Testimony of Maurice Williamson

President, Williamson Consulting

Before the House Subcommittee on Forests and Forest Health, regarding

Wildfires and Their Aftermath: Protecting Communities, Watersheds and Wildlife

October 4, 2006

Mr. Chairman, Members of the subcommittee, thank you for the invitation to comment on this matter. I have practiced forestry in the inland west for over thirty years. In addition to contract work for various governmental entities, including US Forest Service, Washington Department of Natural Resources, and the Bureau Land Management, I have completed contract work for all of the major industrial operators in Northeast Washington and have a private non-industrial client base numbering well over 600.

Over the years I have participated in and attended various symposiums, continuing education programs, and policy level problem solving efforts with regard to forest health. Recently, I participated on the Forest Health Study Group enabled by 2nd Substitute Senate Bill 6144 in 2004 and was appointed to the group by the Public Lands Commissioner, and participated as a stakeholder on the Washington Department of Natural Resources Strategic Fire Plan 2020. Attended various NEPA courses offered through Duke University in 2003 and 2004.

The key to minimizing the number of large wildfires is good "forest health" through responsible management.

I have observed, during my 36 year career, the ongoing forest health/wildfire crisis from both the field forester perspective and in policy level discussions.

- We do have a significant forest health problem in Eastern Washington as identified by 2nd Substitute Senate Bill 6144 and a preponderance of data gathered by the US Forest Service and others.

- Eastern Washington has the infrastructure (processing facilities) to utilize the small diameter previously sub-merchantable material that many areas of the Inland West have lost.

- There are many private forest landowners in Northeastern Washington. These people can be allies both in accomplishing a comprehensive forest health project and in assisting the education process for the general public.

- The Eastern Washington counties have done or are in the process of doing countywide fire plans.

- The Northeast Washington Region of the Washington State Department of Natural Resources has a successful ongoing program within the Wildland Urban Interface for protection of lives and structures.

I would like to stress the importance of an effective public lands forest health program to the small private forest landowners. I will use the Colville National Forest as an example of how this process could work:

- It is acknowledged by experts that insects and disease cannot be managed on a ownership by ownership basis. There are approximately 1,100 miles of Colville National Forest boundary that are adjacent to other owners. This is unlike many other Forests that are more blocked up with regular boundaries and few in-holdings. Private and State landowners/managers cannot effectively control insects and diseases on their properties when their adjacent Forest Service neighbor does not.

- Private landowners have enjoyed high market values for their products since the federal timber supplies have decreased due to the timber wars, appeals, and litigation. However, our processing facilities capacity out strip the available wood supply by some estimates as much as 50 million feet per year. This differential can be directly attributed to the decrease in budgeted sale quantity on the Colville Forest during the last ten years. If the Forest Service supply does not increase we will lose additional markets, as we have in Ferry County, which will result in lower economic return to forest landowners and subsequent conversion of those lands to other more profitable uses. Washington State recognizes the importance of private forest lands to the State's economy, ecological well being, and quality of life. It is not in the State's interest or the private forest landowner's interest to see Federal lands unmanaged.

Data gathered and accessed by the Forest Service indicates 200,000 acres of Colville National Forest land is within what is called the Wildland Urban Interface, where fires can endanger the lives and property of private citizens. Additionally, over 15 years ago, a study accomplished by the Forest Service titled "CROP" indicated some 300,000 acres of the Colville National Forest was in overstocked fire regenerated stands. Additional studies indicate many more acres are in some degree of jeopardy regarding forest health and fire suppression issues. If these acres total a conservative a half million, and the Colville Forest continues to be budgeted for and accomplishes forest health remedies on 6,000 acres per year, it would take 83 years to affect change on the Colville Forest. I do not believe we have 83 years. I suggest you look at ways to accelerate our activities to accomplish forest health restoration on a half million acres over a 20 year time frame. This means we need programs that can accomplish restoration on 25,000 acres per year.

To Create "Healthy Forests"

Unhealthy forests (dead and dying trees) have resulted in more large uncharacteristic wild fires in the last decade than previous decades. For example, as of September 29, 2006, we have experienced 31% more fires than the preceding ten year average yet the acreage burned is 80% higher than the preceding ten year average. There are 12,047,672 acres of United States Forest Service land in the nine western states that are at high risk for uncharacteristic (Condition Class 3). (Source: *Progress Report No.1, Analysis of Costs and Benefits of Restoration-Based Hazardous Fuel Reduction, Treatment vs No Treatment*, Northern Arizona University School of Forestry, June 13, 2003, G. B. Snider, D. B. Wood, and P.J. Daugherty) Additionally, much of the Colville, Okanogan, and Wenatchee forests have considerable insect and disease mortality which has continued to accelerate during the past ten years.

The question is not "will?" these acres burn, the question is "when? will they burn" if not treated.

Aside from the $7 billion plus the federal agencies have spent on fire suppression alone, the loss of timber value, and destroyed property (homes) values during the past ten years, there are other non market values associated with uncharacteristic fires. These include fatalities, regeneration and rehabilitation costs, decrease in water quality, loss of critical wildlife habitat, health hazards from poor air quality, and the loss of the sense of well being of local communities. There have been efforts to quantify some of these numbers. (Sources: *Progress Report No.1, Analysis of Costs and Benefits of Restoration-Based Hazardous Fuel Reduction, Treatment vs No Treatment*, Northern Arizona University School of Forestry, June 13, 2003, G. B. Snider, D. B. Wood, and P.J. Daugherty, *Assessing the Environmental Social and Economic Impacts of Wildfire*, Yale University GISF Reseach Paper 001, May 2003, *A Desirable Forest Health Program for Washington's Forests*, Washington State Department of Natural Resources, December 30, 2004 and *Forest Health and Wildfires - A Net Cost Approach to a True Wildfire Protection Program*, Washington State Department of Natural Resources, Jack Hulsey and Karen Ripley, April 2006) The three cited works argue the minimum of $500 per acre could be spent on fuels (Source: *Washington State Strategic Plan For Healthy Forests*, a Report to the Legislature, December 30, 2004) reduction/rehabilitation projects and be cost effective relative to our current and future fire suppression expenditures. The Forest Service assess wildfire impact in their burned area emergency rehabilitation (BAER) reports. Unfortunately, these reports are not summarized nationally and include only the rehabilitation costs and not the non-market values. Note that a recent report by the USDA Office of Inspector General found that the Forest Service lacks analytical tools to assess risks to communities and the cost benefit of conducting hazardous fuel project. Additionally, lacks the national guidance to prioritize fuel treatments. (This report is available on the USDA website).

In my opinion, (justified by the aforementioned analyses) the question should not be how can we afford to do pre-fire restoration, and hazardous fuels abatement in solving the forest health, but rather how could we not afford to.

Barriers to Implementation of Forest Health/Fuels Abatement Projects on Federal Lands

Aside from the basic philosophical opposition to mechanical manipulation of vegetation (harvest activities) by some, there is a lack of trust that the federal agencies have adequately considered risk versus benefit in their vegetation management programs. The Endangered Species Act has been used successfully and extensively for stalling vegetation management.

These photographs are of National Forest Service land affected by the spruce bud worm on the Wenatchee National Forest. These areas are within spotted owl habitat and are non-matrix/MA lands (which means no commercial activities) because of the President Clinton's plan.

I have included an excerpt from comments made to the Washington State Forest Practices Board, by Dr. Larry Irwin, referring to others reports made to the Forest Practices Board regarding the relationship between spotted owl habitat and the current risks of wildfires. My interpretation of Dr. Irwin's comments are that the Buchanan report to the Board chose to disregard or minimize the risk extensive wildfires to Spotted Owl habitat and chose instead to concentrate on precluding active management on additional acres. Dr. Irwin cites that Buchanan did not disclose that 44% of the owl territories in Eastern Washington Cascades occurred in forests classified fire Condition Class 3, and an additional 36% occurred in Condition Class 2 (moderately altered fire regimes and moderate risk). For a total of 80% of the spotted owl habitat in the Eastern Cascades. Agenda driven science and incomplete disclosure to policy decision makers as utilized by many under the Endangered Species Act is a significant deterrent to solving the forest health and fire hazard dilemma. Other constraints include the Clean Water Act, the equivalent clear cut unit analysis policy of the Forest Service, and many other policy driven or statutory constraints.

Suggestions for Fire Salvage Efforts

While some restoration should take logically place as part of a salvage effort, the purpose and needs statement of the EA or EIS for each project should emphasize the economic benefit and de-emphasize restoration as the major "purpose and need". Too often appellants and litigants can argue against commercial harvest based on real or perceived detrimental effects of salvage operations.

An EIS is the appropriate tool for undertaking significant salvage efforts, however, the length of time it takes to prepare an EIS and go through the process precludes the utilization of small diameter trees. Small diameter trees deteriorate much more quickly than larger trees. I believe the Forest Service should carefully examine all burned areas and try to delineate areas that have a preponderance of small diameter, perishable material, proceed on a collaborative effort to do a categorical exclusion for those particular segregated areas. During the collaboration effort, if successful, parameters by which appeals and litigation on the larger material may be obtained will be minimized. In the case of fires on the Okanogan/Wenatchee (specifically the Tripod fire) it would seem logical to start with the Provincial Advisory Committee (PAC) and expand that group somewhat with interested stakeholders. While the issue of re-burn potential is arguable it is a potential and should be considered a positive attribute to salvage harvest efforts. It is not in the best interests of the forest, the local economy or the nation as a whole to delay or minimize salvage operations without going through a careful analysis, education, and collaborative process.