Committee on Resources

Witness Testimony

Testimony on H.R. 2458
JAMES HUBBARD
State Forester of Colorado
National Association of State Foresters Society
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Subcommittee on Forests and Forest Health
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Good afternoon, Madame Chairman. My name is Jim Hubbard and I am the State Forester of Colorado. I am also a member of the National Association of State Foresters (NASF), a nonprofit organization which represents the State Forestry Directors of all 50 states, seven U.S. territories, and the District of Columbia. In our professional capacities, NASF members provide technical and educational assistance to the nation's-10 million nonindustrial private forest landowners. We also help to protect over 70 percent of U.S. forests from insects, disease, and, particularly, wildfire.

I would like to begin by commending you for recognizing the risks to both public safety and environmental quality posed by current conditions in the wildland urban interface. I am further encouraged by your acknowledgment that resource managers need a flexible and varied set of tools with which to address this multifaceted problem. As the nation's population steadily increases, the "interface issue" is rapidly becoming the greatest fire-related concern among local, State and federal agencies. Project-based or 6 4 stewardship" contracts can provide Federal resource managers with an innovative way to work with their neighboring communities to reduce the risk of catastrophic wildfire while improving air quality, water supplies, recreational opportunities and other noncommodity benefits that the public demands and enjoys. Finding ways to address interface issues is a land management responsibility we must all redeem. Fire in the Forests -- A Brief Review During most of the twentieth century, societal values demanded that a strict regime of fire exclusion and prevention be enforced across the federal landscape. Highly trained fire fighting teams effectively eliminated fire from the nation's forests and, as a result, disrupted the traditional cycle of frequent, low-intensity bums to which many forested ecosystems had become adapted. including crowded In the absence of fire, these ecosystems experienced unprecedented changes stand densities; greater susceptibility to insect and disease infestations; loss of historic species and habitat; and dangerous levels of fuel loading. In other words, our forests have become more flammable and more at risk from catastrophic wildfire than ever before. Fed by thick ladders of vegetative fuel, wildfires now bum hotter, higher, and longer, causing long-term damage to soil, water, air and other essential natural resources. As evidence of this growing risk, large-scale wildland fires have burned an average of 4 million acres per year over the past 10 years. In 1996, alone, nearly 95 thousand fires consumed 6 million acres on lands of all ownership. These wildfires cost local, State, and federal agencies Testimony of James Hubbard State Forester of Colorado September 23. 1997 Page 2 more than $1 billion to suppress and threatened a broad array of both public and private values -including the lives of the men and women who fought to suppress the blazes. The nation's current wildfire situation is further complicated by the expansion of human development into the interface between urban centers and forested wildlands. The interagency National Wildfire Coordinating Group defines the wildland urban interface as "the geographic area or zone where structures and other human

developments meet and intermingle with wildland or vegetative fuels." But to many crowded city dwellers, this zone represents fresh air, scenic views. recreational opportunities, and even solitude. State forestry agencies, along with municipal and volunteer fire crews, bear much of the fire protection burden when wildfires occur in interface areas. These dangerous areas are often characterized by fire-prone landscapes and building materials, distant water supplies, and safety hazards. The wildland urban interface is the number one wildfire concern for most State Forestry agencies and is an appropriate focus for this innovative legislation. Because many of the nation's high-risk forests are in federal ownership, agencies such as the Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management have a particular responsibility to address dangerous conditions, such as the buildup of hazardous fuels, which could threaten their neighbor's lives and property. The causes and impact of wildland fire are not limited to federal lands, however, and these agencies must also work with local communities, state and regional land managers, and local fire fighting agencies to determine the wildland areas in greatest need of treatment and to identify the most effective tools for meeting that need. Existing Fire Management Tools -- An Exploration Vegetative management can alter wildland fire behavior by partially or totally removing particularly hazardous grasses, shrubs, trees and other types of forest "fuels." A number of silvicultural tools currently exist for addressing conditions such as fuel loading which leave forests highly susceptible to wildfire. Prescribed burning and the thinning or harvest of dense stands of small diameter trees are among the most effective of these tools. Prescribed Burning: When carefully planned and implemented under appropriate weather and fuel moisture conditions, prescribed fire can successfully reduce the accumulation of combustible materials on the forest floor; recycle forest nutrients; minimize insect populations and spread of disease; encourage and maintain growth of native trees and plants; and improve access and conditions for wildlife. Prescribed fire is also a valuable tool in the long-term maintenance of hazard reduction projects. It is a tool which should not be excluded from qualifying "forest management projects" as defined by Section 3 (2) of H.R. 2458. Prescribed fire must be used with particular care, however, when dealing with areas adjacent to human development. In both interface and predominantly wild areas, prescribed fire often requires thinning or other mechanical removal of forest material prior to burning. Thinning-: Thinning of forested stands for the purpose of reducing fire risk usually involves removal of small diameter wood on a scale often appropriate for small contractors. Unfortunately, such products are of limited marketability and it is not currently cost-effective for many small operators to take on harvesting projects geared toward fire risk reduction. Despite the financial risks, some operators have indicated a willingness to take a chance on these projects if an appropriate enabling mechanism were in place to assist them. Federal harvesting contracts which include the completion of fire-related forest management activities offer a promising way for federal agencies to achieve their management goals while encouraging the successful participation of small contractors.

Colorado's Front Range -- An Illustration Colorado's Front Range is an area of intense urban development, with more than 3 million acres of homes in the woods. As the risk from catastrophic fire becomes increasingly threatening, the residents of the Front Range are demanding that something be done to protect their lives, homes, and property.

In response to this public demand, Colorado's land management agencies jointly assessed the interface situation along the Front Range zone. The agencies then prioritized areas-at-risk according to the urgency with which they needed treatment.

Federal, State and local interests submitted project proposals which are now being evaluated for local applicability and acceptance. Those projects which have local agreement and the ability to match contractors with markets will be moved toward expedited implementation.

Without the participation of all parties this endeavor will not succeed. Federal land managers need the tools provided by H.R. 2458 to fully meet their obligations with regard to reducing the risk of wildland fire -- along the Front Range and throughout the nation.

Implementing Forest Management Contracts -- Some -Issues for Consideration. Stewardship or project-based contracts will not provide a final answer to the nation's forest health problems or even to the dilenunas of the wildland urban interface. But they can provide a useful tool for helping federal agencies work with their State and local partners to address these problems in some regions of country. In anticipation of this success, I offer the following suggestions with regard to the implementation of forest management projects as outlined in H.R. 2458.

- Existing Policies and Legislation: The use of forest management contracts does not need to set aside any existing national policies or processes. Contract specifications can and should be developed in accordance with applicable forest or land management plans and implementation should be carried out in compliance with all applicable laws.
- Collaborative Identification and Monitoriniz of Treatment Areas: Because conditions in the interface impact both land managers and the general public at many levels, federal agencies should work collaboratively with local communities, as well as appropriate state and local resource managers, to identify areas in need of fire-related vegetative treatment. The monitoring of contract implementation and completion should also involve applicable local and regional interests. State Foresters are directly involved in similar forest management projects and can assist in providing relevant performance standards and evaluation criteria for these assessments. NASF recommends you incorporate this collaborative action into Sections 101 and 103 of H.R. 2458 where applicable
- Prioritization of Treatment Projects: The Forest Service has indicated that there are at least 39 million acres of forest land in need of treatment for fire risk reduction. This tremendous need for action necessitates the prioritization of areas proposed for treatment under this legislation. This prioritization should be done by federal land mana2ers in concert with local Officials according to criteria such as housing density; forest condition and probability of catastrophic disturbance events; local support for vegetative treatment; and the presence of a local land-use planning process that deals with hazard mitigation on a continuing basis.

Conclusion

The "Community Protection and Hazardous Fuels Reduction Act" provides authorizing legislation for the Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management to incorporate forest management project needs into traditional timber sale / harvesting contracts. This legislation essentially outlines a nationwide demonstration program focused on exploring the effectiveness of project-based contracts in combating fire-prone forest conditions in the wildland urban interface.

The State Foresters support contracting as one tool to reduce the risk of catastrophic wildfire and and urge the federal government to pursue the authorities needed to make use of this tool. State level actions are already underway to address the interface problem and adjacent federal land managers must become an active participant in this process.

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