

OPENING STATEMENT: CONGRESSMAN PAUL A. GOSAR
Natural Resources Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests and Public Lands
Oversight Hearing on *"Wildfire and Forest Management"*

July 11, 2013 -- 10:00 a.m.

Thank you Chairman Bishop for holding today's hearing.

My district currently covers the majority of northern and western rural Arizona, including the communities stricken by the terrible loss of nineteen firefighters in the Yarnell Hill Fire.

Before I get started, I would like to say my thoughts and prayers continue to go out to the people who have suffered from this terrible tragedy. I would also like to express my most sincere appreciation to all of the men and women working around the clock to protect lives and property across the country.

In my short three years in Congress, I have represented nearly all of rural Arizona as a result of redistricting. Over that time, my constituents have been recurring victims of multiple wildfires each year.

In my first year, the Wallow Fire, now the largest fire in Arizona state history, ravaged 800-plus square miles of our treasured Ponderosa Pine country in just a few short weeks.

Last year, over 900 fires charred nearly 6,000 square miles in Western States. Over 50,000 of those acres are in Arizona alone as a result of the Sunflower, Gladiator, Poco, and Bull Flat fires.

And this year our state was struck with the recent loss of 19 firefighters in the Yarnell Hill Fire. That fire was one of four fires to strike rural Arizona so far this fire season.

Each of these fires has had their own unique circumstances. Some were started by an act of god, some by human cause. Some fires raged across federally-administered land only, and some affected a combination federal, state, and private lands. Some of these situations are difficult to avoid and contain. The Yarnell Hill Fire for example was started by lightning and ravaged brush on state and private land in Yavapai County. Monsoon winds rapidly changed the direction of the fire, causing it to spread and change direction uncontrollably.

But the fate of many of these fires can be changed. We can facilitate conditions that minimize the chance that they start AND reduce their size and intensity once they burn.

Today, I would briefly like to touch on the experiences I have had in my state and share what I believe Congress must to address this crisis in our rural communities. We owe it to all the brave men and women working in public safety, including our firefighters, to do

everything we can reduce the frequency and intensity of the fires we send them into year after year - conditions where our public safety officials can succeed.

Funding

Without a doubt, we need to ensure important forest health and fire fighting programs are adequately funded. The House has actually led in this fight, putting forth robust funding hazardous fuel reduction and other programs in our budget while the Administration and the Senate FY2014 Budget proposes cuts. But we have to spend our money smarter.

The current federal system continues to prioritize fighting fires. Although the need to suppress fires is never going to go away, we must shift our priority towards pro-active management of our public lands. If we don't, we are going to bankrupt our federal and local governments, lose the natural treasures many of us hold dear, cause a rural way of life to go extinct, and imperil even more of our public safety personnel.

I'll submit a study recently put out by Northern Arizona's Ecological Restoration Institute titled "*The Efficiency of Hazardous Fuel Treatments*" for the record that underscores this point.

In short – it concludes that by proactively treating a significant portion of the Schultz Fire imprint with an investment of \$15 million we could have greatly reduced the cost of the Schultz Fire and avoided the damage and loss of life associated with the fire and post-fire flooding that is now conservatively estimated to be between \$133 and \$147 million. In other words, it is ten times more expensive to suppress and recover a fire than it is to pro-actively treat it and prevent it.

In the Wallow Fire, we spent million to put it out and lost over 2.5 billion dollars worth of assets. And this just talks about dollar signs It is impossible to quantify the lost of over 20 percent of the Mexican spotted owl nests that exist in the world – as we did in the Wallow.

Or even worse: how do we quantify the loss of nineteen brave fire fighters? We can't do that. But what we can do is prevent fires by implementing common sense solutions and apply them.

Enhance Critical Land Management Tools

Congress must give our land management agencies the tools they need to reduce fuels and restore the ecology of our nations national forests and grasslands. Two of the most important steps Congress could take are the extension and reform of end result stewardship contracting and the expansion of the policy known as "the Good Neighbor Authority."

Stewardship Contracting authorizes the Forest Service and Department of Interior to partner with private industry implement wildfire prevention projects on federal lands that focus on surface, ladder and canopy fuels reduction activities.

When the federal government partners with local government, stakeholder groups, and private industry, together we can create much needed jobs and a safer environment for our citizens. Landscape-scale, fiscally responsible forest restoration treatments are the only way our state and the country is going to make real progress towards proper forest health.

The Good Neighbor Authority is a tool that allows the feds to partner with State Foresters to treat our forests. Since 2000, Colorado has used this for over 40 projects. Utah used it to carry out 15 projects on 2,800 acres. The pilot has been a success. It works, expand it to all states.

NEPA Relief

The National Environmental Policy Act has become the third rail in natural resources policy. Any time any Member of Congress tries to amend the act or streamline it, the proposal becomes dead on arrival. But nearly every expert in the field will tell you we have to cut red tape if we are going to seriously address our forest health situation.

Nearly everyone agrees, we must streamline the review process, improve coordination with local officials on the ground, eliminate duplication, and set firm time frames to bring more accountability to the process. It is clear that the process of planning, studying, consulting, litigating, appealing, and collaborating are failing our constituents and our forests.

These are just a few major items I believe Congress must act on. We can talk all we want about what Congress can do - we have had multiple very productive hearings over the past two Congress focused on this issue - but the time to act is NOW. We must build some type of consensus and navigate some of these solutions into law.

I have my legislation, the Catastrophic Wildfire Prevention Act, which accomplishes many of the items I have put forth today. It has bipartisan support here in Congress and within our rural communities. I know many other members of this panel have their own proposals as well. Many of our proposals have similar components. Let's figure out what we all can support and get it done. We have an obligation to provide relief to our rural communities.

I look forward to hearing from many of the experts we have before us today, and I urge Congress to act soon on legislative proposals that can help our nation fight catastrophic wildfires.

Thank you of this opportunity to speak Mr. Chairman.