

Committee on Resources

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Opening Statement of Chairman Richard Pombo

Committee on Resources

Flagstaff, Arizona

March 7, 2003

Good morning. Thank Rick Renzi for hosting all of us here in Flagstaff. In the time I have gotten to know Rick, he has shown himself to be a fine man who knows the issues well. He will be a terrific Congressman.

Thank you also to Scott McInnis for chairing this hearing. Scott is proficient on forestry issues and I value both his input and hard work.

Ensuring forest health is a top priority for me and the many Resources Committee members here today. Today is especially important to me as it is the first field hearing I have attended as Chairman of the Resources Committee.

It is vitally important for Members of Congress to get out of Washington, D.C. and visit the local areas that decisions in Washington impact. Rick Renzi's district, home to last year's catastrophic Rodeo-Chediski fire, the largest in Southwest history, is the perfect place to hold this hearing.

Public lands have undergone drastic changes during the last century. Large areas of these lands are vulnerable and need our protection. The number of people visiting our public lands, be they national parks or forests, increase every year. This is a good thing. It is important our lands remain open to the public so that, for example, parents can take their children hiking through a national park to see the wonders of nature.

It is imperative that we do all we can to protect these lands. And there is no more devastating event that can happen than a forest fire. A forest fire destroys everything in its path – trees, wildlife, personal property, and causes devastating pollution to both the air we breathe and the water we drink.

We all take clean water and clean air for granted. In reality, however, we remain in a delicate balance. We must protect our environment, we need the best science available and local input for the decisions we make. Congress can help, indeed, Congress has an obligation to help, but no one knows how to best protect Arizona forests than those people living in and near the forests of Arizona.

We have a responsibility to protect our citizens, our property and our environment and public lands. When severe fires threaten – as they do throughout the West every summer – we need to ensure that we have a plan that will act as an instrument of assistance, not an instrument adding fuel to an already raging fire.

Mr. McInnis, I want to thank you again for coming to Arizona to see the situation firsthand. I am confident that we can enact a sensible policy that will protect our forests, and I welcome the testimony of our witnesses.

Thank you.

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