

Committee on Resources

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Congressman Jeff Flake

Opening Statement

Field Hearing

Crisis on the National Forests:

Containing the Threat of Wildland Fire to the Environment and Communities

Friday, March 7, 2003 at 10:00 a.m., in Flagstaff Arizona

Thank you Chairman Pombo for providing the opportunity for this field hearing today. I also thank Congressman Renzi for his part in requesting this hearing on issues so vital to Arizona.

There is a crisis in the national forests. Fires have blazed through at unprecedented rates in the last few years, treatments have been delayed or halted, droughts have contributed to the severity of fires and dozens of timber mills that can provide assistance through thinning have been driven out of business or prevented from working. Today, the President's Healthy Forest Plan is being looked at by Congress in order to address this crisis situation.

Last year alone, wildfires burned over 7.1 million acres of public and private land. To put this in perspective, Secretary Norton has told us in the past that this is an area about the size of the states of Maryland and Rhode Island combined. Over 460,000 of those burned acres were part of the Rodeo-Chediski fire here in Arizona. Hundreds of communities felt the impact through road closures, evacuation, burned homes, burned structures, temporary displacement and loss of valuable property. Yet the problem persists.

For years the work of the federal land managers has been hindered and delayed and the lands have suffered. Now, over 75 million acres of forestlands are at an unnaturally high risk for catastrophic wildfire. Some of that acreage at high risk includes already burned areas that haven't been cleaned up yet.

Environmental extremists have prevented the U.S. Forest Service from implementing several forest management plans. There have been many frivolous lawsuits along with a widespread concert of effort that has spread the agency's budget thin. In the Southwestern region alone (Arizona and New Mexico), 15 decisions to implement fuels treatments were appealable decisions. Of those 15 decisions, 11 were appealed and two were litigated. This is a number well beyond allowing for productive land management.

Even closer to home is the example of the Apache Sitgreaves and Tonto National Forests, site of the Rodeo-Chediski fire. The Forest Service awarded three timber contracts to remove dead and burned timber from those forests - necessary cleanup on those lands - and on January 10, 2003, the Forest Conservation Council filed a lawsuit against the efforts. If the dead trees are left much longer, the U.S. taxpayers, through the Forest Service, will be footing the bill for any future cleanup efforts because all value of the timber will have been lost.

Finally, if these Forest Service projects are able to continue, there are few places to turn for commercial work. Sawmill and pulp and paper mill operations have significantly decreased and closures have skyrocketed over the past several years. According to statistics from the American Forest and Paper Association, the west has been severely impacted since 1989 when 400 mills in the west closed over 378 of those were lumber and panel mills. This idled some 36,000-factory workers. Another 36,000 logging jobs were lost as well, bringing the total direct jobs lost to over 70,000 within the industry alone. These numbers show how reliability of forest related jobs is low and further hinders necessary treatments.

The President has introduced the Healthy Forest Initiative, which will counter the catastrophic impact of last year's wildfire season on communities and environmental resources. Focusing on legislative and administrative proposals to empower land managers to better deal with the crisis conditions and allowing for certain fuel reduction projects on federal lands under accelerated procedures, the proposal hopes to

address the plethora of concerns. Congressman Shadegg, Hayworth, myself and others have also introduced legislation to improve the situation for communities susceptible to wildfire.

Land managers are only expected to treat about 2 million acres this year of the 75 million acres at unnaturally high risk to catastrophic fires. The Forest Service needs both of its tools used in maintaining forestlands: the removal of trees and prescribed burning to effect change and contain the threat of catastrophic wildfire to local communities. It is time to think long-term about how current policy should be changed to prevent a continuation of the threat of wildfire to public lands and nearby communities.