

Statement of Congressman Scott Tipton
July 11th, 2013
Before the House of Representatives Committee on Natural Resources
Subcommittee on Public Lands and Environmental Regulations
Oversight Hearing on HR 818, “Wildfire and Forest Management”

Prevention: a simple idea with profound implications for the future of western forests and communities. Right now, fires are burning thousands of acres in Colorado, Arizona, and in many areas throughout the Western United States. The incident commanders in charge of suppression on the 110,000 plus acre West Fork Fire burning in my district, which has threatened entire communities, told me that the behavior of the fire is unprecedented. Because of all of the beetle-killed timber and dry conditions, the fire has acted in a way that defies computer models and has been incredibly devastating.

The environmental effects of this fire will continue to impact our communities for years after the fire is out.

The most tragic part of this is that the occurrence of these forest fires could be reduced, if not outright prevented, with commonsense forest management. By taking action such as removing hazardous fuels like beetle killed timber and unnaturally dense undergrowth, we would not only be able to allow our forests to thrive in a healthy natural state, but prevent the future loss of life and destruction of property, safeguard water supplies, species habitats and air quality, and promote a healthy natural environment overall.

The President spends a fair amount of his time speaking on the need to reduce carbon emissions, and just the other week announced his latest fiat to move forward with a significant back-door energy tax that will further restrict energy development in this country and stunt job growth. If the President is truly interested in reducing carbon emissions, without handcuffing our nation’s economy, his administration should take meaningful action to prevent the catastrophic wildfires that are burning in Colorado, Arizona and other parts of the West.

According to a 2012 presentation from NASA, carbon dioxide emissions from wildfires have more than doubled (up 2.4 times) since the 1980’s. The amount of carbon emissions from wildfires has grown from an average of 8.8 million tons per year from 1984 to 1995 to more than 22 million tons from 1996 to 2008.

Wildfire can often emit more carbon in a few weeks than all of the cars in that state do in a year. This was the case with the Hayman Fire in Colorado, and will likely be the case with the West Fork Complex Fire.

In addition, according to a 2007 study published by the NIH, wildfires can be primary contributors to individual states total carbon emissions. In Idaho in 2006 wildfire produced 1.6 times more CO₂ than all other fossil fuel sources. In 2006 wildfire emissions also accounted for 47 and 42 percent of CO₂ emissions in Montana and Washington respectively.

And according to a report from researchers with the Forest Service, Auburn University and

George Mason University, wildfire CO2 emissions are expected to increase by 50 percent by 2050.

When trees grow they absorb carbon, but when a tree dies (like the thousands of acres of dead bark beetle trees that cover our hillsides) it starts to release carbon slowly as it decomposes, or rapidly when it burns. The failure to address responsible forest management for the health the natural environment and for the safety of our communities simply defies logic.

If we proactively manage our forests we can remove dead trees and re-forest areas with healthy trees that will once again absorb carbon, restore our environment to a healthy state, and protect people and communities from catastrophic wildfire.

When developing a plan to improve conditions throughout the Western United States' vast expanses of forest, it should be common sense to include the input of those who live in the region and have a boots-on-the-ground view of the urgent challenges facing forest management.

To that end, I have proposed a comprehensive, all-hands-on-deck approach to restoring forest health.

The *Healthy Forest Management and Wildfire Prevention Act* (H.R. 818) would give states, and affected counties and tribes the authority to designate high-risk areas on National Forest System land and lands under the jurisdiction of the Bureau of Land Management, as well as the authority to provide for the development of proposed emergency hazardous fuels reduction projects for those high-risk areas. With increased local control, states can better protect their communities, species habitats, water supplies and natural areas with preventative action to control the conditions fueling devastating wildfires.

In addition to the environmental benefits this legislation would provide, it would realize incredible long term cost savings by investing in prevention. The cost of proactive healthy forest management is far less than the cost of wildfire suppression. According to the Forest Service, the Agency spent \$296 million on hazardous fuels treatment nationwide in FY2012 while spending \$1.77 billion on wildfire suppression during the same time.

As the old saying goes, 'An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure.'

That is what this legislation and today's hearing is about; getting ahead of this problem by investing greater resources toward prevention so we can take a more proactive approach to restoring our forests to a healthy natural state and preventing the intense fires that have caused so much damage throughout the West.

I look forward to hearing today's testimony as this committee continues to work to advance solutions to address this Western Emergency.