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Testimony on "IMPACT OF THE MOUNTAIN PINE BEETLE EPIDEMIC  
IN THE BLACK HILLS"  
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As president of the Black Hills, Badlands & Lakes Association, South Dakota's oldest, largest and most vibrant private-sector tourism promotion trade association, with more than 500 tourism business members, I have an urgent message for the honored members of The Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests and Public Lands present here today:

The mountain pine beetle epidemic in the Rocky Mountain Region, including the Black Hills of South Dakota, is an emergency situation that requires a local, state and federal response that is prompt, sustained and efficient.

The current mountain pine beetle epidemic in the Black Hills began in 1997 and has lasted longer than entomologists originally anticipated. Today, it is getting worse. That means that the economic impacts on our Western forestlands are increasing in severity.

Healthy forests are important to the livelihood of millions of people in the West and critical to economic recovery. The forests are an essential source of reliable water supplies, tourism, energy generation and recreation for the region. In South Dakota, visitors spend over \$1 billion annually throughout the state; and the tourism industry directly employs over 28,000 workers. Most visitors to the state come to the Black Hills, where they expect to enjoy recreational activities in a green-forested landscape. Visitor spending generates \$265 million in tax revenue, making tourism the second most important industry in the state. Even a 5 percent decrease would be a severe blow to our already ailing state government coffers.

Because the beetle epidemic leaves brown and devastated trees in its wake, massive forest fires are an ever-growing threat. Swift action is essential in order to maintain public safety and critical infrastructure.

Our Association is working with the Save the Black Hills Coalition, whose members represent the timber industry, Hills communities and businesses, state agencies and other impacted parties, to devise a comprehensive plan of attack that takes advantage of our combined knowledge, resources and skill sets. We are ready, willing and able to move forward with the crucial steps necessary to protect and preserve these vital national forest resources.

While we are all aware of the nation's budgetary constraints, we understand that there are unobligated funds from FY2010 that could be used for western beetle mitigation. Moreover, we know that there are some common-sense strategies that can be implemented that require a period of local regulation of the forest resource. These strategies don't fit current Healthy Forest policies. A decision on your part to redirect those funds toward fighting the pine beetle epidemic, combined with local and state resources and initiatives, would foster the "prompt, sustained and efficient" effort needed to turn the tide on this scourge.

On behalf of the Black Hills, Badlands & Lakes Association, thank you for your consideration of our request and your leadership on this important issue. We look forward to your response.