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Office of the Secretary

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### **President Emphasizes Healthy Forests, Wildland Firefighting in 2004 Budget**

President Bush will propose \$698.7 million for wildfire prevention and suppression and Healthy Forests initiatives in fiscal year 2004, a \$45 million or 7 percent increase over last year's budget proposal.

"We are facing a crisis of forest health of unprecedented proportions," Secretary Norton said. "A century of fire suppression and forest management policies have left our forests with too many trees and trees that are small and unhealthy. Insect and disease damage have turned mountainsides from rich green to rust and then to gray as the trees died.

"For the safety of our communities and the restoration of our forests and wildlife, we have to reduce hazardous fuels in our forests and rangelands to prevent catastrophic wildfires. We want to leave a positive legacy on our public lands and achieve greater safety for America's communities. The president's budget reaffirms his commitment to these goals," Norton said.

The FY 2004 request includes continued funding for a robust hazardous fuels treatment program at \$186.2 million, 400 percent above spending in FY

2000?which will lessen the risk of catastrophic wildfire on 307,000 high priority acres in the wildland-urban interface, and on 768,000 other nonpriority acres.

The budget request calls for \$282.7 million for fire preparedness, including an additional \$5 million for aviation contract costs; \$195.3 million for fire suppression; \$24.5 million for rehabilitating burned areas; and \$10 million for Rural Fire Assistance.

The 2002 wildfire season, one of the longest and most grueling in U.S. history, burned 7.1 million acres, more than twice the annual 10-year average. Those damaged lands included 2.2 million acres managed by Interior and 2.4 million acres managed by the USDA Forest Service. About 2.5 million acres of state and private lands were also burned.

The fires caused the death of 21 firefighters, forced more than 100,000 people to evacuate their homes, destroyed more than 3,000 structures, killed hundreds of millions of trees, and devastated wildlife species and habitat. The Penasco Fire in the Lincoln National Forest in New Mexico, for example, wiped out a population of Mexican spotted owls, while the Biscuit Fire in Oregon destroyed 100,000 acres of spotted owl habitat. The 2002 fires also caused unstable slopes, sedimentation, and erosion that significantly damaged soils, landscapes and watersheds for decades to come.

Currently, about 190 million acres of public land and the surrounding communities are at increased risk of extreme fires because of overgrown forests and rangeland fuel loads. And more than 35 million acres are infested by fire-prone invasive species and noxious weeds. Western federal lands are 15 times more dense than they were 100 years ago.

The President's Healthy Forests Initiative will expedite federal and local efforts to restore forest and rangeland health and reduce fire risks with thinning and fuels reduction. Secretary Norton noted a number of initiatives the Department has already taken to prepare for the 2003 wildfire season, including interagency agreements that will expedite wildland fire prevention activities.

Under the first memorandum of understanding, Interior, USDA Forest Service, State Foresters and the National Association of Counties will prioritize the annual selection of fuels treatment projects 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 1, so firefighters can prepare fuels treatment projects before the beginning of the intense June-September fire season.

A second MOU with the Federal Emergency Management Agency, USDA Forest Service, and State Foresters 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.