Draft Testimony of Congressman Jared Polis
10:00 AM
House Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests and Public Lands
House Subcommittee on Water and Power
Joint Oversight Hearing on "Mountain Pine Beetle: Strategies for Protecting the West"

Chairman Grijalva and Chairwoman Napolitano and Ranking Members Bishop and McMorris Rodgers,

Thank you very much for holding this hearing, and particularly the opportunity to testify before your subcommittee on an issue that is of chief importance to the citizens of Colorado's second district and those who visit its alpine treasures. The mountain pine beetle outbreak that is currently expanding throughout the Rocky Mountains, and particularly the Lodgepole pine ecosystems of my district, and Whitebark pine of the Northern Rockies, is a critically important topic. One of the primary needs in addressing this epidemic is increasing the awareness and understanding of how vast this problem is, and what menu of options we have in mitigating its damage. This hearing will help to highlight the problems that we currently face, and continue to bring more minds to the table, joining those of us who are working constantly to promote mitigation solutions and keep our communities and public land's patrons safe.

In my testimony today I hope to highligt: 1) The scope of this problem and why this outbreak demands the prompt attention of congressional leaders, the administration and our local and national lands management officials. 2) Where we currently stand, what solutions exist and what innovatoins are on the horrizon that will mitigate the damages of this outbreak responsibly and effectively 3) The challenges we face in developing and implementing those solutions responsibly and effectively.

How big of a problem is this?

Colorado's Second District relies heavily on those visitors who come to our state to ski, camp, climb, bike and boat the incredible landscapes that define Colorado's Second Congressional District. In Colorado, the tourism industry provides nearly $10 billion dollars of in state spending annually. In addition to those who come to visit, those who call the second district home are outside enjoying this natural cornocopia of entertainment and adventure day in and day out. My district is home to world class ski areas, dozens of fourteen thousand foot peaks, and countless trails, campgrounds and rivers that define our economy and culture as much as they define our landscapes. However, the mountain pine beetle epidemic is fundamentally changing this landscape, and with it our culture and economy.

In the last ten years, more than 150 million acres of trees, from New Mexico to British Columbia, have died as a result of beetle infestation. While my district is most heavily affected by the mountain pine beetle in its Lodgepole pine forests, other states are seeing similar outbreaks involving other species of trees and beetles.

We have seen outbreaks in the past, most recently in the late 1970's and early 80's, but the combined force of the current outbreaks make this epidemic the biggest in recorded history and for this reason it demands our proactive attention. The current outbreaks are killing trees in larger numbers, at faster rates, and over longer time periods; they are happening in numerous ecosystems across the western US and are occurring at the same time.

The scope of this outbreak demands our attention because it has yet to get the natural help that has stopped past outbreaks from reaching the scale of devastation we see today. Beetles are a temperature dependant being, limited by colder temperatures and colder climates. It was a severe cold period that was credited with stopping a rapidly growing outbreak in my district in Grand County, Colorado in the 1980's. Today, temperature trends and drought conditions are pushing us in the opposite direction.

The beetle's life cycles are also greatly determined by temperature. Generally, species that live in colder climates have a two year life cycle, but we're starting to see the beetles at higher elevations reproducing more like beetles in warmer and lower elevations, once every year to even twice a year, greatly expanding the speed with which this outbreak spreads. Regionally, the mountain pine beetle hasn't been found in British Columbia, the Yukon or the Northwest Territories. Now, British Columbia is one of the areas hit hardest by the current epidemic.

In discussing the scope of this problem, the first and foremost concern is the safety of the visitors and residents who live and play in the mountains that are being hit hardest. Fire is of course the danger that comes to mind first. Research is still being conducted on the direct influence between beetle kill and wildfires, and I know I speak for everyone here when I say that I hope the links are minimal. I say this because if beetle killed forests are at greater risk of burning, or fuel more intense fires, then many communities in my district are getting closer to catastrophe every year.

Some research has suggested that larger beetle outbreaks tend to happen on a 50 year cycle, while large wildfire events don't necessarily follow those same trends. However, additional research has suggested that 5 to 10 years after a beetle outbreak there is little correlation between wildfires and beetle kill, while 15 years out the correlation is much stronger. This outbreak has been present in my district for over ten years and is growing closer and closer to the time when evidence suggests a stronger correlation between beetle kill and wildfire events. Ourcommunities, homeowners, ski areas, towns and businesses know all too well the personal

effects of major wildfire events, but the sheer scale of dead and dying timber in our surrounding forests speaks to a greater catastrophic potential, and that is truly worrying.

In addition to fire, this outbreak has significant safety repercussions from falling dead and dying trees. Mountain pine beetles attack larger trees more often, as these trees serve as better hosts for the beetle's larvae. When these trees die, the root systems die as well, and the trees and soil around them become less stable leading to larger falling trees. These falling trees pose significant hazards to trails, roads, campgrounds, rivers, ski lodges, vital infrastructure, and the patrons and workers who use them.

Our economies also stand to suffer. The communities of Colorado's second district are blessed to have economies directly tied to our landscapes and natural resources. However, for the many communities who share this trait throughout the region, the mountain pine beetle epidemic poses a threat of disasterous proportions. The visitiors that come to Colorado for recreation and tourism drive our economies and sustain our communities. The damage to our tourism industry through threat of fire, damage to infrastructure from falling trees or the damage to our landscape's beauty, give rise to severe concerns about our community's economic and cultural future.

Where are we now and what's on the horizon?

As I'm giving this testemony, Colorado's mountains are drying out from a muddy spring, with snow melting, runnoff filling our rivers and creeks and wildflowers dominating the high alpine meadows. However, as our mountains and forests move further into the summer, a more ominous annual cycle dominates our minds… that of the growing wildfire danger. Now more than ever, the pine beetle epidemic has concerns running high about a wildfire season of catastrophic possibilities. Our communities are not as preparred as they could be, and they need federal help to ensure the highest level of safety is achieved.

While there are mitigation efforts underway and programs and services helping a great deal on the ground… broadly put, funding, funding, funding is one of the primary keys to quick mitigation.

We are all aware that overwhelming firefighting costs have stifled our federal lands management budget. I hope that the Senate will act quickly to pass the FLAME Act, following the House's lead, and the excellent work of this committee in passing that legislation. The FlAME Act will have drastic and immediate benefits for our communities and the effective and efficient use of our tax dollars.

When it comes to spending the limited mitigation money we do have, the Wildland Urban Interface and areas around critical infrastructure, where civilization and wildlans come face to

face, are the areas where expended funding should be focused to ensure the most effective, efficient and responsible use of our tax dollars. Thinning projects done in the Wildland Urban Interface (or woo-ee) and around critical infrastructure, creates fire breaks between less accessible wildlands and the population centers and infrastructure that we hope to protect when a fire occurs. Additionally, it allows fires away from civilization to run their course naturally, benefiting those ecosystems, without concern of a fire quickly spreading to threaten homes or communities. By maintaining a healthy WUI, we can cut firefighting costs, better protect our communities, and give our agencies the freedom to focus on a mission of lands management and stewardship, instead of constant attention to local and residential firefighting.

Our public lands managers have project after project of fuel reduction efforts, which have passed environmental assessment but are still waiting on funding to move forward. Reducing fuels in the Wildland Urban Interface is absolutely critical to solving the safety concerns posed by the mountain pine beetle outbreak quickly and efficiently. Funding these waiting projects will have a significant and immediate impact on reducing our wildfire risks, reducing the costs of wildfire suppression activities… it is truly the low hanging fruit in addressing the mountain pine beetle problem.

With budget shortfalls, and the growing need for funding of hazardous tree removal and fuel reduction efforts, we are looking at other creative ways to decrease the costs of thinning responsibly, bringing increased value to the wood we need removed. When weighing policy approaches and concepts new and old, we must ensure that in creating value and new markets for this wood, we don't create too great an incentive to where the harvesting of this resource becomes unsustainable in its own right.

Whether including woody biomass in the definition of Renewable Energy and thus allowaing for incentives under a Renewable Energy Portfolio Standard (RPS or RES), or through the growing prevalence of "bluestain" wood products as a decorative building material… creating new market demand for the dead and dying trees provides hope to the communities who want to see fuel reduction efforts moving forward.

Wood products, wood pellets, small scale energy projects and other local businesses can play a key role in mitigating the damage and lessening the danger from this outbreak's effects. Today you will hear from Mark Mathis, a wood pellet producer in my district on this subject who can speak to the help that local businesses can provide in reducing this outbreak's impacts. By adding value to beetle kill, we create a new demand for this wood and decrease the cost to our federal land management agencies to remove these fuels from our federal lands.

I was recently able to attend a bluestain showroom grand opening, where more and more individuals are leaning about the bluestain wood products industry, buying bluestain products and bringing value to the trees that we need to have removed. The mountain pine beetle leaves in its wake a fungus that stains the dead trees blue without compromising the integrity of the wood that can be produced from these dead trees. The Bluestain products industry and small scale renewable energy development are only a couple examples of community businesses that should play a central role in creating private incentives to reduce fuels and remove hazardous trees high risk areas.

The Challenges We Still Face

I've discussed several of the options and needs that we know of with regard to the mountain pine beetle epidemic in the West. However, there are a multitude of unanswered questions, challenges, and bridges that we still must cross.

While funding will go a long way to lessening the risk immediately, we face the need for additional and expanded programs that assist fuels reduction efforts on state and private lands. Nearly 70% of the Wildland Urban Interface exists on private lands, and private property owners must have the knowledge and incentives to maintain a healthy WUI for the benefit of public safety. Programs like the State and Private Forestry program, good neighbor authority, and the community fire planning provisions of the FLAME Act, along with the ability for local community companies to carry out this work are excellent examples of what we need to be promoting.

However, much is left to be done as the public safety is put at risk and more and more federal dollars are spent fighting fires or repairing damage that could have been lessened or avoided all together. Whether on public or private land, we need to promote safety and responsibility first and foremost.

We also want to ensure that the measures we do take to mitigate the effects of this problem don't create other or longer lasting problems. Specifically, we need to maintain a focus on environmental responsibility, particularly when discussing thinning outside the WUI and / or creating a new form of value and increased demand for the dead and dying timber that is produced.

As Congress debates and moves closer to passing a wide sweeping overhaul of our nation's energy policy, new sources of energy will become greatly valued and heavily sought after. A properly crafted, specific and responsible definition for woody biomass within a Renewable Energy Standard has a significant and positive role to play in helping fund wildfire mitigation projects, and relieve the backlog of projects that the Forest Service is waiting to have funded. This definition can also mean that we see an expansion of cleaner and less carbon intensive

energy sources, like wood pellet heating, that will help combat one of the primary causes of the beetle epidemic: climate change.

However, it is essential that this definition and the resulting technology and markets are constructed with sustainability as a first priority. Any industry, technology or practice we support must use resources in a manner that will conserve those resources for future generations and will create careers that can sustain communities, not short term jobs that will disappear along with our resources.

Closing Statements

The current beetle outbreak in the west is reaching a scale of epic and catastrophic proportions; it is truly a perfect storm of forest age and health, climate change and drought paired with combined regional outbreaks spreading rapidly throughout the Rocky Mountains. The residents, visitors, communities and economies of my district in Colorado are facing new questions and a more uncertain future because of this epidemic. To address it we will need to employ new policies, provide better funding practices and be sure that as we're addressing this problem we don't create new problems or systems that can't sustain themselves in the long term.

This outbreak will leave a lasting scar on the land for years, but I am confident that the forests will rebound and regenerate. It is our responsibility to be knowledgeable and conscientious of our natural world, ensuring that our wild areas can undergo their process of healing, and ensuring that our communities and visitors aren't put in harm's way during that process.

Thank you again to the members of this subcommittee, and to Chairman Rahall, Congressman Grijalva, Congresswoman Napolitano, Congressman Bishop and Congresswoman McMorris Rodgers for giving your committee's time to the challenges that my constituents face on a daily basis. I also thank you for the opportunity to testify in front of your committee and the opportunity to participate in this hearing.