

TESTIMONY

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Testimony for the Subcommittee on Federal Lands oversight hearing entitled,  
“State, Local, and Tribal Approaches to Forest Management: Lessons for Better  
Management of our Federal Forests.”  
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Thank you Chairman McClintock, Ranking Member Tsongas, 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, and also a certified wildland firefighter.

Summit County is a semi-rural community located in the heart of the Rocky Mountains, serving as a year-round international destination for outdoor recreation. It is home to the world-renown ski areas of Breckenridge, Keystone, Copper Mountain, and Arapahoe Basin. The county’s permanent population totals only about 30,000 people, but it swells to more than 160,000 during peak seasons.

Eighty percent of Summit County’s land mass is federal lands, including 312,000 acres of the White River National Forest, one of the crown

jewels of our nation's public lands system. The White River National Forest spans 2.3 million acres across northwestern Colorado and receives more than 13.5 million visitors per year. This is more visitors per year than Yellowstone, Yosemite and Grand Canyon national parks combined, and is the busiest National Forest in the system.

The natural environment housed in the White River National Forest is the foundation of our local economy and our community's cultural identity. It also serves as the largest drinking water supply for the Denver Metro area. As such, local government agencies and private businesses in Summit County have strong working relationships with forest managers in the local districts in our mutual efforts to provide the world-class recreation, clean water, and healthy forests.

From this perspective, the current model for funding the response to wildland fires is extremely detrimental to Colorado's economy and quality of life. In recent years, the White River National Forest has been subject to successive rounds of budget cuts that hamper the agency's

ability to carry out essential day-to-day operations. In 2010, the White River National Forest budget was \$27 million. Just five years later, its budget has been slashed by more than a third, to \$15.5 million, even as public visitation has increased, and on-going insect infestations continue to increase our vulnerability to wildfire. Further exacerbating this dismal funding situation is a practice known as "fire borrowing," in which local Forest budgets are raided to fund the national response to wildfires across the country.

So far this year, our local Forest unit had over \$500,000 transferred from its normal operational budgets to support wildfire response efforts. As a result, we saw reductions in trail maintenance, recreation facility maintenance, forest health work, invasive species control, and fish and wildlife habitat restoration. These reductions have clear negative impacts to recreation and local economies in the immediate term. And their effects will be felt years and even decades into the future, as we fail to seize windows of opportunity to protect critical

habitats, safeguard our water supplies, and prevent the wildfires of tomorrow.

As wildland fires grow larger and more destructive, we cannot continue to fight them by picking the pockets of our public lands agencies. This short-sighted approach diverts critical funding resources to the symptoms of this problem, hobbling our thoughtful plans for mitigation and prevention on the front end through fuels reduction.

Adding urgency to this subject, Summit County is at the epicenter of Colorado's massive mountain pine beetle epidemic, which has left hundreds of thousands of acres of dead trees in its wake.

In 2005, a group of stakeholders in our community came together to form the Summit County Wildfire Council, which is funded, staffed and administered by Summit County Government. Member stakeholders include the U.S. Forest Service, Colorado State foresters, our three local fire districts, our six municipalities, the business community, non-profits, citizen representatives and private landowners. These

stakeholders have worked tirelessly to deal with the impacts of this beetle epidemic. Since its inception in 2006, our Community Wildfire Protection Plan has guided the Summit County Wildfire Council's recommendations toward countywide wildfire mitigation efforts. These efforts are so important to our community that in 2008, Summit County voters overwhelmingly passed a referendum to tax themselves in the amount of \$500,000 annually to support creation of defensible space, resilient forests and support for other wildland fire mitigation efforts.

Our local grant program, administered by Summit County's Colorado State University Extension office, has leveraged \$4.7M of work for the price of \$2.4M in taxpayer contribution. For the past 10 years, the program has supported 131 wildfire mitigation projects, including fuel reduction treatments on approximately 1,800 acres. Additional wildfire prevention measures include a robust education and outreach component, cistern construction and signage installations in multiple neighborhoods, just to name a few. Recently, the Colorado Department of Natural Resources Wildfire Risk Reduction Grant program provided

\$100,000 in funds to match County resources to provide curbside slash removal services for all residents and property owners. In 2014, more than 1,500 households participated in the program by clearing woody vegetation from around their homes and stacking it for removal by our collection crews. And in 2015, 1,800 households participated. In these two years combined, approximately 2,000 tons of flammable vegetation was diverted from neighborhoods.

This year, The Headwaters Institute, Clarion Associates, and Wildfire Planning International asked Summit County to accept the offer of pro bono code-review services, for the purposes of tying wildfire prevention measures to county land-use planning policies. The review process resulted in 139 recommendations that align our land-use codes and master plans with our wildfire protection goals.

## CONCLUSION

The citizens of Summit County, Colorado, have been doing their part in this forest health crisis. But we do not have deep pockets. And despite

all our best efforts locally, our ability to survive a catastrophic wildfire rests in the hands of a Congress who in recent years has proven unwilling to fund the basic operational duties of the White River National Forest. Responsible homeowners who create defensible space around their homes can take little comfort in their personal progress when they look out at millions of acres of dead, dry trees on the other side of their property lines. Because federal funds that could have been spent on wildfire prevention are being depleted to fight fires that are burning elsewhere today.

Millions of people from across the country and around the globe come to recreate outdoors in the majesty of the White River National Forest. But when our ski area operators knock on the door of the Forest Service, no one is home. Our private-sector partners develop thoughtful plans to expand recreational opportunities on the Forest. The public approval processes for these projects should be a slam dunk, but because our National Forest offices are so woefully understaffed, these processes drag on for years.

In no way is this a criticism of the exemplary professionals who dedicate their lives to the stewardship of our National Forests. On the contrary, we work with them closely on a wide variety of issues, and they have my deepest respect and admiration. I only wish that they were given the resources they need to fulfill their duties and obligations.

Lastly, I reject the notion that these lands would fare better if they were placed in local or state hands. Our National Forests are unequivocally *national* treasures that provide recreational opportunities to citizens from all 50 states, who come to rejuvenate themselves. These forests are the source of drinking water and agricultural irrigation for hundreds of millions of people across dozens of state lines. In the West, our National Forests are harmed by the federal government's inability to take meaningful action on climate change, and we local communities should not have to shoulder responsibility for dealing with the resulting droughts, diseases and insect outbreaks that plague our forests and leave our homes more vulnerable to wildfire.



We have undertaken vigorous efforts to develop recreational amenities and mitigate the threat of wildfires with limited resources through a number of unique collaborations between federal, state and local government, private industry and landowners. But the dire condition of our Forests, the threats to our communities and resources, and the ever-escalating costs of wildfire suppression all demand that Congress come together for National Forest stewardship in the name of the nation's well-being.

Thank you.