

Testimony to the House Natural Resources Republican forum on “Confronting America’s Out-of-Control Wildfire and Forest Health Crisis” Thursday July 12th at 10:30 EDT.

Ranking Member Westerman and members of the committee. I am Ryan Bronson, Director of Government Affairs for the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation. RMEF is a 225,000 member non-profit hunting conservation organization with a mission to ensure the future of elk, other wildlife, their habitat and our hunting heritage. We are headquartered in Missoula, Montana.

Since our founding in 1984 we have helped conserve and enhance more than 8.3 million acres, and improved access to 1.4 million acres. Most of these projects have occurred in the forests of the western US. When it comes to forest and wildfire policy, we have skin in the game.

Actively managed forests provide optimal habitat for elk and other wildlife, and are more resilient to weather, insect outbreaks and fire. Catastrophic fires that destroy critical habitat for endangered species are an increasing risk, so treating over grown forests to protect ecosystems should be a non-controversial policy goal.

Unfortunately, litigious special interests have weaponized the Endangered Species Act to prevent many fire and habitat management projects. The 9th Circuit *Cottonwood Environmental Law Center v. US Forest Service* decision (aka. *Cottonwood*) has already delayed 130 projects, and these delays have led to catastrophic fires that have destroyed lives, property, homes and important wildlife habitat.

We have specific examples. The Stonewall project in Montana’s Helena-Lewis and Clark Forest was a proposed vegetative management project that would have benefitted elk and other wildlife, but it was delayed by *Cottonwood* litigation. In 2017 the Park Creek and Arrastra wildfires burned over half of the proposed treatment area with intensities that damaged some of the soils in the area. This was economically and ecologically costly.

More recently we have seen the Hermit’s Peak Fire in New Mexico that began as a prescribed fire but got out of control. In the Forest Service’s Wildfire Review Report it was noted that treatment was delayed from September of 2019 to October of 2020 by a *Cottonwood* injunction, and then by Covid staffing issues following that. A thinned project area likely would have had lower fire risk. The subsequent 341,000 acre fire has not been good for endangered Mexican Spotted Owls, elk or people.

The Senate ENR committee is marking up a *Cottonwood* Fix today, which my organization supports.

As increased funding flows to fire mitigation and forest management as a result of the Infrastructure Law we fear that the level of on-the-ground projects that Congress envisions will be stymied by litigation, frustrating everyone.

Thank you for the opportunity to participate today.