

Committee on Resources

Subcommittee on Forests & Forest Health

Statement

**TESTIMONY OF
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BEFORE THE
COMMITTEE ON RESOURCES
SUBCOMMITTEE ON FORESTS AND FOREST HEALTH
U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
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Madam Chair Chenoweth-Hage and Members of the Subcommittee, I appreciate the opportunity to speak with you today regarding the lessons learned from the recent devastating wildland fires in New Mexico and actions needed to mitigate the current hazardous fuel situation in my state's forests.

I am here today because I have experienced first hand the destruction caused by wildland fire. Much has been said of the Cerro Grande fire due to its size and devastating effects on the town of Los Alamos. Yet the Cree fire near Ruidoso, the Scott Able fire near Cloudcroft, the Vineyard fire near Roswell, and the Manuelitas fire near Las Vegas were all equally devastating to those who found themselves in their paths. Unfortunately, as you know, wildland fires claimed three lives and destroyed hundreds of homes in New Mexico. Two brave individuals perished fighting the Scott Able blaze, and one man lost his life during the Vineyard fire near Roswell.

I would like to thank this Committee and Congress for quickly responding to the needs of these communities by providing disaster relief funds and other resources for rebuilding and restoration efforts. I also applaud the efforts of the Senate in significantly increasing the level of funding for hazardous fuels reduction and urge the House to adopt the Senate's funding level during negotiations over the Interior appropriations bill. While I appreciate your efforts, I cannot nor do I expect the federal government to shoulder 100 percent of the responsibility, for fire protection and relief. We plan to do our part in New Mexico as well. When the New Mexico State Legislature convenes in January, I will request an increase in state funding to protect our most vulnerable communities, from wildland fire. Additional Federal and State funds are key to this restoration and prevention effort.

I would like to mention however, that the loss from these fires is being compounded because the United States Forest Service does not allow the immediate removal of the fire-damaged timber for commercial use. Under current policies, it will take eight to twelve months before any recovery can occur, at which time the timber will be rendered useless by the effects of degradation. By conservative estimates, this represents a potential lost economic opportunity of nearly \$15 million in New Mexico alone.

What have we learned from this year's devastating fire season? It comes as no surprise that so many communities were threatened. We have known for years about the imminent fire danger posed by the unhealthy state of our forests. We also know that the continued expansion of our communities into forested areas of the state makes fire fighting increasingly complex. Devastating fires in California over the past decade have taught us that we are ill prepared to protect homes in the wildland-urban interface from a fire's

destructive force. In New Mexico, however, we thought we had time to implement the necessary management actions to avoid the kinds of disasters that have already taken place in California. We came up short. This season's fires revealed just how vulnerable we are.

Immediate action is needed if we are to avoid continued destruction of our communities and forests. As I mentioned in my previous testimony to this Committee in June, funding support for fire suppression and prevention must be increased.

Beyond funding, what is needed most is a comprehensive and cohesive strategy to address the threat posed by fire in or near forested areas. The strategy should consider risks faced by communities as well as the vulnerability of key watersheds. Then management actions must be developed and prioritized on a regional basis. Resources should be allocated based on the strategy. Once implemented, the strategy should remain intact until the work is completed. Stakeholders at all levels-municipal, county, tribal, state and federal-should be involved in designing this strategy, as all share responsibility for its implementation. Stakeholders must identify the risks posed by hazardous fuels build-up throughout the region, and agree upon the communities most threatened. In my view, only if we bring all stakeholders together will we make any measurable progress in reducing the ominous fire threat.

While I believe prescribed fire is one important management tool and should be retained, fundamental changes in how the federal program is carried out are required so that future prescribed fires do not become another Los Alamos disaster. The purpose of my testimony today is not to denounce prescribed fires, but rather suggest how to make prescribed burns effective and safe. When federal agencies plan, evaluate, and implement prescribed fire programs, they must actively involve the appropriate local, state and tribal agencies. These interested parties must have a voice in not only the preparation of any necessary changes to prescribed fire policy, but also in the policy's implementation. I strongly urge the Congress and the Secretaries of Agriculture and the Interior to take the necessary steps to ensure meaningful consultation with these interested parties take place with respect to the planning and implementation of prescribed fires.

In sum, it is critical we all do our part to avert future disaster. Let's vow to work together to make the appropriate changes in policy and practice. At a minimum, we should:

- Increase funding for fire suppression and prevention activities;
- streamline the process that allows for the recovery of fire damaged timber;
- develop a cohesive, comprehensive strategy to implement fire prevention programs in the urban wildland interface areas most at risk; and
- establish a procedure by which local, state, and tribal entities are consulted before finalizing a decision to use prescribed fire.

Again, thank you for the opportunity to appear before the subcommittee. I will be happy to answer any questions you may have.

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