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Testimony  
Before the Committee on Resources  
United States House of Representatives

Hearing on Wildfires and Their Aftermath  
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Good morning, honorable members and staff of the House subcommittee on Forests and Forest Health. Thank you for the opportunity to visit with you today. My name is Bill Howard. I am here representing my specific operating group, Boise Wood Products, within the Boise Cascade L.L.C. family. Boise is committed to sustainable forestry, whereby we assess our fiber procurement program through independent third party audits to certify our practices are within the standards set by the Sustainable Forestry Initiative<sup>®</sup> Program. I am a graduate forester with 38 years of experience in the business of managing industrial forest lands as well as purchasing and harvesting timber from public and private sources all on the eastern slope of the Washington Cascades.

My remarks today reflect the observations and experiences of my career in this region.

It has been well documented throughout the dry, inland west that the forest structure has changed given the past century of aggressive fire suppression, harvesting, and grazing. Formerly frequent fires maintained relatively open stands dominated by early successional plant communities. Fire exclusion allowed juvenile stands to develop underneath more mature trees, literally a second tree story of trees. Growth rates exceeded harvest resulting in an increase in biomass. Now dense stands of shade tolerant species have become predominant. These stands must share the limited supply of growing space, light, nutrients, and most critically, water. This overcrowded condition results in summer stress, and the weakened trees are more subject to insect outbreaks and root diseases. And such stands are more prone to intense, destructive wildfires.

This decline in forest health is tied directly to an increase in fire risk. Simply, we have too many trees of the wrong species growing on our forested lands. Drought dominates the West. While we cannot control how much water is available in total, we can affect how much is available to individual stems by stocking control. Thinning offers the opportunity to influence how plant communities develop over time. Tree species, composition, structure, vigor, and size can all be improved and the increase in understory vegetation benefits grazing and wildlife values. Removal of excess trees provides consumer products while reducing fire risk. It seems all too simple. Yet on federal lands harvest rate declined during the late 1980's and continues today at a small fraction of the prior average. We are just nearing the end of one of the most destructive wildfire seasons in the U.S. in decades. The cost to society and especially to the local communities is enormous. As fire damaged acres increases, suppression costs continue to escalate, how long can we afford to treat the symptoms but not the core problem?

The rapid decline of sales output in the past 15 years has caused many mill operations to go out of business. For example just in my community of Yakima, 2 mills closed between May and September of this year because they were unable to acquire adequate log supplies at an acceptable cost. Both of these locations historically had purchased a large

portion of their needs from the Forest Service. Now logs from this area are hauled 150-250 miles rather than 50-70. This erosion of the manufacturing infrastructure must stop if we, as a society, want to have healthy, vigorous, productive forests. I liken the supplier/customer relationship as something of a partnership. We are partners in the removal of excess fuels to benefit society and the environment. Logging machinery has changed to increase efficiency and minimize impact on the sites. Mills have retooled to increase recovery from the smaller log diameters of today. Some mills even specialize in the very small, or focus on one or two species rather than on everything. Log merchandising has become a larger part of our business in order to direct the logs to the most opportune facility.

In the mid 90's my department instituted a structured quality program. When I asked my mill managers what were their three top needs, the answer was always: fresh logs, fresh logs, fresh logs. When you have that directive, obviously green trees are preferred over black ones. Larger trees have more clear fiber, so there is more opportunity in sale offerings which treat the entire stand, big trees and small. Harvest level must approach growth in order to care for the "at risk" stands and to reduce the fire risk to the forest. This is also our livelihood. Legal and bureaucratic obstacles which impede our professional forest staff must be hurdled. The economic cost of tolerating expanded risk by not managing our forests must be addressed in planning. Tree management is the driver of forest health, and in planning revisions harvest level must no longer be considered a residual output but rather as the primary means of directing healthy forests.

Once a fire has occurred, the steward has reduced flexibility. Burned, dead, and dying trees lose economic value rapidly. Cracking and staining occur quickest in the smallest trees and tops. Bluestain, which is a color degrade caused by fungus reduces pine value dramatically. Some mills will pay nothing for a stained log. Finished product value is perhaps 20% of an equal grade green shop cutting. Anything which delays the planning horizon must be overcome in order to capture the economic value of the damaged resource.

Thank you for this opportunity to share our concerns about federal forest management.