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Opening Statement by
Representative Kristi Noem
Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests, and Public Lands
Oversight Field Hearing on
"Impact of the Mountain Pine Beetle Epidemic in the Black Hills"
Hill City, South Dakota
July 10, 2011

Thank you Mr. Chairman.

I want to thank Chairman Bishop for coming to South Dakota to hold this hearing, and to see first-hand the damage that it has done in our state. The mountain pine beetle is an epidemic that threatens our forests, watersheds, wildlife habitat, scenery, recreation, tourism, and increases the potential for catastrophic forest fires. I had the opportunity to hear about the problem in depth the many times I have been in the Hills and see many familiar faces here today.

An estimated 384,000 acres – one third – of the 1.2 million acres of National Forest System lands in the Black Hills have been destroyed by the epidemic since 1998. The infestation is growing rapidly, doubling from 22,000 new acres affected in 2008 to 44,000 new acres affected in 2009. The beetle infestation has also killed essentially all of the trees in the 13,426 acres of the Black Elk Wilderness.

This of course is not just a South Dakota epidemic. Pine beetles have destroyed or killed more than 41 million acres of pine forests across the United States in the last 14 years. In addition to South Dakota, the range of the bark beetle includes New Mexico, Arizona, California, Nevada, Utah, Colorado, Wyoming, Montana, Idaho, Oregon, and Washington.

We recently celebrated our nation's independence on July 4th. Before the Mountain Pine Beetle killed trees surrounding Mount Rushmore, people came from all over the country to celebrate the holiday with fireworks behind the Mount Rushmore National Memorial. Unfortunately, due to the potential fire hazard, we are no longer able to do that. This is just one example of how this epidemic has damaged the economic wellbeing of the area.

Fortunately, we know there are effective and scientifically sound ways to address this problem. The main treatments are thinning, spraying legacy trees or creating buffer zones around infected areas which have worked to stop the spread to healthy trees. The Black Hills is fortunate to have a robust forest products industry with the ability to implement treatments as fast as the Forest Service can analyze and prepare the projects. This requires the development of a forest

management plan. Currently, it can take up to two years to approve the plan and go through the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) process. In that time, the pine beetles spread into new areas which the Forest Service cannot act upon until they approve a new plan. That means no matter how much financial resources are available, we are always about two years behind the problem.

This is an emergency and should be treated as an emergency, similar to wildfires. We need to be proactive. We cannot allow the process to be delayed by up to two years with the constant threat of wildfire and concerns with public safety and environmental quality. The federal government has an obligation to manage and maintain its lands, including the Black Hills National Forest and Mount Rushmore National Memorial. They must make available all resources and tools they have to address the problem in the face of threats to public safety, critical infrastructure, and environmental integrity.

Healthy forests are important to the livelihood of millions of people in the West and critical to economic recovery. In South Dakota, the forests are a source of tourism, energy generation, recreation, and a reliable water supply for the region. It is imperative that we don't allow the forests to be destroyed by a preventable disaster.

I look forward to hearing from our panel of witnesses that includes representatives from the Black Hills National Forest, the State of South Dakota, the tourism and timber industries, and private landowners. With this hearing, I hope we not only bring attention to the swift action necessary to stop the spread of the pine beetle, but also come up with solutions to the problem. I am hopeful that if the federal government works together with the state, local industry and private land owners, they can offer solutions and give us the tools we need to fight the spread of the Mountain Pine Beetle.

Thank you Mr. Chairman, I yield back the balance of my time.