination and input from all stakeholders. For nearly a year, Megafire Action has been researching past proposals to reorganize and improve the federal wildland fire response. Our assessment has included proposals to relocate the Forest Service under DOI and the creation of a “National Wildland Firefighting Service” as envisioned by Senators Sheehy and Padilla.

Based on extensive analysis—including insights from a landmark 2009 GAO report on the feasibility of moving the Forest Service to DOI—we believe the proposal put forward by Senators Sheehy and Padilla has strong potential to create a more cohesive, accountable, and cost-effective wildfire management system.

This blog piece will examine:

1. The historical development of the Department of the Interior and the Forest Service.
2. The benefits of moving Forest Service’s wildfire preparedness, suppression, and recovery capabilities from USDA to DOI.
3. The 2009 GAO report on consolidating federal land management agencies.
4. The cost synergy potential of restructuring federal wildfire response.

We have been asking overburdened federal firefighters to do the impossible without an organization capable of success. The time for action is now. As wildfires intensify, communities and landscapes are suffering from a management system that is no longer fit for purpose. Megafire Action looks forward to engaging with Congress, USDA, DOI, Tribes, scientists, advocates, and firefighter groups to advance the bold reforms envisioned by Senators Sheehy and Padilla. This legislation is a critical step toward a more effective, accountable, and well-resourced federal wildfire response.

Background on the Department of the Interior and Forest Service

In 1905, Congress transferred control of the forest reserves from the Department of the Interior to the Department of Agriculture, creating the United States Forest Service. This move

reflected scientists' and policymakers' belief that forests and timber supply would be better managed under USDA's agriculture and conservation mission. While the Forest Service's placement in USDA made sense at the turn of the 20th century, the mission of the agency has since undergone significant transformations driven by social, political, economic, ecological, and legal shifts. The passage of landmark environmental legislation such as the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969, National Forest Management Act of 1976, and Healthy Forests Restoration Act of 2003 reflect an evolving public expectation that the Forest Service prioritize sustainable, multifaceted, and multiuse approaches to land management beyond the protection of timber stands for harvesting. Today, the mission of the Forest Service is most closely aligned to the missions of the DOI and its agencies.

The Forest Service's location within USDA may have worked well during the early 1900's when its mission was mainly focused on ensuring a continuous supply of timber as a key agricultural commodity driving economic development.² However, since the 1960's, the Forest Service's focus has shifted to sustainable management of multiple resources and wildland fire management. Today, the mission of the Forest Service is closely aligned with the DOI's Bureau of Land Management (BLM) mission to sustain the health, diversity, and productivity of public lands for current and future generations. This includes the protection of our public lands from devastating high-severity wildfires. As the Forest Service's mission has shifted away from USDA's mission of managing agricultural commodity resources to be more in line with Department of the Interior natural resource priorities (see table below), reorganization must be considered.³

Table 1: Forest Service and Interior Agencies' Mission Statements

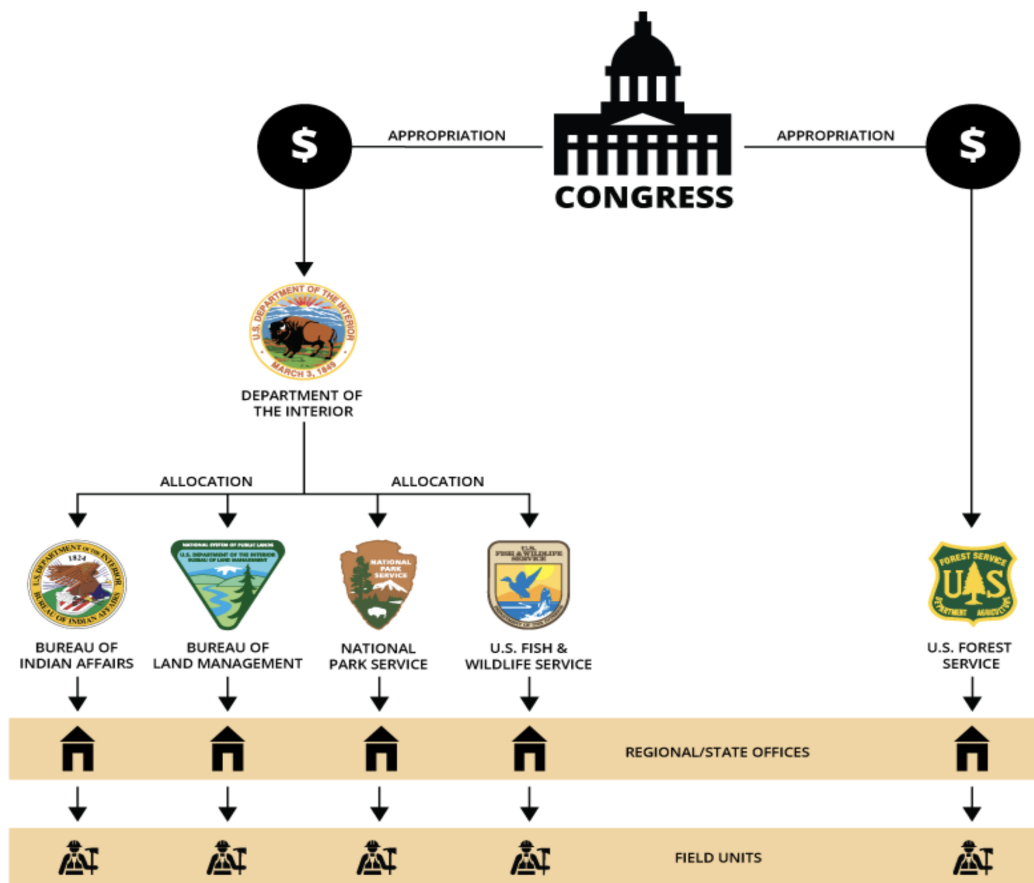
Agency	Mission statement
Forest Service	To sustain the health, diversity, and productivity of the nation's forests and grasslands to meet the needs of present and future generations
Interior	To protect and manage the nation's natural resources and cultural heritage; provide scientific and other information about those resources; and honor its trust responsibilities or special commitments to American Indians, Alaska Natives, and affiliated Island Communities
BLM	To sustain the health, diversity, and productivity of the public lands for the use and enjoyment of present and future generations
Fish and Wildlife Service	To work with others to conserve, protect, and enhance fish, wildlife, and plants and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people
National Park Service	To promote and regulate the use of the . . . national parks . . . to conserve the scenery, natural and historic objects, and wildlife and to provide for the enjoyment of the same to leave them unimpaired for the enjoyment of future generations

Recognizing the clear overlap between the Forest Service and DOI, a variety of proposals have been made over the past 80 years to reorganize federal land management. These proposals range from relocating the Forest Service under DOI, creating a National Wildland Firefighting Service, merging the Forest Service and BLM, moving BLM to USDA, and exchanging lands between Forest Service and BLM. Proposals by the Nixon and Carter Administrations to reorganize DOI, the Forest Service, and other agencies into a Department of Natural Resources languished in Congress. The concept has continued to see traction, with President Trump's 1st term Secretary of the Interior Ryan Zinke supporting relocating the Forest Service under Interior.⁴ The Fit for Purpose Wildfire Readiness Act of 2025 moves the conversation forward by

proposing the creation of a National Wildland Firefighting Service that may take different elements of past proposals as the Administration’s plan takes form. This proposal comes at a uniquely dynamic moment in Washington coming after the devastating Los Angeles Fires where the appetite for bold reforms to wildfire management has never been greater.

The need for unified wildfire mitigation and management

The Forest Service struggles to flourish as the only land and wildfire management agency within USDA’s organizational structure, where its mission is misaligned and deprioritized. USDA Secretaries are typically chosen for their expertise in agriculture, not forestry or wildland fire management, leaving the Forest Service without the critical departmental leadership it needs. The Forest Service’s challenges are further exacerbated by its budgetary isolation within USDA. With a FY 2025 budget request of just \$8.9 billion—less than 5% of USDA’s \$213.3 billion total—the agency operates on the margins of the Department’s larger priorities such as crop production and school lunch programs.⁵ Forest Service funding is managed by the Appropriations Subcommittee on Interior (along with DOI), separate from the Appropriations Subcommittees on Agriculture that oversee most USDA programs, further complicating congressional efforts to effectively oversee Forest Service’s budget and mission. The bifurcated appropriations process for wildland fire management is modeled below.⁶



The results of the status quo are increasingly alarming—the Forest Service fails to meet its long-term public financial obligations, leaving it unable to address critical short-term needs. The agency has put itself in a dire position where it cannot function at current staffing levels without a \$658.5 million increase over the fiscal year 2024 funding, causing it to cut seasonal hires for the next fiscal year, deprioritize core forestry work, and leaving it underprepared for the 2025 fire season.⁷ This is due to the drawdown of supplemental funding from the Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) and the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA), as well as staff cost-of-living increases. Though the Department of the Interior faces similar challenges, the severe budget crisis is unique to the Forest Service among land management agencies.

Though the Department of the Interior is not perfect, its centralized budget structure and accountable political appointees have navigated shifting annual and supplemental budgets without an organizational crisis. Annual appropriations for the DOI's Wildland Fire Management program have grown substantially—from \$993 million in 2021 to \$1.90 billion requested for 2025—DOI managed to maintain relatively cohesive planning, transparent allocation, and effective execution of funding for wildfire preparedness, fuels management, suppression, recovery, and science.⁸ Additional funding from the IRA and IIJA have not led to a budget shortfall requiring cutting seasonal workers under the current Continuing Resolution.

Guided by politically appointed undersecretaries and a single accountable cabinet secretary who understands the mission, funding for all wildland fire-related activities in DOI flows through a consolidated budget process managed by the Office of Wildland Fire. This enables the DOI to integrate preparedness, suppression, fuels management, rehabilitation, and science, avoiding redundancies and enhancing accountability to Congress and the public. Bringing the Forest Service's wildfire preparedness, suppression, and recovery mission into DOI's centralized budget structure is a critical first step in addressing the agency's financial accountability issues and creating a modern wildfire mitigation and management agency.

Strict budget accountability is more critical than ever as taxpayers have invested billions in wildfire resiliency through the IIJA and IRA. However, a September 2024 report by the USDA Office of the Inspector General (OIG) revealed that the Forest Service "could not accurately report how much it spent for FYs 2022 and 2023 hazardous fuels management, resulting in \$205.6 million in questioned costs."⁹ Additionally, the OIG "found that FS did not fully document its rationale for prioritizing and selecting projects. As such, FS' decision-making process is not transparent, resulting in reduced assurance that the most critical projects were selected."¹⁰ The issues raised by the OIG do not justify clawing back vital fuels reduction funding, but rather highlight the need for greater accountability in allocating taxpayer funding. Integrating Forest Service's wildfire mitigation work into the Department of the Interior's transparency and accountability framework would enhance oversight and ensure funds from the IIJA, IRA, and annual appropriations are effectively allocated to the highest-ROI projects.

A National Wildland Firefighting Service with a Director “who shall be appointed by the President, by and with the advice and consent of the Senate” would dramatically improve wildland firefighting and fuels management by fostering greatly improved collaboration between Forest Service's wildfire management programs (including fuels management) and DOI's land management agencies. Shared resources, firefighting personnel and equipment, could be deployed more strategically, while unified department-wide planning processes would ensure that fuels management projects are prioritized based on the most urgent risks across landscapes and not confined by artificial jurisdictional boundaries. This integration would streamline operations and enable improved technology and data sharing, consistent training and qualification standards, and better informed decision-making, ultimately saving both lives, communities and irreplaceable natural and cultural resources.

As our partners at [Grassroots Wildland Firefighters](#) note, a National Wildland Firefighting Service under the Department of the Interior would streamline wildfire management by reducing administrative redundancy, consolidating hiring and training, and eliminating inefficiencies caused by interagency coordination. A unified workforce would improve career pathways, standardize training requirements, and ensure equal pay and benefits across all federal wildland firefighters. By centralizing job postings, credentialing, and resource deployment, we could enhance workforce retention, reduce response times, and create a more agile, highly skilled firefighting force. Permanent career positions, rather than seasonal roles, would provide greater job security and stability, while cost savings from reduced bureaucratic overhead could be reinvested into frontline fuels management and firefighting capacity.

Transitioning the Forest Service's wildfire mitigation and management programs from USDA to DOI will require careful planning to address workforce concerns, including potential disruptions to career trajectories, management structures, and agency cultures. Ensuring a smooth integration process with clear communication, leadership alignment, and strong workforce protections would be essential to maximizing the benefits of this transformation. The Administration must include firefighting groups in the planning process from day one.

Relocating the Forest Service wildfire mitigation and management under DOI would also foster closer collaboration with the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA), bolstering tribal sovereignty and federal support for tribal-led fuels and wildfire management. Tribes must be a central part of the Administration's transition planning. Having these capabilities under a single department would also streamline coordination for governors and local communities, reducing the challenges of working across two federal departments—a change that would resonate with rural stakeholders and garner strong support from Western governors.

Unifying technology deployment for improved decision making

Advances in artificial intelligence (AI), low Earth orbit satellites (LEO), fire modeling, and other technologies have the potential to revolutionize wildfire management and public land

stewardship. However, their deployment remains fragmented across agencies and mired in conflicting IT protocols and CIO regulations from two separate departments, hampering their ability to effectively support wildland firefighters and land managers in planning and response. Effective and efficient response is further hampered by the addition of state and local protocols when fire breaks its jurisdictional land manager boundary.

The Wildland Fire Mitigation and Management Commission has recommended creating a Wildfire Intelligence Center, described as "an interagency joint office with dedicated funding to provide comprehensive assessment and prediction of fire in the wildland and built environment interface through data aggregation and science-based decision support services."¹¹ This proposal has gained serious traction in Congress—the House passed bipartisan Fix Our Forests Act establishes a "Fireshed Center" jointly within the Forest Service and USGS that is based in part on the Commission's recommendations.¹² It is no coincidence that in the Senate, Senators Padilla and Sheehy have taken the lead on [establishing](#) the Wildfire Intelligence Center and momentum for a House-Senate agreement has never been higher. Reorganizing federal wildfire mitigation and management programs under DOI would significantly amplify the effectiveness of a Wildfire Intelligence/Fireshed Center by enabling unified decision making with assistance of centralized decision support.

The establishment of a National Wildland Firefighting Service would not fully resolve the fragmentation of wildfire-technology services spread across multiple departments—including Defense, Commerce, Interior, and Homeland Security—but it could significantly streamline interagency collaboration, enhancing critical programs like predictive modeling, geospatial data systems, and the forest inventory and analysis. The National Wildland Firefighting Service could integrate the Forest Inventory and Analysis program (FIA) with USGS's expertise in natural hazard monitoring and geospatial analysis, significantly improving decision-making for wildfire suppression and fuels treatments. This alignment would maximize taxpayer investments, delivering science-driven solutions to optimize resource allocation and support long-term wildfire resilience.

2009 GAO report: observations on a possible move of the Forest Service into DOI

In 2008, the GAO was tasked with assessing the potential benefits and feasibility of moving the Forest Service from the USDA to the DOI. Note: this GAO report examines moving the entire Forest Service, while the creation of a National Wildland Firefighting Service as envisioned by Senators Sheehy and Padilla could involve relocating the agency or just select fuels reduction and wildfire management components. Though the GAO did not issue a recommendation for or against a reorganization, the report's findings suggest strong merits for reorganizing the Forest Service under DOI and the challenges outlined in the report can be mitigated by applying best practices from private sector mergers and acquisitions and past federal agency reorganizations.¹³ The following table summarizes the key benefits and possible challenges

identified by the GAO, along with factors we believe can mitigate the challenges of the reorganization.

This table outlines the key benefits identified by GAO in relocating the Forest Service from USDA to DOI.		
Possible Benefit	GAO Analysis	
Improved Coordination and Efficiency	Moving the Forest Service to DOI could enhance collaboration with the Bureau of Land Management, National Park Service, Fish and Wildlife Service, and Bureau of Indian Affairs, which often manage adjacent or intermingled lands. This could reduce duplicative efforts and foster cohesive strategies for wildfire suppression, recreation, and conservation.	
Potential Cost Savings	Over time, integrating systems and operations under DOI could reduce administrative costs. Shared IT systems and unified program operations might lead to efficiencies, although these savings are expected in the long term.	
Enhanced Accountability	A unified structure within DOI could increase budget and performance accountability in managing public lands and resources under a single Secretary.	
Landscape-Scale Management	Consolidation under DOI could better support ecosystem-wide land management, vital for addressing wildfire risks, and biodiversity conservation.	
Wildfire Management Integration	Combining wildfire management efforts within DOI would streamline coordination, resource allocation, employee standards, and operational efficiency.	
The GAO report also noted several potential challenges, which we believe can be mitigated:		
Possible Challenge	GAO Analysis	Mitigating Factors
Diminished Role in State and Private Land Management	Moving the Forest Service could weaken collaboration with state and private landowners, as USDA's mission aligns more closely with these stakeholders. The Forest Service provides technical and financial assistance for managing state and private forests, not traditionally a focus for DOI.	This role could be preserved by transferring the Forest Service's authorities intact and extending similar outreach to DOI agencies, such as the Fish and Wildlife Service's existing programs for private conservation efforts, thus ensuring continued support for state and private stakeholders while leveraging DOI's broader land management resources.
Cultural and Organizational Clashes	The Forest Service and DOI agencies have distinct cultures and operating practices. Merging them could lead to morale issues, resistance from employees, and disruptions in operations.	This challenge is not to be underestimated, but successful transitions, such as the creation of the Department of Homeland Security, show that leadership-driven unified missions can mitigate cultural clashes.
Integration Costs and Complexity Limit Immediate Efficiencies	Transitioning the Forest Service's reporting, budgeting, and IT systems into DOI would be costly and time-consuming. Legal and statutory differences between the agencies would further complicate integration and lead to limited efficiencies in the short-run.	While initial costs and disruptions are inevitable, unified IT, financial, and administrative systems promise long-term benefits that outweigh these challenges. Private sector mergers demonstrate significant IT/HR cost-savings, and existing Forest Service-DOI collaborations like the Wildland Fire Community's shared computing services under the Service First initiative demonstrate how deeper integration can enhance efficiency.

Solving the Forest Service budget crisis with cost synergies

While the GAO did not attempt to evaluate the potential cost synergies achievable by relocating the Forest Service into the Department of the Interior, there are several key funding streams where significant overlap exists between the agencies. The “budget for the National Wildland Firefighting Service” requested by the Fit for Purpose Wildfire Readiness Act should

include an extensive inventory of where cost synergies can be achieved and reinvested into the creation of a world class fuels reduction and wildfire management agency.

Cost-saving opportunities across four key funding streams—Wildland Fire Management, Hazardous Fuels Management, Research and Technology, and IT/Administrative Services—include leveraging shared resources, aligning administrative functions, consolidating contracts, and streamlining R&D. Estimated total cost synergies will require extensive analysis, and should form part of the plan requested by the Fit For Purpose Wildfire Readiness Act. We expect cost synergies across these streams to represent a significant opportunity to optimize resource allocation and address the current \$658.5 million budget shortfall afflicting critical hiring for fuels management and wildfire suppression at the Forest Service.¹⁴ In the GAO report, the Forest Service claimed (without providing any analysis or justification) that integrating the Forest Service into DOI could have a one-time cost of \$300-500 million (\$439-732 million in 2025 dollars). Potential annual cost synergies from relocating all or parts of the Forest Service under DOI should more than cover initial integration costs.¹⁵

The biggest potential cost savings of the reorganization, however, are expected to come from the benefits of improved fuels reduction and wildfire management. Extensive research finds that fuels reduction treatments can yield additional savings by lowering the suppression costs and damages of subsequent wildfires while also increasing their ecological benefits.¹⁶ If the creation of a National Wildland Firefighting Service improves the efficiency of landscape-scale fuels management and reduces uncontrolled wildfires, it could lead to long-term savings by lowering the costs of destructive wildfires. A 2024 analysis of arid Western forests found that every dollar invested in fuels treatments yields up to seven dollars in benefits, a 600% return on investment.¹⁷ After covering integration costs, we recommend allocating the annual cost synergies from the creation of a National Wildland Firefighting Service to expand ecologically sound fire management and fuels reduction, potentially saving billions and transforming our response to the megafire crisis.

Next steps: creating a plan with with stakeholder input

Establishing a National Wildland Firefighting Service is an enormous undertaking that will require a phased approach involving both executive action and legislative approval. This operational plan requested by the Fit For Purpose Wildfire Readiness Act should assess the legal, financial, and operational impacts of transitioning wildland fire preparedness, suppression, and recovery from the Forest Service to DOI. The plan should also assess potential cost savings, performance improvements, and challenges associated with the reorganization. The plan should assess multiple options, including the relocation of the entire Forest Service under DOI.

As part of the Administration's plan, it should consult state governments, tribes, conservation groups, wildland firefighters, advocacy groups and industry representatives to address

concerns and build support. Public input should be solicited through notices in the Federal Register.

Establishing a National Wildland Firefighting Service offers a historic opportunity to unify wildfire mitigation and management, addressing inefficiencies that have long hindered an effective response to the megafire crisis. By streamlining operations, leveraging cost synergies, and fostering collaboration across agencies, this reorganization could save billions while improving outcomes for communities and ecosystems. It is a bold, necessary step to safeguard America's landscapes and communities while delivering greater value to taxpayers.

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