

**STATEMENT OF THE HONORABLE GREG GIANFORTE  
GOVERNOR, STATE OF MONTANA  
BEFORE THE  
COMMITTEE ON NATURAL RESOURCES  
U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES  
REPUBLICAN OVERSIGHT FORUM**

**JULY 22, 2021**

Good morning, Ranking Member Westerman and distinguished members of the committee. Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony on the work the state of Montana is doing to prevent catastrophic wildfires and restore health and resiliency to our forests.

As we meet this morning, Montana is facing 18 large scale fires across our landscape. This year alone, we've seen over 1,400 fires burn more than 174,000 acres across Montana, and it's only July. Just this month, we've had over 500 fire starts. These wildfires threaten the safety our communities and first responders, impact our local economies, and have cost Montana taxpayers over \$6.5 million to date this fiscal year. I have long said Montana faces a forest health crisis, and addressing this issue is one of my top priorities.

My Montana Comeback Plan calls for using all tools available to improve and expand forest management. The result will be a healthier landscape, improved wildlife habitats, more recreational opportunities, more good-paying jobs, and less severe wildfires. By reducing the severity of fires, active forest management will also create conditions that are safer for our firefighters to respond in, giving us a better chance at keeping fires small.

The recent revision of our Montana Forest Action Plan identifies over 9 million acres of forestland with significant forest health issues and an elevated risk of wildfire. Of those acres at risk, we found nearly 4 million acres of forestland would benefit most from cross-boundary forest management.

Given the need to actively manage our forests, I've charged the Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation (DNRC) with doubling the acres it treats this year. Last calendar year, the Department treated 11,000 acres. This year, they're aiming to treat 25,000 acres – more than double. This is just a starting point. The DNRC will actively manage private, state, and federal land with a variety of treatment types, including thinning, logging, and prescribed fire.

We've also invested in 14 different cross-boundary projects across Montana. These projects demonstrate the importance of working together across ownership boundaries to create meaningful, landscape-scale change. Using funds from our state's fire suppression account and the USDA Forest Service's State and Private Forestry Division, we'll expand existing work and jumpstart new activities. Without our state's commitment, these forestry projects wouldn't be possible – but it's not just up to us.

Here in Montana, federal ownership accounts for over 70 percent of the forestland in our state. Of the over 9 million high risk acres identified by the Montana Forest Action Plan, 60 percent occur on federal land. This makes tools like the Good Neighbor Authority and stewardship contracting more important than ever. These tools are also proof that we can responsibly develop our abundant Montana resources and simultaneously protect our environment. They aren't mutually exclusive.

By leveraging our collective workforces to capitalize on each other's strengths, we're able to implement timber sales and forest restoration projects across Montana at a pace and scale that was not previously feasible. Last year, we completed and have under contract 22 timber sales that total 58 million board feet, and treated over 10,000 acres, with a contract value of \$9 million. Looking ahead, we have 16 timber sales and over 20 restoration projects currently planned which will treat thousands of additional acres in dire need of treatment on federal ownerships across Montana.

Finally, given the forest health crisis here in Montana, I have called upon all land managers in the state to get more private, state, tribal, and federal acres into active management to reduce the risk facing our communities. As our State has already demonstrated, it will take significant commitment and collaboration from all of us to make meaningful progress.

In Montana, we are committed to working together to bring health back to our forests, to protect our communities, and to create jobs. Without active forest management, we cannot be successful in our forest health improvement and wildfire risk reduction goals.

Thousands of first responders are currently on the front lines working to protect our communities, natural resources, and livelihoods across Montana and the western United States. The untold sacrifices of these brave men and women cannot be calculated in dollars spent, or acres burned, and we must keep them and their loved ones in our thoughts and prayers as the fire season progresses.

The time to act is now. With so much at stake we simply cannot wait any longer. We must treat more acres.

Thank you for inviting me. I look forward to any questions you may have.