

Testimony

STATEMENT OF
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UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE;
BEFORE THE
UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
COMMITTEE ON RESOURCES
CONCERNING
FOREST MANAGEMENT CHALLENGES
JULY 2, 2003
SEELEY LAKE, MONTANA

Mr. Chairman:

Thank you for the opportunity to discuss forest management challenges in Montana, as well as the rest of the country. Before I begin let me thank you, Mr. Chairman, for your support of the Forest Service and your focus on managing the nation's natural resources. I think the 192 million acres of national forests and grasslands in America are truly a national treasure. Nearly 17 million of those acres are right here in Montana. The national forests are some of the most outstanding places in this country. They serve as America's outdoor playground, and they contain a wealth of wildlife and other natural resources.

We are living in a time of great issues and great debate. Some people and organizations still argue that timber harvest levels represent the greatest threat to the national forests. However loudly voiced or strongly held these views may be, they are not a full picture of the reality of management of the national forests now or over the next 100 years. National Forest annual timber cut has gone from a high of around 12 billion board feet in 1988 to around 2 billion board

feet today. Today, the primary purpose for timber removal in most places is to improve wildlife habitat, restore watershed and ecosystems, and reduce hazardous fuels.

I believe the key issues associated with America's forests and grasslands include hazardous fuels and the protection of communities from catastrophic wildfire, and invasive species and pathogens, fragmentation and unmanaged recreation.

The need for action to restore our Nation's public forests and rangelands to long-term health has never been greater. Catastrophic fires are just one consequence of the deteriorating forest and rangeland health that now affects more than 190 million acres of public land, an area twice the size of California. Last year alone, wildfires burned over 7.2 million acres of public and private lands, leading to the destruction of thousands of structures and the evacuation of tens of thousands of people from hundreds of communities. Although nationally wildland fire activity so far this year had been less than the average of the last few years, on June 17, 2003, the Aspen Fire blew out of the Pusch Ridge Wilderness in southern Arizona and overwhelmed the community of Summerhaven, Arizona destroying an estimated 325 homes, businesses and other structures. We are seeing critical situations in the southwest and these conditions are spreading northward. Although the National Interagency Coordination Center has stated that wildfires this year to date are far below average, large portions of Arizona, California, Idaho, Oregon, Nevada, Utah, Washington, and Montana, as well as sections of Colorado and Wyoming, are predicted to have above average fire activity this summer.

The underlying issue is that so many of our forests have become overgrown and unhealthy. I don't want to oversimplify—many forests are healthy, and some forest types were always dense. But on the national forests alone, millions of acres adapted to frequent fire are at risk from wildland fires that could compromise human safety and ecosystem health.

Ponderosa pine is a prime example. Historically, most ponderosa pine forests were relatively open, with a few dozen trees per acre. Today, they might have hundreds or even thousands of trees per acre. In a drought, all those trees can fuel a catastrophic fire with the potential loss of homes, communities, municipal water sources and wildlife habitat. Think of it as an environmental debt, like a toxic dump. It will take decades of action to clean up, provided we as a society are willing to focus on this issue and commit the needed resources.

Americans must decide: We can remove some of the trees and lower the risk of catastrophic fire; or we can do nothing and watch them burn. I think the choice is obvious: In a good part of the West—where forests are overgrown—we *must* return forests to the way they were historically, then get fire back into the ecosystem when it's safe.

At the same time, we've got tens of millions of acres of healthy fire-adapted forest. We've got to keep them healthy. That means getting fire back into the ecosystem now in a prudent manner.

Another great issue is the spread of invasive species. Federal forests and rangelands across the country face unusually high threats from the spread of invasive species and insect

attacks. Nationwide, invasive weeds cover about 133 million acres and are expanding at the rate of about 1.7 million acres a year. Insects and pathogens have historically existed in our forests and rangelands. However, the frequency, extent and timing of recent outbreaks are out of the ordinary. Changes in tree stand density, species composition and structure caused by fire exclusion, the lack of active management and drought are factors that have significantly affected outbreak patterns. The result is the death of millions of trees across many thousands of acres in California, Utah, Arkansas, Michigan, Minnesota, the Mid-Atlantic States and the South. Often when these areas burn with uncharacteristic intensity, they become very susceptible to invasive species, further prolonging poor forest and rangeland health.

The third great issue is fragmentation through land conversion. Between 1982 and 1997 nearly 22 million acres of open land were converted to developed land; about 4,000

acres a day. How does that affect national forests and grasslands? Historically, the national forests were buffered by miles of rural landscape. Today, people want to live near or adjacent to public lands, creating the wildland/urban interface or WUI. Demands for services are growing, people want to use their forests more, and so are the challenges of property boundary management and fire protection.

But maybe the biggest threat is to wildlife. Overall, we're losing forest interior habitat as large privately owned working forests are sold and developed. America is losing valuable corridors needed to connect parts of the national forests with other large undisturbed tracts of land. Animals like marten, bear, or cougar need large, relatively undisturbed forests to survive.

We're also losing open areas of range which animals like elk need to survive. Most people don't realize that the Forest Service manages so much rangeland—about 40 percent of national forest land is range. Elk depend on bottomland for winter range and move to the uplands in the spring. Without both types of habitat they won't survive. When golf courses and condominiums replace rangeland we lose the ecological integrity of the land as a whole.

Our population will continue to grow, but we can direct our efforts on how to buffer the national forests by protecting open land—by keeping ranches and working forests in operation. Congress has given the Forest Service some good programs that can help landowner keep their lands forested. The Forest Legacy Program is a tool to protect environmentally important forests from conversion to non-forest uses. The program is incentive based, entirely voluntary and provides for easement acquisitions on a willing buyer – willing seller basis only. Montana has been a shining example of Forest Legacy accomplishment. Since entering the program in 2000, the State has completed 3 projects protecting almost 98,000 acres. We also have forage reserves that ranchers can use to give their allotments a rest. Through programs like these, we can work together across the landscape to keep the land whole, in the best tradition of conservation.

The fourth great issue is unmanaged outdoor recreation. Last year, the national forests had 214 million visitors, which is just phenomenal. And it's only going to keep on growing—we expect it to more than double by the end of the century.

I think that's great. We want the American people to use their national forests and grasslands. It gives them a stake in the land. It gives them a sense of place. It helps them understand why we in the Forest Service are so passionate about the land—why we think it's so worth protecting.

The issue is this: Back when we had light recreational use, we didn't need to manage it; but now that it's heavier, we do. At one time, we didn't manage the use of off-highway vehicles, either. OHVs are a great way to experience the outdoors, and only a tiny fraction of the users leave lasting traces by going cross-country. But the number of people who own OHVs has just exploded in recent years. In 2000, it reached almost 36 million. Even a tiny percentage of impact from all those millions of users is still a lot of impact. Each year, we get hundreds of miles of what we euphemistically refer to as "unplanned roads and trails."

For example, the Lewis and Clark National Forest here in Montana has more than a thousand unplanned roads and trails reaching for almost 650 miles. That's pretty typical for a lot of national forests, and it's only going to get worse. We're seeing more and more erosion, water degradation, and habitat destruction. We're seeing more conflicts between users. We're seeing more damage to cultural sites and more violation of sites sacred to American Indians. And those are just some of the impacts. We're going to have to manage that by restricting OHV use to designated roads, trails, and areas.

As Federal, State and local land managers have attempted to address these threats and restore forest and rangeland health, their efforts have been severely hampered by unnecessary and costly procedural delays. Excessive analysis, ineffective public involvement, and management inefficiencies trap land managers in costly procedural delays, where, in some cases, a single project can take years to move forward. In the meantime, communities, wildlife habitat and forests and rangelands suffer. Fires and insect infestations that begin on public lands can spread to private lands as well, causing significant property damage and threats to public health and safety.

Recognizing the impending crisis, especially the threats of catastrophic wildfire to communities and ecosystems, President Bush proposed the Healthy Forests Initiative (HFI) in August 2002. The President directed Federal agencies to develop several administrative and legislative tools to restore deteriorated Federal lands to healthy conditions and assist in executing core components of the National Fire Plan. Since the President's announcement last August, Federal agencies have taken several regulatory steps to implement components of the HFI.

We have established new categorical exclusions, as provided under the National Environmental Policy Act, for certain hazardous fuels reduction projects and for post-fire rehabilitation projects. These new CEs shorten the time between identification of hazardous fuels treatment and restoration projects and their actual accomplishment on the ground.

CEQ Chairman Connaughton issued guidance addressing the preparation of environmental assessments for fuels treatment projects. The guidance addresses the purpose and content of an EA, specifically, that EAs should be focused and concise. These guidelines are now being applied on five national forest projects.

We made rule changes to our appeals regulations designed to encourage early and meaningful public participation in project planning, while continuing to provide the public an opportunity to seek review or appeal project decisions. This allows more expedited application of hazardous fuels reduction projects.

I want to thank you, Mr. Chairman, and the committee for your support of the recently passed Consolidated Appropriations Resolution, 2003 (PL 108-7) which contains stewardship contracting authority that gives agency land managers a critical tool to implement projects necessary to achieve land management goals. This provision allows the Forest Service to enter into long-term stewardship contracts with the private sector, non-profit organizations, local communities, and other entities. Guidance for long-term implementation is now out for public review.

I want to point out that one of the great successes in demonstrating the effectiveness of Stewardship Contracting has taken place right here around the Seeley Lake community. The Clearwater Stewardship Pilot reduced hazardous fuels and improved grizzly bear habitat on 600 acres through commercial thinning. Revenues were used to improve recreation facilities and eliminate the threat of campground wastes to Seeley Lake.

I also want to thank you, Mr. Chairman, for your leadership in passing H.R. 1904 in the House of Representatives. This important legislation would provide additional tools to help land managers protect forests and communities from fire, insects and disease, as well as some of the other threats I have mentioned.

Mr. Chairman, the Forest Service is committed to working with Congress, State, local and tribal officials and the public to advance common-sense solutions to protect communities and people, and to restore forest and rangeland health

Once again thank you for the opportunity to be here today. I will be glad to answer any questions you may have.