



Minnesota Timber Producers Association

903 Medical Arts Building • 324 W. Superior St. • Duluth, Minnesota 55802
Phone 218-722-5013 • Fax 218-722-2065

Testimony
Minnesota Timber Producers Association
Forum on Wildfire and Forest Health Crisis
United States House of Representatives
June 21, 2022

The Minnesota Timber Producers Association, represents loggers, truckers, sawmills, and other allied businesses in Minnesota's forest products industry. Thank you for addressing these issues and allowing me to share some thoughts.

In Minnesota, we're blessed with a vibrant forest products industry, which means we have well managed forests. That also means our risk of wildfire isn't what it is out west. For the most part.

A year ago, we did have the Greenwood Fire in the Superior National Forest. It was started by lightning in an area with a lot of bug-infested spruce and balsam in addition to aspen and tamarack. This area of the state doesn't have timber markets, so the stands become over-mature and susceptible to fire. The Greenwood fire burned 26,000 acres and destroyed 70 structures.

Timber markets—companies that manufacture paper, lumber, oriented strand board, and other products—are critical to the forest management practices—including timber harvest—that make our forests healthy.

Timber Harvest has many benefits, including:

- Harvest mimics the disturbance created by fire.
- Clear-cuts and thinnings remove dead and dying material the fuels wildfires.
- Well-managed timber harvests create age-class diversity that helps limit fire spread.
- Harvest also has many economic benefits, creating jobs, supporting rural communities, and manufacturing goods all Americans need and use each day.

Both of the National Forests in our state—the Superior National Forest and the Chippewa National Forest—are lagging well behind their “early successional” habitat goals identified in their Forest Plans. Timber harvest can help meet those goals.

We're concerned about a large prescribed burning project on the Chippewa National Forest the Forest Service has proposed. The Fire Dependent Ecosystem Project relies heavily on prescribed burning on over 150,000 acres of the Chippewa, and the Forest Service had proposed executing the project with a categorical exclusion. After push back from industry, particularly from Rick

Horton at Minnesota Forest Industries, the forest supervisor agreed the project should undergo a full environmental analysis, so it is currently under review. Many of the objectives described in the project can be met by a combination of mechanical treatments, including timber harvest, and prescribed fire. As we've seen in the case of the Hermit's Peak Fire in New Mexico, even well-intentioned prescribed burning projects can have tragic results.

The catastrophic fire seasons of 2020 and 2021 provided the wake-up call that should finally change the way the Forest Service manages their lands. As Forest Service Chief Randy Moore has acknowledged, many acres of our Western National Forests are extremely overstocked, and under a changed climate and long-term, historic droughts, are very susceptible to catastrophic fires. We've seen massive fires in western National Forests, and many more remain at risk.

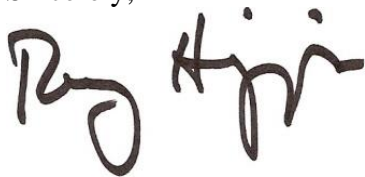
This puts Minnesota's National Forests at risk as well, not necessarily to larger fires, but to neglect. Put simply, the forest management staff on our National Forests also tend to have fire qualifications, known as red cards. When there's a huge wildfire in the western US, personnel from the Superior and Chippewa Forests are called to go on fire assignments, leaving them unable to complete their work here in Minnesota on needed projects on the Chippewa and Superior. The Administration has been very slow in rolling out the pay raises and new job series that were authorized in the Infrastructure Bill which passed in November. These changes were only implemented last month, making them essentially irrelevant for this fire season.

We've also been discouraged to see the very slow roll-out of new projects which received over \$4 Billion in new funding in the infrastructure bill. The proposed projects rely heavily on prescribed fire, and amount to only a two percent increase in acres treated each year. This does not, to my eyes, look like how an agency should respond to a crisis.

The 193 million Acre National Forest System is a conservation success story that the American people should be proud of. But it is in serious jeopardy unless the Forest Service moves aggressively to use the authorities Congress has already given it to reduce fire dangers and meet other forest plan objectives.

Thank you for your attention to matter of great importance to those in Minnesota's forest products industry, as well as to the health of the forests in our state and across the country.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Ray Higgins". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

Ray Higgins
Executive Vice President
Minnesota Timber Producers Association
rayhiggins@timberproducers.com
218-591-2692