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**Opening Statement of  
Chairman Doc Hastings**

**At the House Committee on Natural Resources  
Full Committee Oversight Hearing on**

***“The Impact of Catastrophic Forest Fires & Litigation on People and Endangered Species:  
Time for Rational Management of our Nation's Forests”***

**Tuesday, July 24, 2012, at 10:00 a.m.**

This hearing focuses on the devastating impacts of catastrophic wildfires—on people and species and how Endangered Species Act litigation blocks activities to help prevent or fight fires.

Each year, wildfires damage or destroy an average of 3.7 million acres across the United States, mostly on federal forests and other public lands, including millions of acres of land that the federal government has mandated as critical for endangered species. As we hold this hearing, 28 major fires are burning in twelve states, adding to 3.9 million acres that have already burned this year.

These fires destroy lives, homes, farms, and families’ economic security—and they destroy old growth habitat and endangered species. The soaring annual cost of managing wildfires runs over \$3 billion. As a result, fewer resources are available for forest management to improve forest health, create jobs, provide funding for rural schools, and protect species habitat.

Decades of poor management of millions of acres of federal forest and range lands has made the situation worse. Last week, the Associate Chief of the Forest Service testified that 65 million acres of Forest Service lands are at “high risk of wildfire,” yet, last year, the Service treated just 4 million acres—that’s only 6 percent. The lack of proper federal land management imperils neighboring state, local, tribal or private lands that are often better managed through thinning, timber sales and other activities.

Why won’t the federal government more responsibly manage forests? In large part, the answer is the Endangered Species Act (ESA), the way it is interpreted, and the way it and other laws are being abused by environmental groups through endless lawsuits to block local, state and federal timber fuels reduction and thinning projects.

Information provided by the Justice Department to this Committee reveals that at least 59 environmental lawsuits against the Forest Service and BLM have been filed or are open during just the past four years. These suits have stopped most human or economic activity connected

with forests, including eliminating thousands of jobs. They have also obstructed projects to improve species habitat on thousands of acres decimated by fires, by removing dead or diseased trees, maintaining access roads to fire areas, and removing ash and sediment. Ironically, some of these lawsuits aimed at “saving” forests have resulted in their actual destruction, where once old-growth, critical habitat forests now resemble the moon’s surface after fires.

More troubling is that these lawsuits, and the threat of even more, have led to instances where federal agencies and private firefighting contractors sometimes are unclear how to implement ESA rules amidst fighting wildfires. Overcautious behavior ensues and fighting out-of-control wildfires, already a dangerous occupation, is made even more difficult.

Some believe the *real* cause of catastrophic wildfires is global warming, that megafires are natural and should run their course, and that fires and drought won’t ease unless carbon emissions in the Earth’s atmosphere are reduced. I note these are usually the same individuals who oppose any efforts to reduce the immense carbon building up in our forests through management and who often support ESA lawsuits to block efforts to mitigate environmental damage caused by these fires.

Our communities and endangered species deserve practical solutions now to address and reduce the risks of megafires. We owe it to them to improve federal forest health and species habitat and ensure that the Endangered Species Act works to protect species and people before and after these devastating fires occur. That’s what this hearing is about today.

I look forward to hearing from the witnesses here today.