

Testimony by Brett Bennett, Bennett Lumber Products, Inc.
Regarding “State, Local and Tribal Approaches to Forest Management: Lessons for Better Management of our Federal Forests”
Tuesday, September 29th, 2015

Greetings, and thank you for inviting me to testify before you all today. My name is Brett Bennett of Bennett Lumber Products, Inc. We are a family-owned and operated business, with 2 sawmills located in Princeton, Idaho and Clarkston, Washington.

The following testimony is given on behalf of myself and on behalf of the approximately 240 employees who work at our mills and who rely on timber from state, private, and federal forestlands to maintain our livelihoods. Bennett Lumber has always been dependent on multiple sources of logs to run our mills and, as time passes, we have seen many changes in our ability to procure logs from different landowners, particularly from the federal government. Federal land management agencies are often hampered by onerous analysis and regulatory requirements that damage their ability to be nimble, and as they labor under the requirements imposed on them by Congress and by the courts, the overstocked and unhealthy timberlands of the west often go up in smoke.

Burdened by these requirements, federal agencies find it difficult or impossible to meet their mandate of maintaining forest ecosystems while also sustaining forest productivity. The agencies are left facing tough realities and difficult decisions. As people move to the edge of, and into, forested lands, the ever-present danger of wildfire takes on a new dimension—and exponentially increases fire-fighting costs. Scientists and foresters call for prescribed fires and thinning to reduce fuel loading in the forests. Demands for wood products, recreational opportunities, and the roads that facilitate access, are increasing steadily. Clean water, clean air, and multiple types of wildlife habitat, all of which depend on proper forest management and the thoughtful use of harvest as a management tool, are in everyone’s best interest.

73% of the timberlands in Idaho (20.4 million acres) are managed by the federal government, and the need for active landscape-level management on these federal lands is dire. US Forest Service Chief Tom Tidwell has recently testified that between 65 and 82 million acres of National Forest lands throughout the nation are in need of active management. Specifically for Idaho, Chief Tidwell stated that 15 of the 20.4 million acres of National Forests in Idaho need restoration.

Simply put, we need to increase both the pace and the scale of forest management activities on federal lands.

In early 2012, the Obama Administration publicly committed to increasing the pace and scale of managing the National Forest System lands, arguing that by expanding forest restoration programs, forest health would improve and fire danger would decrease.

That sounds good, but the fact of the matter is that the existing legal framework that the federal agencies must work under has taken land management away from trained foresters and handed it over to Federal judges and environmental extremist organizations. The truth is that local people, given the opportunity to work on our overstocked and unhealthy national forest system lands, can put boots on the ground and money into local economies, while bolstering forest health and reducing fire danger. It is up to you all at this level to come up with possible mechanisms for such programs.

In Idaho, there has been a lot of talk about the state managing the Federal lands within our borders. The problem with this is that the state still needs to manage those lands under all the same laws that are so burdensome to the USFS currently. Thus, state management could turn into a huge, expensive quagmire.

Then there are state-owned lands which of course ARE managed, under the state BMPs. These are endowment lands that are mandated by the State Constitution to only be managed for the largest economic benefit for the state endowment. They can be managed in this fashion because they are not saddled with the excessive regulations that I see as choking out any hope of productivity or effective forest management from federal land managers.

It would be helpful to us in Idaho and across the West if you all, respected members of Congress, could help to design a framework by which the federal land managers could incentivize cooperation with local officials, logging contractors, and forest products businesses, and allow us to perform landscape-level thinning and removal of understory brush and ladder fuels, and thus prevent wildfires from becoming intense and catastrophic in the first place. We need more local control, not more fire suppression funding. In my mind, fire suppression, while hugely important, also represents a misplaced priority. We need to perform preventive work on these landscapes before catastrophic fire takes management decisions out of our hands.

Congressman Labrador has introduced the Self Sufficient Community Lands Act, HR 2316, which would allow for more local control of select projects, and that is exactly the kind of new thinking that we in Idaho need in order to restore the health of our forest landscapes and our rural, timber-dependent communities.

The West is in crisis. Annual forest mortality is at a 50 year high and 85% of this annual forest mortality is on National Forest System lands. According to the University of Idaho, nearly 12% percent of federal forestland in Idaho is “standing dead”—dead trees still standing in a forest. 94% of those standing dead acres are located in federal ownership. These acres are considered to be at high risk of uncharacteristically intense fire due to overcrowding of dead stock.

The current annual harvest from the National Forests represents less than half the allowable sale quantity in many existing forest plans. In many Regions, the Forest Service is falling short of its own management goals. Stepping up management, through collaboratives where they exist and normal timber programs elsewhere, will address pressing forest health concerns, bolster employment in economically distressed rural communities, and aid in lessening the intensity of the wildfires that currently hit the west every summer. Wildfires in Idaho emit the same amount of carbon dioxide into the air we breathe as 4.7 million cars during an active fire year. Fire suppression costs now exceed a billion dollars a year, and fire-related activities account for half of the Forest Service budget. This model is simply not sustainable.

Forest health in Idaho can be improved by harvesting trees through selective cutting and thinning operations, followed where appropriate by prescribed fire. This work creates intact and resilient forest ecosystems, and provides logs to sawmills—an important economic driver in Idaho.

The University of Idaho's research illustrates the importance of the forest products business sector in Idaho. The industry provides 10,200 direct jobs and 9,010 supporting jobs—almost 20,000 jobs in Idaho, providing \$686 million total in labor income. Each million board feet harvested in Idaho—the equivalent of approximately 250 log trucks—supplies enough lumber to frame about 65 homes, provides 18 jobs, generates \$629,000 in labor income, and injects \$2.9 million into the state's economy through the sales of goods and services. Every \$1 of sales by an Idaho forest products industry firm generates an additional 60¢ in sales by other industries. The total impact in Idaho of converting timber into consumer products is \$3.2 billion in sales.

Only 3 states depend more on forest business: Maine, Mississippi, and Oregon.

We all want healthy forests with working ecosystems. Forest landowners, both small- and large-scale, manage their lands to keep forests healthy, growing and providing the environmental values we all care about, while also creating the renewable and sustainable wood products that we all need.

The science of forestry was initially developed to enhance the growth of the forests. Since then, this science has been modified within the federal agency framework to try and balance all competing uses of federal lands in a complex (and not always successful) manner. Management of our national forests can only work if stakeholder groups and the general public understand the need for multiple science-based management techniques on varying landscapes. Management techniques, such as thinning and prescribed burning, can help our federal forest lands to become strong and healthy, and healthy forests benefit everyone.

Collaborative efforts involving federal and state agencies, the forest sector, the conservation community, and private forest landowners are resulting in innovative forest management solutions that are helping to restore the health of our federal forestland, but these solutions can take years to implement.

It's time to reconsider the policies that govern federal forests. Current policies have evolved in response to controversy and litigation – not from solid science or from sound forestry knowledge. Increasing sustainable harvest and restoration activities on choked, overstocked federal forests will improve forest health, reduce fire danger, and bring jobs to depressed rural economies. It's a win-win situation. Change will require a sustained effort by respected political leaders such as yourselves, as well as the collaboration by diverse groups who all recognize that healthy, growing forests are in everyone's best interests.

Thank you for your time and attention to this important matter, and thank you for your focus on the health and the future of our forest landscapes.