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House Committee on Resources
Subcommittee on Forests and Forest Health

Oversight Hearing on
Reforestation Problems on National Forests: A GAO Report on the Increasing Backlog

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Thank you for the opportunity to participate in today's hearing on issues surrounding reforestation on National Forest and Bureau of Land Management (BLM) public lands. The report, "Reforestation Problems on National Forests: A GAO Report on the Increasing Backlog," focuses on the U.S. Forest Service and has recommendations for the Secretary of Agriculture. In an Appendix to the Report, the GAO briefly discusses the BLM's reforestation and related forest health treatment activities in the 2.4 million acre-Oregon and California Grant Lands (O&C) in western Oregon. I would bring to the Subcommittee's attention that the BLM's reforestation and forest health efforts encompass both the O&C lands and the public domain forestry program on 53 million acres of BLM-managed forests and woodlands outside of western Oregon.

The GAO reports that BLM eliminated its backlog of post-harvest reforestation on the O&C lands in 2002, and has since kept pace with its reforestation and growth enhancement needs on the O&C lands. Elimination of the backlog in 2002 was due to a combination of factors, including reduced harvest levels, increased funding, and management actions taken by the agency.

The GAO's comments on BLM's reforestation activities describe reforestation as a regular management practice, which most often means post-harvest. In discussions with Subcommittee staff, we were asked to also provide testimony on the BLM's reforestation and restoration activities in the aftermath of wildland fire. Last summer, I testified before this Subcommittee on BLM's activities for post-fire rehabilitation, and greatly appreciate the Subcommittee's continued interest in this vital agency activity. At the request of the Subcommittee, the remainder of this statement discusses the BLM's post-fire reforestation and restoration activities on all BLM-managed lands.

When forested areas managed by the BLM experience fire or other catastrophic events, our highest priority is public health and safety. In the immediate aftermath of a fire, the BLM addresses short-term impacts to local communities, such as threats to public health and safety from fire-damaged hillsides and watersheds. After public health and safety needs are addressed, we turn our attention to the steps needed to stabilize and restore the forest resource as well as salvage to provide economic opportunities to local communities and economic recovery of the timber. Our experience has demonstrated that the sooner after an event we undertake restoration actions, the more likely our efforts will be successful in restoring the resource. Conversely, delays in implementing treatments after a catastrophic event may jeopardize reforestation and successful restoration of the resources.

Reforestation and restoration actions are determined on a site-specific basis. In addition to management objectives for the resource, the BLM factors into its locally based decision-making process the scope, intensity and severity of the event; the possibility of further on-site or off-site damage; the potential economic value of the resource; the timeframe desired to meet resource objectives; the likelihood of success; and the cost of failure. BLM considers several types of post-fire restoration treatments, including:

- Seedings to reduce erosion and invasion by exotic species.
- Reforestation to hasten forest reestablishment. Reforestation and stand maintenance and protection are treatments which have the objectives of reforesting lands following disturbance events such as timber harvest, wildfire, windstorms, and insect outbreaks. Treatments include pre-planting site preparation, tree planting, post-planting maintenance and protection of desirable vegetation, and genetic tree improvement. The BLM's four seed orchards provide superior seed of native species used for reforestation of western Oregon forests.
- Timber salvage to reduce future fuel loads, recover the economic value of the resource, provide for the safety of forest workers, and prepare the site for future resource conditions to meet RMP objectives.
- Stream enhancements to repair damaged streambanks.
- Structures to control erosion and runoff.

If salvage is an option, the BLM must consider how much timber to remove and how much to leave for wildlife habitat, nutrient cycling, and other ecological functions. Again, this is a site-specific determination. If too much material is removed, site productivity can be affected. If too much material is left, there is a risk of insect and disease attack as well as

potentially heavy fuel loading that may drive future wildfires.

The BLM believes that reforestation and all restoration tools, including salvage logging, should be available for use by our resource managers. To be successful, restoration tools must be employed to meet land and resource management objectives in a timely, cost-effective, and efficient manner.

I would like to illustrate this process by describing three examples of the BLM's reforestation and restoration activities in the aftermath of wildland fires: the Bland Mountain Fire of 1987, the Timbered Rock Fire of 2002, and the French Fire of 2004.

Bland Mountain fire, 1987

This fire, near Canyonville in southwest Oregon, started on July 15, 1987. Approximately 10,000 acres burned, including 4,000 acres of BLM-administered land and 6,000 acres on private lands. Two individuals lost their lives in this fire, and significant property destruction occurred.

The BLM was able to implement restoration treatments within the first year after the fire, in large measure because we were able to rely on documents included as part of our land use planning process in developing an Environmental Assessment (EA) of our proposed restoration treatments.

Reforestation and other restoration activities included: tree planting on all burned BLM acreage; grass seeding on 790 acres of stream side areas; creation of 140 waterbars; creation of one 8,000 cubic yard capacity sediment pond; seeding and mulching of 27.3 miles of roads and fire trails; creation of 320 temporary sediment catch basins and check dams; and 55 million board feet of timber salvage. Reforestation has been generally successful on both BLM and private lands. Trees planted post-fire are currently between 15 to 30 feet tall.

Timbered Rock Fire

The 27,000 acre Timbered Rock Fire of 2002 covered nearly 12,000 acres of public lands managed by the BLM Medford District in southwest Oregon. The fire burned the same time as the 500,000 acre Biscuit Fire. The BLM proposed two timber salvage sales to recover approximately 17 MMBF of burned, but still merchantable, timber on approximately 800 acres (8 percent of the burned area). As addressed in the Timbered Rock Fire Salvage and Elk Creek Watershed Restoration EIS, after completion of the salvage, about 95 percent of all trees (green and fire-killed) would remain. In preparing the EIS, the BLM sought public involvement to identify the desires, expectations, and concerns of interested and affected publics regarding this project and the use of available resources. A letter seeking input on the EIS was mailed to 780 individuals, landowners, organizations, tribal governments, and government agencies. A website specific to the Timbered Rock EIS was published on the Internet. Two public meetings, attended by about 40 people, were held during the scoping period. A total of 50 comments were received at the meetings and by e-mail, telephone, and fax.

The Timbered Rock project also contained a science element, developed in cooperation with researchers at Oregon State University, to look at the influences of post-fire salvage and salvage intensities on wildlife species. There continues to be scientific controversy about the impacts of salvage activities on burned lands. Salvage of dead trees has been of particular interest because of the potential economic benefits of harvest activities and the influences of salvage on risk of future fire and insect outbreaks. Salvage also has been highly controversial because of known or hypothesized environmental impacts on soil, water, and biodiversity. A large number of questions remain about basic relationships between salvage and ecosystem response in different ecosystem types. A key issue related to salvage activities concerns potential influences on wildlife and wildlife habitat. The complete EIS is available online at: www.or.blm.gov/Medford/timbrockEIS/index.htm.

The BLM's proposed salvage projects in the Timbered Rock EIS were challenged in court (Oregon Natural Resources Council Fund, et.al. v. Brong, Civil No.04-693-AA, U.S. District Court for the District of Oregon). On June 10, 2004, the court issued a temporary restraining order that halted salvage logging, and on November 8, 2004, the BLM was permanently enjoined from implementing salvage activities under the EIS.

This litigation delayed implementation of the salvage and other restoration activities proposed in the Timbered Rock EIS. It is nearly 3 years since the fire, and salvageable material has decayed to the point where much of the value has already been lost. The Department of Justice, at the request of the Department of the Interior, has filed a notice of intent to appeal the case, maintaining the option of asking for review by the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals. Since we were not able to implement the Timbered Rock EIS, however, the opportunity to study some of the issues surrounding salvage activities was lost.

French Fire

The French Fire, in north-central California, started on August 14, 2004, and burned for six days before containment on August 20, 2004. The final fire perimeter was in excess of 22 miles, with over 13,000 acres burned. The fire area included BLM, National Park Service, state, city/county, and private lands. An Interagency Burned Area Emergency Response Team was convened and prepared an Emergency Stabilization Plan with detailed recommendations and information.

After implementing emergency stabilization measures following the fire, the BLM began planning a timber sale to salvage approximately 4 MMBF of dead and dying timber on some 1,930 acres. An EA was prepared, and the French Fire Salvage Timber Sale was sold on March 8, 2005. The precise treatments to be applied to different areas of the sale were selected on the basis of the intensity of the fire and the level of tree mortality. The harvest of this sale will be completed before the timber volume and value is negatively affected by insects and decay. The timber harvest has begun and is planned to be completed by July of this year. Approximately 240 acres of reforestation is planned in areas of the fire that had the highest fire intensity and tree mortality.

Conclusion

As illustrated in the Timbered Rock EIS, litigation has made it very difficult in some instances for the BLM to implement comprehensive fire salvage and restoration activities. Delays in implementation of restoration activities may result in lost value of the resource, not only to the government, but also to local communities. Perhaps the most significant potential harm from delays in implementation of restoration activities and reforestation is additional damage to the resource from, for example, widespread insect infestations that often follow forest fire. As land managers, restoration of ecosystem health following a fire or other catastrophic event is a high priority. We have been successful in implementing treatments in many instances, and new tools provided through the Healthy Forests Restoration Act and other legislation should increase our odds of success. But delays can, at times, jeopardize reforestation and successful restoration of the resources.

Thank you again for the opportunity to testify. I would be glad to answer any questions.