

Committee on Natural Resources
Subcommittee on Public Lands and Environmental Regulation
Rob Bishop, Chairman

Oversight Hearing on: *Wildfire and Forest Management.*

Thank you Chairman Bishop for calling this important hearing to examine the need for increased forest management to reduce the risk of catastrophic wildfire. It is clear that our National forests are in an unhealthy and dangerous state that pose an extreme risk to public safety, water supply and wildlife and resulting in larger and more intense wildfires.

This year marks the second consecutive year that my home state of Colorado has experienced record-setting fires in terms of property lost in a single wildfire. Last year, the Waldo Canyon Fire destroyed 347 homes and killed two people; this year, the Black Forest Fire claimed around 500 homes and two lives.

Since the beginning of the year there have been more than 25,000 fires across the country. Currently, 22 active large fires burning across eleven states have burned a total of 1.9 million acres. Last year's fire season burned a total of 9.3 million acres – the third worst fire season on record for acres burned.

Colorado and other states cannot afford to continue absorbing the enormous costs associated with these fires, most of which have burned on federal land, primarily in areas where trees are far too old and dense, and often have been affected by insects or disease.

Poor forest condition is one of the primary factors that have led to destructive wildfires and catastrophic insect and disease outbreaks. It is widely recognized that management of our forest resources has not kept pace with the ever increasing need for restoration. Decades of failed policy with respect to active forest management have created unhealthy and overstocked forest conditions, placing 73 million acres of National Forest land and 397 million acres of forest land nationwide at risk to severe wildfire.

The soaring annual federal costs of managing catastrophic wildfires come at the expense of land management activities that create jobs, provide funding for rural schools, and improve forest health. Currently, the Forest Service, an agency that once managed millions of acres and averaged over one billion in revenues annually, now spends \$2 for every \$1 it produces and spends half of its appropriated budget on wildfire suppression.

A great deal of research, including research conducted by the Forest Service, indicates that active management which produces valuable timber can help reduce fire threats while meeting a wide variety of restoration goals. Active forest management and timber harvest have been shown to have multiple long-term benefits. Despite these findings, one of the main reasons for the declining health of our federal forest is a lack of long-term and affordable timber harvest access caused by litigation. This is, in large part, due to preservationist organizations using federal statutes like the Endangered Species Act and National Environmental Policy Act as tools to litigate timber harvesting. Litigation and fear of litigation directly impact how the Forest Service handles timber operations.

Furthermore, the Forest Service's own research highlights that the agency is only able to access less than 25 percent of the suitable timber base for forest management and fuels treatment due to regulatory and legal constraints.

Nationally, approximately 80 million acres of trees are projected to be at risk of severe mortality due to insect and disease.

Instead of addressing these problems, the Administration has proposed cutting hazardous fuels reduction funding by 37%, or a \$115 million decrease, while proposing to increase land acquisition funding by 10%. The Administration also requested a 27% increase in suppression funding, making it clear that its preference is to continue fighting catastrophic wildfire and adding to the federal estate instead of reducing the risk of fire on the lands it already manages.

State and local governments, federal land management agencies and this Congress must do more to better manage our nation's forests and to provide the resources necessary to fight wildfires when they happen.

Again, thank you Mr. Chairman for holding this critical hearing.