Testimony

Statement of Harv Forsgren
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USDA Forest Service
Subcommittee on Forests and Forest Health
Committee on Resources
U. S. House of Representatives

Concerning

Issues Affecting Rural Communities in the Southwest -
National Forest Management and the Endangered Species Act
September 20, 2004

Chairman Walden and Members of the Subcommittee:

Thank you for the opportunity to be with you today to discuss the management challenges of the forests and rangelands in the Southwestern Region. I am Harv Forsgren, Regional Forester for the Southwestern Region of the Forest Service. With me today is Jeanine Derby, Forest Supervisor of the Coronado National Forest.

At the outset, Mr. Chairman, I want to thank you and other members of this Committee for your leadership in passage of the Healthy Forests Restoration Act of 2003. This law combined with stewardship contracting is having significant positive effects here in the Southwest and especially for rural communities that face risk from wildfires.

Regional Overview

The Southwestern Region encompasses over 21 million acres of National Forests and Grasslands in Arizona, New Mexico and the panhandles of Texas and Oklahoma. Our statutory mission is to manage these lands for multiple-use while sustaining health, diversity, and productivity. Here in Arizona, the Forest Service manages about 11 million acres of forest and rangelands for a multitude of purposes including livestock grazing, mining, and utilization of forest products, recreation, wildlife, and watershed protection.

As Southwestern Regional Forester I am focusing our resources and efforts in three areas:
• Restoring the ecological functionality of forests and rangelands;
• Helping communities protect themselves from the threats of wildfire; and
• Contributing to the economic vitality of local communities.

These three priorities are inseparably connected. In the Southwest, the ability to accomplish work in order to improve health of our forests is dependent upon the economic vitality of local

communities – specifically the presence of infrastructure to utilize the biomass that must be removed from those forests to restore their health.

The most significant land health challenge we face in the Southwest is captured by one startling statistic: Of the 21 million acres of National Forest System lands in the Southwestern Region, more than 80 percent of that acreage is at moderate to high risk of uncharacteristic wildfire. I say "uncharacteristic" not because fire is an unnatural feature of our forests – it is not. Historically, about 85 percent of the landscape burned very frequently, but at low intensity.

Rather, I use the word "uncharacteristic" because the current condition of our forests results in fires that are unnaturally large and intense. These fires can severely damage our watersheds. They can alter soils, reducing their ability to capture and hold moisture, accelerate erosion and deteriorate water quality.

These fires destroy important wildlife habitats and remnant old growth stands, and hurt visual quality. As we have seen in Arizona and around the nation these fires can also destroy lives, property and local economies.

Due to effective fire suppression for most of the last century, our ponderosa pine forests that were once open and park-like, supporting between 50 and 200 trees per acre, are today a dense tangle of up to 2,000 trees per acre. Our forests are literally being choked to death.

Our long-term drought is making matters worse. Drought-stressed trees are unable to fend off attacks from insects. The Southwest's landscape is now blanketed by hundreds of thousands of acres of red…then brown…pinyon and ponderosa pine trees killed by insects, further adding to the fire danger.

Restoring the health of our forests and rangelands, and securing the associated benefits for future generations will require both active management and naturally occurring wildfire. Simply stated, we need to thin our forests by reducing the total biomass, remove the excess number of trees and carefully reintroduce fire into our forests.

Restoring Forest and Rangeland Health

The picture I have painted of the challenges we face in restoring forest and grassland health may seem daunting. Nevertheless, I'm very optimistic about our opportunity for success.

One reason for my optimism is the President's Healthy Forest Initiative. This is one of the most important conservation initiatives to come along in my career.

The administrative, regulatory and legislative actions resulting from this effort have given our land managers more tools. Given the geographic scale of the "forest health" issue in the Southwest, however, we cannot effectively address our forest health issues without additional private sector involvement.

The Consolidated Appropriations Resolution, 2003 (PL-108-7) contains stewardship contracting authorities that will help facilitate industry investment in infrastructure needed to utilize the small-diameter materials that are choking our forests.

As you may know, Mr. Chairman, in early August the Southwestern Region awarded the nation's first large-scale stewardship contract on the Apache-Sitgreaves National Forests in Arizona. The award was made to Future Forests Limited Liability Corporation, a local company based in the White Mountains.

The White Mountain stewardship contract is significant since between 5,000 and 25,000 acres will be treated each year over the 10-year term of the contract. Most of the areas to be treated are in the wildland-urban interface where there is high risk of catastrophic fires. This contract allows for the costs of removal of small trees, residue wood and slash to be exchanged for the value of the excess trees that are removed. The smaller trees and wood fiber will result in uses such as biomass power generation and the manufacture of wood pellets. The larger trees will be used for lumber. Overall the goals of this contract are to reduce the risk of catastrophic wildfires, improve forest health, reduce treatment costs and increase jobs in the local communities.

As additional stewardship contracts are developed, we expect they will encourage more private sector use for wood fiber and more jobs for local communities. We will still need to meet the full suite of applicable laws, regulations and policy. We will still need to fund treatments from appropriated funding, that won't pay for themselves and in the Southwest that will be the rule rather than the exception. And we will still need to carefully prioritize treatments based on their relative costs and benefits because we know we can't treat every acre.

Stewardship contracting coupled with the Healthy Forests Restoration Act and other tools provided in the President's Healthy Forest Initiative will enable us to accomplish much in the future. For all of this work, it is critically important to work collaboratively with local communities and other government agencies.

I also want to announce that through August, we have completed most of our fuels reduction projects for fiscal year 2004 and there is still active mechanical thinning and burning being conducted throughout the Region. About $27 million in hazardous fuels funds were used to treat nearly 160,000 acres on the region's national forests in 2004.

About 40 percent of the treatments were in the wildland-urban interface, known as WUI. Other projects where secondary fuels reduction occurred, such as wildlife habitat burns and timber sales, have accounted for nearly 43,000 more acres being treated. This accounts for over 200,000 acres of fuels reduction work accomplished in the Region this year.

About two thirds of our hazardous fuels funding goes toward treating wildlandurban interface projects because reducing fuels near communities is generally more costly. But that makes sense, because the WUI is where the most risk lies. And completing WUI treatments also reduces the risks and costs of completing backcountry burns. There are two forests in the Region, the Tonto Nationa Forest here in Arizona with low elevation burning and the Gila National Forest in New

Mexico with aggressive back-country burning that rack up large amounts of non-WUI restoration at low cost.

The Region's State and Private Forestry program also distributes funds to the State Foresters who then direct grants to entities that do on-the-ground thinning on public and private lands. About $4.9 million were distributed in fiscal year 2004 for these programs. In addition, about $1.9 million in other funds go to the State Forester Offices for various programs. As an example, over $600,000 went for assistance to volunteer fire departments for training and purchasing equipment.

Communities are also helping themselves. Citizens have taken action through the FIREWISE program, which helps people who live or vacation in fire-prone areas educate themselves about wildland fire protection. Homeowners are learning how to protect their homes with a survivable space and how to landscape their yard with fire resistant materials. A consortium of wildland fire agencies that includes the Forest Service, the Department of the Interior, and the National Association of State Foresters sponsor the program.

Our Work with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

There are 48 threatened or endangered species that occur on national forest system lands in the Region. An additional three species are currently proposed for listing in the Region. I want to highlight three of the major programmatic consultations we have done with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) over the past few years to meet our responsibilities under the Endangered Species Act (ESA) in a streamlined fashion.
In 2001, FWS completed a batched consultation with the Region designed to expedite projects to reduce fuels adjacent to WUI areas in order to protect life, property, and natural resources, including rare species habitat. This consultation included 283 WUI projects on 1.9 million acres in the Region and has resulted in streamlined reviews of the projects as site-specific plans are completed.

A Grazing Team composed of biologists from the FWS and the Forest Service meets regularly to consult on permit issuance for grazing allotments on the national forests. Grazing guidance criteria were developed jointly between FWS and Forest Service and were first finalized in 2002 and revised in 2004. The grazing guidance criteria were developed to help biologists make "effects" determinations and avoid adverse effects to listed species and designated critical habitat. The criteria enable us to propose and address endangered species issues on grazing allotments scheduled for permit issuance and to streamline ESA compliance.

In April 2003, we began working with the FWS to reinitiate consultations first done in 1996 and 1997 as programmatic biological opinions for the Region's 11 Forest Plans. The FWS is now using information we recently provided to address Mexican spotted owls and 58 other candidate, listed or proposed species and/or proposed or designated critical habitat. The action area includes the Region's 11 national forests and adjacent lands. The end goal is to address all currently listed species and others that may be listed in the future to ensure ESA programmatic requirements are met while National Forests within the Region complete revisions to their Forest Plans.
I will use the nearby Coronado National Forest as the example for our more localized work with

the FWS. This year the nearly 30,000-acre Nuttall Complex Fire threatened summer homes and the Mount Graham International Observatory in the Pinaleno Mountains. Thankfully, there was no loss of human life or property except for relatively minor damage at the Heliograph lookout and electronic site. There were effects on the Mount Graham red squirrel.

Throughout the fire suppression effort, the Forest worked with the FWS to minimize potential damage to squirrel habitat. However, this work did not impede in any way the fire suppression operations.

The Forest has worked with the FWS over the last decade to conduct numerous fuel reduction projects in the Pinaleno Mountains. These fuels treatments also included consideration of the traditional and religious significance of Mount Graham to the Apache peoples who share the view that the ecological conditions on the mountain should more closely resemble those of the 1870s

Plans are underway for several continuing projects that would further reduce fuels. The Pinaleno Ecosystem Restoration Project would cover an additional 5,500 acres in dense stands of ponderosa pine and mixed conifer. Another project would do additional FIREWISE treatments around several sites such as the Turkey Flats and Columbine recreation residence tracts, the Bible Camp and the Heliograph Peak electronics site. Finally, ongoing maintenance treatments close to the Mount Graham International Observatory would continue.

Prescribed burns around the base of Mount Graham, to reduce the risk of wildfires starting and moving uphill, have been completed on 8,200 acres and another 15,300 acres are in planning now.

In summary, the Coronado National Forest has not been hampered in firefighting or doing fuels reduction work by the FWS. If it's a wildfire, the FWS policy is clear that, per the 2001 Secretarial memorandum on endangered species and fire, "no emergency response is to be delayed or obstructed because of Endangered Species Act considerations." We complete emergeny consultation on fire operations only after the risk to human life or improved property has subsided. The Regional Director for the FWS has made good on his commitment to protect listed species without placing people in harm's way.

When threatened and endangered species are involved for fuels reduction work, the FWS has made consultation a priority.

Conclusion

In closing, we will continue to address the health of the forests and rangelands in the Southwestern Region during this period of severe drought. To be successful, we must continue to work with all who have a stake in the management of the national forests and grasslands. I believe restoring forest and rangeland health is especially important for many of our rural communities—to help protect them and to provide jobs. This concludes my prepared remarks. I will be happy to answer any questions you may have.