

**Oral Statement of Phil Rigdon
Before the House Subcommittee on Public Lands and
Environmental Regulation
Hearing on “Wildfire and Forest Management”
July 11, 2013**

Good morning Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee. I am Phil Rigdon, President of the Intertribal Timber Council - or ITC - and Natural Resource Deputy Director for the Yakama Nation in Washington state. Thank you for this opportunity for the ITC to present a tribal perspective on wildfire and forest management.

Nationally, 18.6 million acres of forests and woodlands are held in trust by the United States and managed for the benefit of Indians. Pursuant to both tribal direction and federal law, our forests must be sustainably managed. With our BIA partners, we actively operate modern, innovative and comprehensive natural resource programs premised on connectedness among the land, resources, and people. Our approach is holistic, striving to simultaneously sustain economic, ecological, and cultural values, the so-called “triple bottom line.”

Unlike Forest Service and BLM forests, Indian forests and their management require review by an independent scientific panel every ten years. Just last month, the Indian Forest Management Assessment Team (IFMAT) released its third report to Congress and the Administration. It finds tribes have been able to make significant improvements in forest management through innovation, creativity, and partnership building. We actively manage our forests to sustain benefits for generations to come, and we do this with far less funding than other federal land managers. But we could do far more if chronic underfunding and staffing shortfalls are corrected.

Funding discrepancies between Indian trust forests and the Forest Service are shocking. Using my own Reservation as an example, the Yakama Nation receives \$0.57 per acre per year for fire preparedness, while the adjacent Gifford-Pinchot National Forest receives \$1.18, the Mount Hood National Forest \$2.11; and the Columbia Gorge National Scenic Area \$2.83.

In trying to do more with less, local flexibility is a key element. We aren't hamstrung by blind adherence to policies. We understand that policies be interpreted with flexibility and prudently applied. A one-size fits all policy is not appropriate or acceptable everywhere all the time. As Tribes, we respond proactively to local conditions, evaluating the resources and values at risk, the source and nature of threats to forest health and options for addressing them.

At Yakama, we responded to budworm infestation by prioritizing timber sales to treat areas that were most severely affected. The epidemic peaked in 2000 when the budworm defoliated trees on 206,000 acres. Between 1999 and 2003, we treated 20,000 acres of infected forest per year. 97,000 acres were treated with a biological control agent between 1999 and 2001 to control tree mortality.

As a result of our proactive treatments, budworm defoliation decreased dramatically. In 2002, only 1,207 acres were defoliated – a reduction of over 99%. We recovered significant economic value from dead and dying trees, and the reduction in forest density promoted forest health and resiliency. While such forest health treatments are common on tribal lands, it would be a challenge to find similar speed, scope and effectiveness on federal forests.

Tribes also respond to fires more effectively and efficiently than the Forest Service. The average size of a fire on BIA-managed lands is three times smaller than on Forest Service land. Suppression costs, on a per-acre basis, are five times lower on

tribal lands.

After fires, tribes are able to quickly respond to recover economic value and begin the rehabilitation process. For example, the 2002 Rodeo-Chediski fire in Arizona burned 467,000 acres of tribal and federal land, including a significant portion of the timber on the Fort Apache Indian Reservation. While significant damage was done to tribal forests, the intensity of the fire was dramatically reduced because, since 1945, the White Mountain Apache Tribe had conducted commercial thinning followed by prescribed burns on 30,000 acres per year.

Tribal salvage and reforestation began within months of the Rodeo-Chediski fire – removing up to 500,000 board feet of fire-killed timber a day. In contrast, the Forest Service faced litigation that delayed salvage operations, reducing its value and increasing its cost.

As Tribes, our interests in the health of the landscape go beyond reservation boundaries. Many tribes have off-reservation treaty rights on lands that are now National Forests. We are negatively impacted by catastrophic wildfire, disease and insect infestations on these lands. Even with effective treatments on our own lands, conditions on nearby federal lands can and do inflict significant damage and economic and social costs to tribal forests and communities.

Congress recognized this when it passed the Tribal Forest Protection Act in 2004 (TFPA). The TFPA was intended to enable tribes to propose and conduct projects on adjacent Forest Service and BLM lands in order to protect tribal trust rights, lands, and resources.

The TFPA has not met expectations on the ground. Since 2004, only six TFPA projects have been effectively implemented on

Forest Service lands. The Forest Service and the ITC recently completed a formal review of the TFPA and identified several recommendations to better accomplish its intended outcomes. ITC would like to work with this Committee and the Congress to explore ways to improve TFPA implementation.

Finally, the loss of forest products infrastructure – both private and tribal -- threatens the ability to maintain economically and ecologically functional forests on the landscape. The ITC supports a legislative concept called “Anchor Forests.” We have a pilot project underway with the Forest Service in Eastern Washington State. The goal of the project is to coordinate management across ownerships to support the local harvesting, transportation, and processing infrastructure needed to provide income and jobs, and to help defray costs of forest health treatments.

In summary, we believe the nation would benefit by looking to Indian forestry as models of sustainability. The ITC would like to work with this Committee to expand collaborative approaches to forest management on a larger scale, and I invite you to visit reservations to see how Tribes are actively managing our forests to maintain healthy, resilient landscapes.

Thank you.