

OPENING STATEMENT: CONGRESSMAN PAUL A. GOSAR

Natural Resources Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests and Public
Lands Legislative Hearing

“The Catastrophic Wildfire Prevention Act of 2012

July 18, 2012 -- 9:00 a.m.

I thank Chairman Bishop for holding today’s hearing and for cosponsoring my bill, *the Catastrophic Wildfire Prevention Act of 2012 (H.R. 5744)*.

First, my thoughts and prayers continue to go out to our constituents who have suffered from catastrophic wildfire. I would also like to express my appreciation to all of the men and women working to protect the lives and property of our neighbors. I have a slideshow, on the screen now, to show some of the devastating impacts these fires.

The district I represent - Arizona’s First Congressional District - is one of the largest Congressional districts in the county, encompassing eight of Arizona’s thirteen rural counties. It contains over thirty-seven million acres of land administered by the federal government, including over nine million acres of United States Forest Service lands. That acreage includes much of Coconino, Apache-Sitgreaves, Prescott, Tonto and Kaibab National Forests

Last year, our communities were victims to some of the largest forest fires in recorded history. The Wallow Fire grew to over 800 square miles, over just a few short weeks, charring in its wake some of the most treasured parts of our Ponderosa Pine country. The Horseshoe Fire, the Murphy Complex, the Stanley Fire and the Monument Fire blackened another 200,000+ acres. This year’s fire season has not been any better. Over 900 fires have charred nearly 6,000 square miles in Arizona, California, Colorado, Nevada, New Mexico, Oregon, and Utah. Over 50,000 of those acres are in Arizona alone.

It is clear that the process of planning, studying, consulting, litigating, appealing, and collaborating are failing us and our forests. The frequency of fires, and the magnitude of the acreage burned, has increased markedly since 1990. The five largest wildfires in my state’s history, Rodeo in 2002, Cave Creek in 2005, Willow in 2004, Aspen in 2003, and now the Wallow Fire have all occurred in the last ten years. Prior to 1990, the largest fire was the Carrizo fire in 1970 which burned just 57,000 acres.

Our ecosystems are suffocating. Where we once had 10 to 25 trees per acre, we now have hundreds. Roughly 80 million acres of forests across the West are overgrown and ripe for catastrophic wildfire, according to the Landfire multiagency database. Our forests have been mismanaged for a long time and it is way past due to change our strategy.

The current federal system continues to prioritize fighting fires. Although the need to suppress fires is never going to go away, we must shift priority towards pro-active management.

We simply cannot afford to do otherwise. Catastrophic wildfires are difficult to control and cost the federal government millions of dollars in immediate fire response and many millions more in restoration and rehabilitation. The Western Forestry Leadership Coalition, a state and federal government partnership, estimates the costs are *2 to 30 times* the reported suppression costs. Last year, the Forest Service spent a record total of \$48 million on burned-area recovery work. \$25 million has already been spent to prepare for the immediate aftermath of this year's wildfires, putting the U.S. Forest Service on track for another possible record year of spending on burned-area recovery efforts.

So what is standing in the way of pro-active and fiscally sustainable forest management? Bureaucratic red tape, preventing us from participating in the stewardship of our public lands and the extortion tactics of some environmental groups, which have devastated the timber industry and placed local ranchers' economic livelihood at risk.

That is why I introduced the Catastrophic Wildfire Prevention Act of 2012. My bill authorizes the Forest Service and Department of Interior to implement wildfire prevention projects, including timber harvests and livestock grazing, in at-risk forests and threatened and endangered species habitat that focus on surface, ladder and canopy fuels reduction activities. In other words: it streamlines the review process, improves local coordination eliminates duplication, and sets firm time frames to bring more accountability to the process.

Forest thinning works! In Eastern Arizona, the areas that were treated as part of the White Mountain Stewardship Project, a contract designed to thin Apache-Sitgreaves National Forest and White Mountain Apache Tribal lands, and the areas managed locally by the Apache Tribe and the State of Arizona were properly cleared. Today there are still healthy trees with burned underbrush. In the lands that were untouched by thinning practices, the majority of the U.S. Forest Service administered land in the state, fire has left only scorched earth behind. We simply need to make ecological restoration easier.

This common sense approach has garnered strong bipartisan support. This legislation has thirty-two cosponsors from twenty-three different states. Additionally, Utah Senator Mike Lee has introduced companion legislation in the Senate. Many of these supporters represent states or Congressional Districts with large swaths of National Forest System or Bureau of Land Management administered land – not Massachusetts. In short, they are the people directly in harm's way, not safely tucked in a concrete jungle.

Thank you Chairman Bishop for your leadership on this issue. I look forward to further committee action on my bill and others proposals that will restore the environment, improve public safety, save the taxpayer dollars, and put people back to **work**.