

Committee on Resources

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Rep. Greg Walden Chairman, Subcommittee on Forests and Forest Health

As long as there have been forests there have been natural events that have impacted them; windstorms, ice storms, tornados, hurricanes, volcanoes and, of course, fire. In fact, most of the forests we're familiar with today have been influenced or created by these disturbance events, such as the fire-dependant forests that Native Americans helped to establish by regularly setting fires to reduce brush and create habitat for game. So these are not new phenomena or necessarily bad ones. When these events, however, are extraordinarily large or disruptive they can do enormous and long-lasting damage to wildlife habitat, water and air quality, and to communities. Particularly, as of late, we've seen this in the aftermath of catastrophic fire.

Since 2000, over 23.7 million acres have burned as a result of wildfire. This includes huge mega-fires such as the B&B fire last year—burning over 90,000 acres, half of it in Northern spotted owl habitat. In 2002, also in my district, the Biscuit fire burned nearly half a million acres and demolished 80,000 acres of owl habitat.

In 2002, the Hayman fire, much of it in Mr. Tancredo's district, not only threatened homes and communities, but devastated much of the critical watershed for the City of Denver. The largest fire in state history, it dumped colossal loads of mud and soot into Denver's largest supply of drinking water, costing the taxpayers millions.

Recognizing that 190 million acres of federal lands are at a high risk of catastrophic fire, it goes without saying that these large fires are going to be a part of our lives for years, if not decades, to come. The primary question, then, that this hearing will address today is what can be done to rehabilitate and reforest these lands after catastrophic events in order to restore habitat and stabilize soils. We will focus primarily on case studies and what we've learned from the trials and errors of past experiences, such as the clean-up after the eruption of Mt. Saint Helens in 1982, the post-fire restoration after the Volcano Fire in Northern California in 1960, or the salvage and reforestation efforts in the forties and fifties after the Tillamook burns.

Although the science may not be complete, there is much we do know, and history can help instruct us as we face future catastrophic events and our attempts to apply our best knowledge to rebuild forests.

To begin today's hearing I'd like to show a ten minute video submitted by Communities for Healthy Forests, that I believe is indicative of the sentiments and hopes of local forest communities all over the country. Their message is not one of "us verses them", but rather one that is inclusive and pro-forests. I hope you find it as informative as I have.