

Committee on Resources

Witness Testimony

Testimony on H.R. 2458

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Chairman

Board of County Commissioners

Eureka, Nevada

Before the

House of Representatives

Subcommittee on Forests and Forest Health

September 23, 1997

Madam Chairman, and members of the Subcommittee:

My name is Pete Goicoechea and I am here to support the concepts embodied within the Community Protection and Hazardous Fuels Reduction Act of 1997. This Bill addresses a severe risk to human life as well as public and private property, including livestock and wildlife. The approaches to reducing the risk of wildfire and its severity put forth within the bill recognize the important role that domestic livestock can play in reducing dangerous fuel levels by harvesting combustible fuels. When wildfire ravages the land in our county we see energy and resources redirected away from the production of food, the management of wildlife and the maintenance of productive landscapes. Hopefully the concepts addressed within HR 2458 will help redirect energy and resources to the maintenance of functioning landscapes.

Wildfires in Nevada threaten the life and safety of our residents, our watershed resources, and the forage resources which support our wildlife, livestock, and outdoor recreation opportunities. The costs associated with wildfires in Nevada in terms of taxpayer resources, property loss, and resource degradation are staggering. As shown in Table 1,* presuppression costs alone (which do not include the costs of putting out fires) incurred by the Bureau of Land Management in Nevada ranged between \$3 million and nearly \$5.5 million between 1990 and 1993. During this time, the BLM was spending up to \$145 per acre on fire pre-suppression costs in Nevada alone. BLM fire suppression costs are believed to add another \$130 to \$145 per acre. As a consequence, the BLM is estimated to spend on the order of six to eight million dollars each year in wildland fire activities in Nevada alone.

Table 2* reveals that Western states also incur significant costs for wildland fire management, although markedly less per acre than the BLM. Comparison of the costs per acre shown in Tables 1 and 2 does lead one to wonder why BLM is seemingly less efficient in managing its wildfire program costs. Please note that the acres per fire is very comparable between BLM and the States.

Despite incurring high costs for fire management, the total acreage of rehabilitated land in Nevada by BLM is surprisingly low. The Nevada Association of Counties in a 1988 report found that although nearly 1,000,000 acres burned in 1985, only 55,000 acres were reseeded in 1985 (1). A large percentage of those areas not reseeded in Nevada became infested with cheatgrass, an introduced annual that is genetically predisposed to survive repeated fire. As the frequency of fire increases, the landscape will be ultimately dominated by cheatgrass

and other annuals. Recognizing Federal fiscal constraints to increasing the acreage of Federal lands which are rehabilitated following fire, realistic alternatives must be instituted. Such alternatives might include enhanced roles for local governments; establishment of forage banks; greenstripping; and fuel management through livestock grazing. In particular, local governments may be willing to invest in fire suppression, prevention and rehabilitation if such investments lend stability to local economies. HR 2458 establishes the framework for the use of such alternatives.

Many of the valley floors and fans in Northern Nevada have become vast monocultures of sagebrush with limited understory plants. There are many reasons this occurred and are probably mostly due to historical grazing practices and modern fire suppression activities. Prior to settlement of the West, fire in the sagebrush/grass communities was an important factor and occurred on a 30 year cycle. Our modern fire suppression efforts, in concert with continued grazing, eliminated the understory on vast tracts of land. As annual weeds invade these areas, future fires result in a monoculture of cheatgrass.

With regard to establishment of forage banks, Eureka County would recommend that HR 2458 facilitate such opportunities. The concept of a forage bank would enable local land users to enhance forage production by seeding the vast expanses of unproductive areas I just described. The additional forage produced could be made available to area permittees who have lost forage due to wildfire or the need to rest riparian or other areas of critical environmental concern. Where possible, the seeding program should include native grasses and forbs which are more resilient to wildfire, thereby reducing the hazard of catastrophic fire. While ranchers would benefit from such a program, so would many others. Our wildlife and watersheds would undoubtedly benefit by improving the condition of our landscapes.

Within Eureka County, extensive stands of Pinyon-Juniper (PJ) woodlands exist. These non-commercial forests pose a significant wildfire hazard and fires in these areas are costly to suppress. Furthermore, modern fire suppression has interrupted the historical fire cycle and has facilitated the invasion of PJ on more productive rangelands. Dense stands of PJ seldom support an understory and forage for wildlife and livestock is dramatically reduced by PJ encroachment. Dense stands of PJ also use tremendous amounts of water and I have personally witnessed previously dry springs begin to flow after fires removed PJ. While controlled burns may be an alternative, it seems to be a waste of a resource. Perhaps we should be exploring methods to use this renewable resource and products such as trex are a realistic alternative. If a demand could be established, we would promote that harvested areas be reclaimed to the original sagebrush/grass communities. We would also promote harvesting areas in mosaic patterns that conforms to topography and landscape. Reclaiming these areas would provide watershed, wildlife and economic benefits as well as reduce fire hazard and possibly develop a new rural industry (wood chips). HR 2458 should be structured to enable such creative and cooperative approaches to wildland fuel management.

Provisions of HR 2458 which authorize short-term grazing contracts are a beneficial tool for managing fuel but must recognize the rights of existing permittees, especially water rights. Since most of the Great Basin was previously adjudicated for livestock grazing, preference must be given to current or adjacent permittees who control appurtenant water rights. Last year we witnessed a forest permit in our county issued to a rancher who lives nearly 200 miles from the allotment. No consideration was given to the owner of the base property attached to this allotment or the fact that someone else owned the water rights. As a result, the new permittee had to haul stock water and much of his access was limited. By not addressing those rights, grazing permits for fuel management may prove difficult and in some cases may not be economically feasible. We suggest that such contracts be with permittees holding current grazing permits.

The Northern portion of our county supports ever expanding annual grasslands that are a direct result of fire. We expect these grasslands, which now surround this Nation's two largest gold producing mines, to burn every three to five years. With every fire we see an increase in the size of these annual grasslands as well as an increase in the potential for a catastrophic fire. Eureka County has hundreds of subdivided ranchette type properties that are in or adjacent to these annual grasslands. Considering these properties are very remote and infrastructure and support are limited, I have grave public safety concerns for these areas.

The checker board pattern of private/Federal land ownership in Northern Eureka County, current agency policies and increased development have made fire hazard management difficult and it is time to try something new. I believe local government should and must be involved. We were recently contacted by BLM to participate in a green striping program (planting strips of fire resistant grasses). Because of land ownership patterns, BLM policy and conflicting personalities the plan was eventually abandoned. We must do everything possible to contain the spread of these annual grasslands and green striping is a viable alternative. Perhaps the Federal government should expand the use of cooperative agreements with local governments to facilitate such programs. I also believe that environmental compliance requirements must be evaluated and possibly lessened as they pertain to fire. The cost of NEPA compliance is a significant factor and we often hear the excuse that time, money and manpower is limiting to the agencies. We need to make sure NEPA compliance is not limiting prevention and rehabilitation efforts. Also, we need to make sure environmental compliance includes planning for the future. For example, green striping should include future disturbances such as establishing a fire break at the first threat of a fire. Green strips, especially at the critical urban interface, should be treated like farm ground and harvested for seed or forage.

I am a third generation rancher in central Nevada and I have been in the livestock business a lot longer than my three terms as County Commissioner. I have seen a marked transition in central Nevada over the last 40 years. Fire suppression in the 1950's and 60's consisted of a fire box supplied to area ranchers. Those ranchers were the first line defense reinforced by what ever agency people were available and volunteers from the community. I might note that at that time there were far fewer agency people than today. On serious fires, dozers, graders and discs were supplied by the ranchers and miners who were threatened by the fire. Most of those fires were shaped and herded until they burned out. Now a plume of smoke brings retardant bombers, helicopter attack teams and hundreds of professional fire fighters. The cost of fire suppression has skyrocketed and in many cases is not warranted.

I have also witnessed how our fire policies have changed our landscapes and our communities. The harvest of forage through livestock is a significant and stable component of Eureka County's economy. Over the last 15 years, cattle numbers in our County have fallen over 70% from 41,000 head in 1982 to 13,000 head in 1997. With the reduction in livestock, I have seen more fires and suppression cost becoming a burden to local, state and federal governments.

I appreciate your efforts with this Bill and I believe it will help address many of the issues and concerns I have expressed. I wish to also thank you for giving me this opportunity to testify on an issue that is very important to Nevada and my constituents in Eureka County.

Notes:

1. Resource Concepts, Inc., Wildfire Management, prepared for the Nevada Association of Counties, August 1988.

* Tables not available in this format

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