

TESTIMONY

Dan Gibbs

Summit County Commissioner

Testimony for the Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests and Public Lands' hearing on HR 5744, HR 5960, and HR 6089.

July 20, 2012

Thank you Chairman Bishop, Ranking Member Grijalva, members of the committee. It is a great honor to come before you today. My name is Dan Gibbs, I'm a County Commissioner from Summit County Colorado.

This Committee has had the benefit of hearing from the U.S. Forest Service and the U.S. Bureau of Land Management to paint the larger picture regarding the condition of our forests and the corresponding fire threats arising from those conditions.

As a former Colorado state legislator who sponsored many state forest health and fire response legislation—many of which were adopted into law—and as a current Summit County Commissioner—a county that is experiencing major forest health concerns—as well as a certified wildland fire fighter, I wanted to focus my remarks on the local and state concerns related to forest health and how Congress can help.

Over the last ten years, I've witnessed a transformation of our forest in the county that I live in and represent as well as the counties that I represented while serving as a Colorado State Senator. In Grand County, which is just north of Summit County and which gives rise to the headwaters of the Colorado River—a source of water and life for major cities and many western states—most of the lodgepole pine trees are dead. In Summit County alone, we have 146,000 acres of dead trees and about half of all of the pine trees are dead. These trees were killed by the mountain pine beetle epidemic that has been raging through Colorado and Wyoming forests.

As a result, we now have a major challenge to respond to these conditions and help the communities in places like Summit County and throughout the west address forest health and increased fire threats.

I appreciate that Congress has provided some assistance—primarily through the passage of the Healthy Forest Restoration Act (HFRA) in 2003. This law, which came as a response to major fires that occurred throughout the west in 2002 including the Hayman Fire in Colorado, which burned 138,000 acres, destroyed 133 homes, and resulted in \$40 million in suppression costs, has helped expedite forest restoration efforts. However, there is much more that can be done.

As can be seen from the Hayman Fire example—and many like it—the costs to suppress fires vastly outpaces the costs to treat forests to make them less prone to major fires. Although the Healthy Forest Restoration Act has been helpful in this regard, we need to expand upon it so that we can perform more treatment work and thus reduce the costs associated with suppression.

That is why I appreciate the legislation that is the subject of today's hearing. Before I turn to these bills, I want to take this opportunity to provide the local perspective on addressing these forest health issues and the challenges and obligations we face in light of limited federal resources and authorities.

In Summit County, which is composed of over 80% national forest land, the portions of 146,000 acres of dead trees that are near communities need to be thinned or removed, or they will continue to present fire risks and threats to people when they eventually fall down. Some of this threat exists near homes and other important assets, such as watersheds and power lines. The challenge is in finding the resources to develop projects to thin and remove these trees, and to work within the existing legal and regulatory systems before we can go in and do the work.

As I mentioned, Summit County has benefitted from HFRA. In working with the U.S. Forest Service, we have treated 3,800 acres of dead trees in the wildland/urban interface. These projects did not occur until 2007, four years after its passage, but we were pleased that they were conducted. Currently, under HFRA, we have an additional 13,200 acres of treatment projects approved for future work under HFRA. However, we still have tens of thousands of acres that need urgent treatment in the wildland/urban interface. In short, although HFRA has helped a great deal, our needs in Summit County alone vastly outpace the assistance that this law provides.

As a result, Summit County has had to take matters into its own hands and find ways to secure additional assistance.

As an example, in 2008, Summit County voters passed a measure, called 1-A, which authorizes a property tax levy for wildfire protection and the removal of bark beetle-killed trees, among other purposes, which could generate up to \$500,000 per year. In 2010, the County was able to apply \$300,000 from this funding source for 12 forest treatment projects on about 140 acres of private land in the wildland/urban interface. And to be able to treat these acres, we collected nearly 50% of private contributions. As you tell by these dollar amounts required to treat just 140 acres, the costs to do this needed work are significant.

In addition, as state legislator, I sponsored and passed the Colorado Forest Restoration Act that established grant program that made available \$1 million annually from state revenue for local forest treatment projects, wildfire mitigation and watershed protection. These grants required a local match of 40% with state funding at 60%. These funds are available for needs statewide, and grant applications far exceed the needs.

Summit County, and individual communities in the County, was the recipient of some of these grants. One of these grants, for the Town of Dillon, was used to treat the forested area along Straight Creek, a major drinking water supply for the town. The town was rightly concerned that a fire in this area would greatly impact its watershed, much like the Hayman Fire impacted a watershed for Denver water users. These grant funds were used to treat 64 acres.

To make this project a success, there were many partners that played an important role including Denver Water, Xcel Energy, The Greenlands Reserve, Colorado the Town of Dillon, the U.S.

Forest Service, the Department of Transportation and much of the ground work was contracted using the Rocky Mountain Youth Corps, an organization whose mission is to engage youth in the outdoors, inspiring them to use their strengths and potential to lead healthy, productive lives.

So, along with HFRA, the County's tax levy, and the statewide grant program, we have been able to get needed projects done. But, again, we still have tens of thousands of acres to address in areas like Straight Creek and near homes.

That is why we in Summit County and forested regions throughout Colorado are interested in what more assistance Congress can provide—not only in terms of funding for the development of treatment projects, but also to improve of the process to approve projects. And the bills that are before the Committee today have provisions that would help in this regard and in fact some of the concepts within them we have been promoting for many years here in Colorado.

Generally speaking, the projects that I have mentioned would be enhanced by these concepts, and in fact would help focus attention on the areas of the forest that are our highest priorities for treatment work and would help stretch scarce resources.

Let me highlight these concepts, again, concepts that appear in various forms in the separate bills that you are considering today.

First, we need more funding. Plain and simple. The task for removing hazardous and fire-prone trees is daunting and the state and local communities can only make a dent in this effort given the funding limitations they have to operate within. I understand that the bills you are considering in the Committee are not primarily about funding, but urge you to make this a priority. The more funding we can provide to the agencies to perform and implement treatments, the less we have to spend at the backend when the trees go up in flames or blow down on to trails, campgrounds and power lines.

Second, although we have benefitted by the HFRA provisions here in Summit County and especially applying HFRA to areas in our County that are within the wildland/urban interface, designating areas on our national forests that are impacted by insects, disease and poor forest health conditions would allow the Forest Service to focus attention and resources in these areas. In other words, we would welcome the concept of designating areas as “emergency” or “critical needs” and applying the streamlined HFRA provisions to these areas would help be of great benefit and help authorize projects where they are most needed and effective. We appreciate being consulted on the designation of these areas, but they are essentially the areas that are hardest hit and are where if treatments are not performed in an expedited manner, we run the risk of serious damage from wildfire.

Third, although we in Summit County have not had the benefit of a program called the “Good Neighbor Authority,” which allows state foresters to perform essential treatment work on federal lands when similar work is being performed on non-federal lands, we believe that this program has a lot of merit and can help make the treatments on no-federal land be that much more effective. We are aware that some of the counties that surround Summit County have done some

projects under the Good Neighbor program and they have been worthwhile. So, we urge Congress to reauthorize this program, make it permanent and extend it to all states.

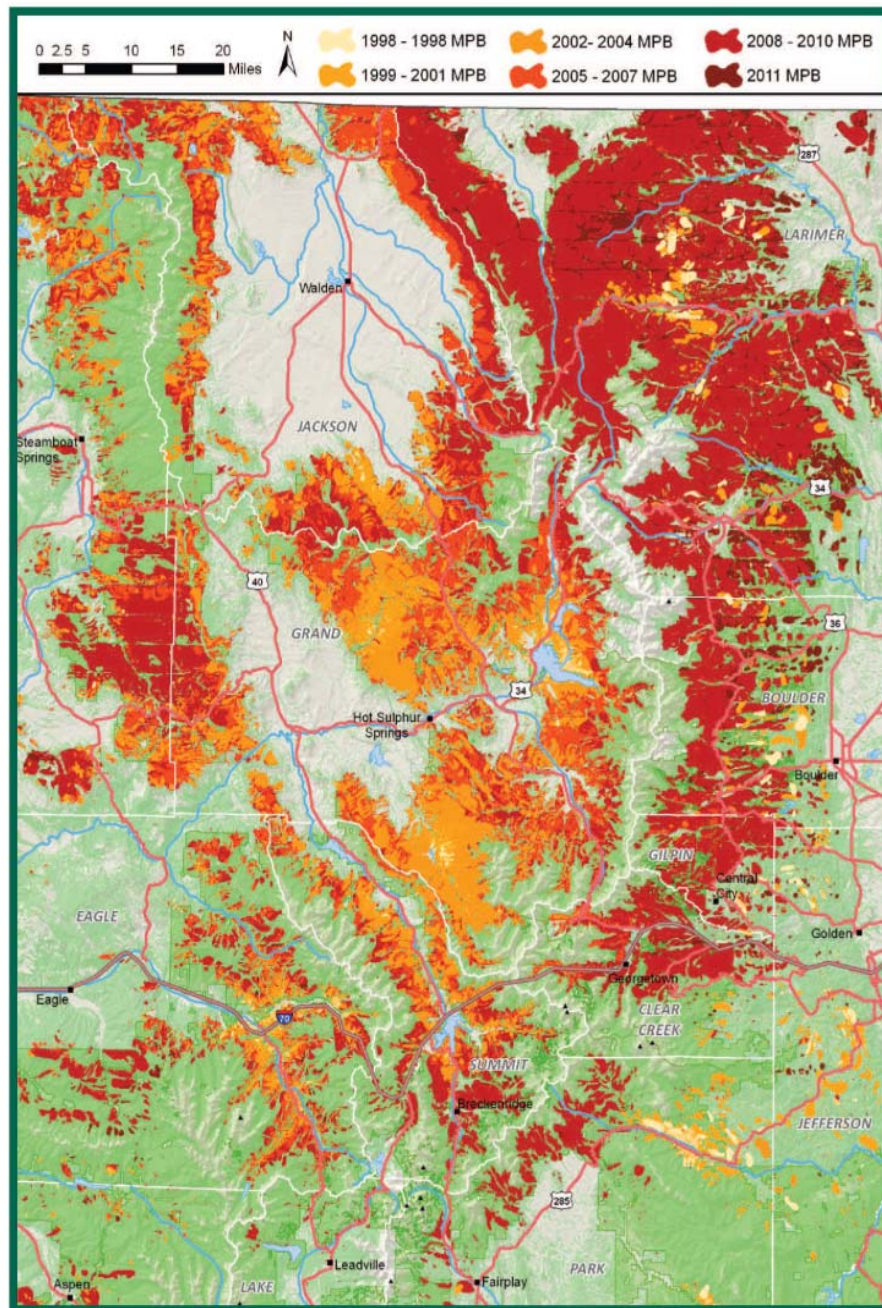
Fourth, we would support permanently reauthorizing “stewardship contracting.” As the trees and other woody biomass that needs to be removed to reduce fire threats and improve the health of our forests typically are not valuable for other economic uses, the stewardship contracting mechanism has allowed many projects so go forward on a good-for-services basis. This means the projects are economical and make sense for entities to bid on them, especially in partnership with the private contractors. In essence, these are good example of public/private partnerships, and thereby can stretch limited resources and get more projects underway and completed.

These provisions would provide tangible and important assistance to reduce the emergency threat of large-scale wildfires and help promote a healthier, more sustainable forest. We in Colorado, like many other western states, are doing our part at the state and local level to help. But we need the assistance of this bill to augment these efforts and make them effective.

CONCLUSION

Colorado has been doing our part in this crisis, and we stand ready to do more. We have undertaken vigorous efforts to mitigate the threat with limited resources through a number of unique collaborations between state and local government and private industry. Still, we are not able to address the infestation adequately without further help that we are hoping Congress can provide. We recognize that some of the provisions in the various bills before you today may draw opposition from various interests. We would hope that you work through these and eventually pass a package that will garner wide support and will be in keeping with the general concepts that I have highlighted.

Mountain Pine Beetle Progression, 1996 – 2011



Taken from the U.S. Forest Service webpage (www.fs.usda.gov)

All of the following photos are credited to Deputy Chief Jeff Berino with Lake Dillon Fire-Rescue



Aerial photo of the Williams Fork Region of Grand County (Along the Grand and Summit County border)



A development in the Keystone community in Summit County



A blowdown of beetle-killed trees in the Willow Creek area of Summit County



The Ophir Mountain Fire (2005) which occurred on the hillside behind the Summit High School in Summit County (this area is now within an approved HFRA project); it began from a bark beetle-killed tree falling onto the adjacent powerline



The Ophir fire (as it grew)



The Ophir Fire