

Testimony of Jake Garfield
Deputy Director, Utah Public Lands Policy Coordinating Office
Before the House Committee on Natural Resources Republican Members
“Confronting America’s Out-of-Control Wildfire and Forest Health Crisis”
Republican Forum – July 18, 2022

10:30 AM

Ranking Member Westerman, Members of the Committee, I appreciate the opportunity to participate in the forum today.

My name is Jake Garfield, I am the Deputy Director for the State of Utah’s Public Lands Policy Coordinating Office. The role of our agency is to coordinate the Utah state government’s interactions with the Federal land management agencies and work with our partners on practical solutions to the challenges facing lands Utah’s public lands.

Utah has long experience with catastrophic wildfires that threaten Utahn’s homes, destroy wildlife habitat, pollute our air, and impair the sources of Utah’s drinking and agricultural water. As a dry state where the vast majority of our water comes from the National Forest lands above our communities, healthy and resilient watersheds are paramount to maintain Utah’s economy and way of life.

After the devastating wildfires of 1910 in Idaho and Montana, the U.S. Forest Service adopted a strict wildfire suppression policy throughout the United States – and this century of fire suppression has led to an unsustainable built up of tree density on Utah’s forests – lands that can erupt into exceptionally dangerous and uncontrollable wildfires due to extremely high fuel loads. The problem is compounded when high tree density reduces the flow of Utah’s springs and streams and makes our forests more susceptible to bark beetle infestation. Persistent drought and a changing climate aggravate the challenges posed by Utah’s overstocked forests.

However, we can make a difference. The State of Utah and the U.S. Forest Service are proactively working together to reduce fuel loads on Utah’s forests, build resiliency to catastrophic wildfires, and thus protect our communities and waters sources when wildfires occur.

The Shared Stewardship Agreement between the State of Utah and the U.S. Forest Service, recently renewed by Utah Governor Spencer Cox and Secretary of Agriculture Tom Vilsack, has successfully treated more than 54,000 acres of Utah’s forests over the past 4 years, with more than \$20 million in funds from the State, the Federal government and partner organizations. Forest lands treated under the Shared Stewardship Agreement are not clear cut, but they are thinned out, allowing existing mature trees to absorb more water, and allowing rain, snow, and sunlight to reach the forest floor and establish healthy undergrowth. Such treated forests may still burn in the event of a wildfire, but such fires will often stay on the ground rather than burning the forest canopy, burn with lower temperatures, and ultimately have fewer adverse impacts on Utah’s watersheds and wildlife habitat. Wildfires in these proactively treated areas

typically become ground fires after ignition and are easier to fight, posing fewer threats to homes and communities in the wildland urban interface.

We want to thank the U.S. Forest Service and Department of Agriculture for their partnership and support of Utah's Shared Stewardship Agreement and hope that these proactive forest treatments will receive the funding and support they need to expand to more and more areas of Utah. There are more regulatory revisions needed to enhance the active management of national forests and rangelands and we look forward to helping make those revisions a reality.

Thank you for the opportunity to participate today.