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Secretary Norton Announces New Firefighting Initiatives;

Details Locations of Five New Healthy Forest Pilot Projects

NEW ORLEANS ? Coming off of one of the worst fire seasons in modern history, Interior Secretary Gale Norton today announced two memorandums of understanding to better coordinate federal, state and local forest and rangeland firefighting efforts and announced five new Healthy Forests pilot projects the Interior Department and state, tribal and local partners will perform this year.

Secretary Norton made the announcements this afternoon in New Orleans at the National Fire Plan Conference. The conference included more than 400 fire

managers and land managers, representing federal, state and local organizations.

"We need to take action and leave a legacy of healthier lands and thriving communities. Together, we can fulfill this vision," Secretary Norton said. "A century of fire suppression and forest management policies have left forests with too many trees and trees that are small and unhealthy. Insect and disease damage have turned whole mountainsides from rich green to rust ? and then to gray as the trees died.

Secretary Norton pointed out that more than 7.1 million acres burned last year ? more than twice the annual 10-year average. These fires caused the death of 21 firefighters, drove tens of thousands of people from their homes and destroyed more than 2,000 buildings. These fires also destroyed sensitive wildlife habitat and severely damaged soils and watersheds for decades to come. Currently, 190 million acres of public land and surrounding communities are at increased risk of extreme fires.

"For the good of communities and their economies, most agree that we have to treat the forests and rangelands to prevent catastrophe. We want to leave a positive legacy on our public lands and achieve greater safety for America's communities. We are working with communities to reduce the risks of catastrophic fires and to restore health to our forests and rangelands. Success requires that we apply a healing hand to the land," Secretary Norton said.

Secretary Norton today announced two MOUs to build better partnerships to combat wildland fires. In the first MOU, the Department of the Interior, USDA Forest Service, State Foresters and National Association of Counties signed an agreement to better prioritize the annual selection of fuels treatment projects. This will be accomplished by concentrating on high priority areas: 1) in the wildland-urban interface, where the greatest risk to property and life exist and, 2) outside the wildland-urban interface, areas that are at the highest risk of catastrophic fire. Projects will be selected May 1st, so firefighting personnel can prepare fuels treatment projects before the beginning of the intense June through September fire season.

Secretary Norton also announced an MOU agreement signed with the Federal Emergency Management Agency, USDA Forest Service and State Foresters that will avoid duplication in fire-related federal grant programs. The

agreement will leverage funds more effectively to assist local fire departments efforts to improve firefighter safety, suppression response and risk mitigation. Grant applications will be reviewed simultaneously by all federal agencies to avoid duplication.

Secretary Norton also announced five additional Healthy Forests pilot projects. The pilot projects include the following:

? Weaver Mountain, Ariz., in Yavapai Country, three miles southeast of Yarnell, Ariz. The southern boundary is north of the Hassayampa Wilderness Area. The project includes approximately 14,000 acres, consisting of 8,950 Bureau of Land Management acres, 4,000 Arizona State acres and 1,100 acres of private ownership. The project will reduce interior chaparral brush within the area and improve rangeland and wildlife habitat conditions.

? White River Power Line project, near Rio Blanco County, Colo. The project involves mechanical thinning and prescribed burning of pinon, juniper and sagebrush stands that are directly adjacent or near electric transmission lines. The Rio Blanco County commissioners and the White River Electric Association, recognizing that a hazardous fuel problem exists, requested that the BLM do hazardous fuel reduction treatments in the area.

? Horse Thief Subdivision in Montana, near Roundup, Mont., 50 miles north of Billings. Mont. The BLM lands around the subdivision are overstocked with Ponderosa Pine, which provides for a very volatile fuel situation. The first treatment would be mechanical and consist of hand or machine thinning from below to reduce the fuel load. The second treatment would also be mechanical and would open the mature canopy to reduce the change of crown fire. Treatments would be maintained by periodic use of additional mechanical treatment and/or prescribed fire.

? BIA/Zuni Agency project in N.M., 35 miles west of Gallup. Prescribed fire and mechanical treatments will be applied to 1,300 acres of pine, gambel oak, pinyon and grassland vegetation to restore the landscape. Encroachment by pinyon and juniper has reduced wildlife habitat, ponderosa pine regeneration and productivity and increased soil erosion. The Tribal government supports the project.

? Grand Teton National Park, Wyo., between Moran and Moose. This

initiative encompasses seven sites, covering 83 acres of the park. The chiefly mechanical treatments will protect historical properties, private structures, National Park Service housing and a dam. The mixed conifer and sage rangelands have created a volatile fuel situation.

"Our proposals and pilot projects will help protect forest and rangeland for future generations. These thoughtful initiatives can make a difference in the number of fuels treatment projects we are able to move forward. They will help us restore the health of our forests and reduce risks to our communities," Secretary Norton concluded.