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Testimony on
"IMPACT OF THE MOUNTAIN PINE BEETLE EPIDEMIC IN THE BLACK HILLS"

July 10, 2011

Chairman [Rob] Bishop (R-Utah) and Representatives [Kristi] Noem (R-SD) and [Cynthia] Lummis (R-WY), ladies and gentlemen;

Thank you for the opportunity to present the Department's views on the impact of the Mountain Pine Beetle epidemic on the Black Hills National Forest. I am mindful of the concerns that you have for forest health and the long-term sustainability of our national forests including the Black Hills. Efforts to protect communities and forests through restoration projects can make a difference; most recently Arizona is experiencing its worst fires season in history, yet forest areas that had been previously treated with fuels reduction projects affected fire behavior, reducing its intensity, allowing for more effective fire suppression and resulting in greatly reduced impacts on forests and communities.

Mountain pine beetles have infested ponderosa pine trees on over 400,000 acres of the 1.2 million acre Black Hills National Forest over the past decade, and 400,000 acres remain at risk to beetle attack. Periodic wild fires and mountain pine beetle infestations (*Dendroctonus ponserosae v. Hopkins*) and related bark beetles are part of the natural disturbance cycles in pine forest across the western United States. Significant changes in forest structure, particularly tree density, combined with relatively long cycles of drought since the 1990s, have created conditions resulting in widespread mature tree death on an epic scale.

Since healthy, vigorous, sustainable ponderosa pine trees (*Pinus ponderosae*) are the main attraction of the Black Hills National Forest and the root of the many benefits we enjoy from our forest, the epidemic now taking place has social, economic, and environmental impacts. Dead trees threaten power lines, roads, trails, campgrounds and much of the infrastructure, public and private, throughout the Hills. Widespread areas of dead trees and dying trees affect property values and require time, money and resources to mitigate. The threat of severe wild fires is rising as dead trees fall and fuel loads build in forests. Wildlife habitat is being transformed on a broad scale, often at odds with both public and private purposes. Industries dependent on sustainable forest products are directly threatened by the high tree losses as product values decline rapidly in the Black Hills just months after insect attack. Tourism, dependent on the features of the forest to draw visitors, is increasingly constrained with the hazard of falling dead trees.

We are seeing increasing losses from mountain pine beetles in South Dakota and Wyoming. Mountain pine beetle infestations in the Black Hills, now in their 14th year of sustained attacks,

have exploded from 22,000 acres in 2009 to 44,000 acres in 2010, and appear to be increasing. On a broader scale, mountain pine beetle populations have reached epidemic levels in all major coniferous forest cover types in the Rocky Mountain Region. Mountain pine beetles have killed the majority of ponderosa pine and lodge pole pine trees on about 4 million acres of Colorado and Wyoming. Spruce beetles threaten spruce forests in Colorado and Wyoming. Douglas-fir beetles threaten Douglas-fir in Wyoming.

The weakening effects of periods of drought, increasing tree density far beyond normative levels and the maturity of tree stands increase a forest's susceptibility to insect infestation. In the wake of beetle-caused mortality, there may be an increased threat of intense and severe wildfires depending on stand conditions. Wildfire can be one of the most complex events that affect forests. For example, it is widely acknowledged that forest fires have both beneficial as well as damaging effects. However, when wildfires reach catastrophic severity and intensity, changes in species composition and structure after the fire may make these areas more susceptible to future fires and may not meet long-term objectives for timber production, wildlife, recreation use, and other resources. For example, it becomes difficult to re-establish habitat for sensitive species such as goshawk, which require large and dense forest, when catastrophic fire has removed the pine seed source. The picture is further complicated by various management objectives across public and private lands in the Black Hills.
We recognized that to make significant reductions in the combined threat of mountain pine beetle attacks and large-scale wildfires, we needed to place greater emphasis on hazardous fuel reduction and forest management. We are using every resource available to us to address the growing crisis in forest health. The Healthy Forests Restoration Act of 2003 (HFRA) help us expedite restoration and fuels work. In fiscal year (FY) 2005, 35 percent of the Rocky Mountain Region's hazardous fuels project decisions were under HFRA authorities. In FY 2006, 63 percent of the hazardous fuels project decisions used HFRA authorities. Today, on the Black Hills National Forest, our major project Environmental Impact Statements use HFRA authorities unless there are specific reasons not to do so. The Black Hills National Forest has used categorical exclusions effectively but is currently limited by the scale of the insect outbreak.

An essential tool for cost-effective fuel reduction is the use of private sector infrastructure for removing and using wood and creating and sustaining jobs important to our economy, including a number of minority-owned businesses. We are using old tools in new ways and new tools like stewardship contracts to treat broader areas with a multitude of beneficial outcomes for private enterprise and public interests. In addition, we're also looking at opportunities to use biomass for energy production.

Additionally, we are working with our partners and neighbors to enhance our efforts. Together we have formed the Black Hills Conservation Leaders, a group working to synchronize our local, state, and Federal efforts through a shared vision and strategy. Three units of the National Park Service, Mount Rushmore National Monument, Jewel Cave National Monument and Wind Cave National Park, have joined cooperative efforts to manage Mountain pine beetle in the Black Hills.

We are supported in these efforts by the States of South Dakota and Wyoming, the Black Hills National Forest Advisory Board, the forest products industry, the forest stewardship contractors,

and the public. We recognize and appreciate the support to respond to the beetle epidemic from our Federal delegations in South Dakota and Wyoming.

The Black Hills National Forest Advisory Board has been an enormous help to us. The Board is composed of representatives of state and local government, tribes, and interests ranging from conservation and recreation to mining and timber production. The Board has been invaluable in helping us understand stakeholders' desires and concerns and in helping marshal resources and coordinate activities to better address mountain pine beetles and fire. The advisory board unanimously supports active management of the Black Hills National Forest to keep it healthy and productive, and to keep communities safe.

Over the past decade, our sustained efforts on the Black Hills National Forest, including cooperation with stakeholders, have resulted in the treatment of a total of 600,000 acres including hazardous fuel reduction near communities. Part of the 600,000 included effective bark beetle treatments on about 200,000 acres through timber harvests. . In addition, National Park Service units are aggressively managing beetle outbreaks, treating more than 575 acres at Mount Rushmore National Monument in the past year. Commercial thinning, cutting and taking out beetle infested trees, and prescribed burning have reduced the susceptibility of the forest to catastrophic fire and bark beetle attacks. However, the beetles continue to spread to new areas faster than we can respond.

We are focusing our efforts to thin our forests on public lands to protect adjacent communities. We urge all landowners and land managers to participate with us by thinning the forest around their own lands and homes.

Ecosystems in the Black Hills National Forest become more resilient through various methods, natural and managed, including timber sale projects, thinning, prescribed burning, and removing hazardous vegetation. We continue to treat additional acres on the Black Hills National Forest. We are committed to healthy forests through thoughtful and sustainable management while maintaining other important forest values. We will be as proactive as law, policy, and funding allow, consistent with our Black Hills Forest Plan and continued public support.

Thank you for this opportunity to address the Subcommittee. I will be pleased to answer any questions that you may have.

Attachments:

The photographic record of the mountain beetle attack in the Black Hills of South Dakota and Wyoming and aerial and other photos of fire effects in managed and unmanaged forests in South Dakota, Wyoming, Arizona, and New Mexico found at www.ForestPhoto.com key words mountain "pine beetle, bark beetle, beetle, managed,