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Okanogan County, Washington

Testimony
Before the Committee on Resources
United States House of Representatives

Hearing on Wildfires and Their Aftermath:
Protecting Communities, Watersheds, and Wildlife

October 4, 2006

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Thank you for this opportunity to testify before you today. This subject is very important and of concern to all of us.

I represent the Board of Okanogan County Commissioners and the Citizens of Okanogan County. Our County is based on Natural Resources, Agriculture and Recreation users. The fire events that we have experienced for the past five years has devastated our economic base for multiple-use of resources, our communities who rely on tourism and recreational users for income into their businesses and severe health issues resulting from the impacts of living and working with polluted air quality. This is our home, where we raise our families, work hard to earn a living wage and take pride in our communities. While I do not speak for other counties that have experienced severe fires this year, I do represent them as the President of Eastern Washington Association of Counties.

Okanogan County consists of 28% private land, which is neighbored by 72% of State and Federal lands; the majority is Federal land. The estimated cost to fight the Tripod Complex fires is over 98 million dollars and the rehabilitation cost requested is 35 million. Currently there are 1,524,292 acres of National Forest Land in Okanogan County that includes 341,586 acres of roadless areas and 514,262 acres of wilderness.

This leads us to ask two questions: Are we good stewards of the land we manage while being responsible neighbors to one another? And, is letting 'Nature' take its course, with no management in Roadless and Wilderness areas, the wisest decision for ALL people? In comparison, it is less expensive to perform management such as, select timber sales, thinning to reduce the fuel load on the forest floor and maintain remote roads for quick access in responding to put fires out than it is to let the fires burn uncontrollably.

Two issues; that I would like to bring to your attention today is; Impacts to the economic well-being of our County and the Health concerns with the smoke resulting from the fires.

Many of our businesses depend upon the recreational users and tourist that visit here each year. When fires are allowed to burn into major amounts of acres such as the Tripod, Tatoosh and the Cedar Creek this year, the impacts will have long-term recovery. Many small communities and private enterprise will never recover from the losses due to these fires.

One example is each Outfitters business in the county has lost, individually, over \$30,000 in revenue this summer. Many resorts, gas stations and “Mom and Pop grocery stores” that depend upon the fishing and hunting seasons, the trail and hiking systems that have been developed with taxpayer dollars will not recover. We must also consider the amount of timber acres and revenue loss to the timber industry and the many State Institutions where the funds are dedicated to by State Law. The dollar amount lost is an unknown at this point due to the fire season not being over. We can estimate that the amount will be in the hundreds of thousands of dollars when all is said and done.

How do we survive and recover when our adjoining neighbor has caused these losses with poor or no management practices? A priority for Okanogan County Commissioners was to keep our local people and contractors working through the entire fire event instead of out of state personnel, in an effort to offset the economic loss. Our forest, recreational trails and wildlife habitat will not rehabilitate nor re-grow for generations; we ALL, are the losers. Who is responsible for this? It is clearly the result from the philosophical belief and past management not to use the best and most efficient silviculture practices for our forest. As proven in this fire event, we must change our approach to forest management for healthy and sustainable timber and National forest.

The second issue is the public health concerns associated with the Tripod Complex Fires. The Okanogan County Public Health District and the Okanogan County Commissioners are responsible for the health, safety, and welfare of each citizen we represent.

The period during which air quality advisories were released, and in place, lasted from July 27, until September 15th, 2006. The level of smoke advisory varied with location, time of day, fire behavior, and climate. Areas most impacted were Winthrop, Conconully, and Loomis. It should be noted that the Environment Canada also issued health related smoke advisories for the Canadian lower Okanogan. The data is for the period of 46 days but further studies will be required to estimate the chronic impacts on health and the population exposed.

Good	2 days
Moderate	9 days
Unhealthy for Sensitive Groups	21 days
Unhealthy	12 days
Very Unhealthy	1 day
Hazardous	1 day

Okanogan County Public Health coordinated an Air Quality Advisory release in both English and Spanish and was distributed to county media. We also developed a protocol on August 7th with other agencies for sharing air quality information; these were US Forest Service, Washington Dept. of Ecology, Okanogan County Emergency Management, American Red Cross, British Columbia Interior Health Environment Canada and Chelan/Douglas County Health Districts. Contacts were also made to medical equipment distributors advising that we may need to increase demand for oxygen bottles, oxygen generators and respirator supplies. Many of our most vulnerable citizens are impacted with health risk and long-term effects are still an unknown. A review of literature regarding the health effects of smoke on impacted populations was conducted, most with exposure in fire fighters. The literature concluded that toxic emissions were present in smoke and varied from fire to fire. Medical surveillance is needed to track exposures and further research must be required to fill the gaps in our understanding of emissions, exposure and health effects in the long term.

During this fire event, the strain on the County's budget with additional unexpected overtime and expenses for our Public Health District, local chapter of our American Red Cross, Okanogan County Sheriff's Department, and Okanogan County Emergency Management Department has brought undesirable consequences to our Counties taxpayers. It appears to us that we are changing dollars into smoke. The opportunity still exists to harvest the resource.

In conclusion, the questions and emotions of us and the people of our County have ranged from extreme sadness, anger, and frustration. We ask ourselves over and over, "How can we continue to live and survive with no management, and this is the result"? Each of us took an oath and accepted the responsibility of our duty to serve and protect the welfare of citizens, be diligent and wise with tax dollars and to have the courage to speak out when a wrong has been committed. We are here to inform you that a WRONG has been committed and it is up to all of us to make it right and learn from our past errors.

Thank you for holding your Congressional Hearing in Okanogan County, we welcome your presence.

Respectfully submitted,

Mary Lou Peterson, Commissioner District 3