



The Confederated Tribes of the Colville Reservation



Prepared Statement of the Honorable Virgil Seymour on behalf of the Confederated Tribes of the Colville Reservation

Oversight Field Hearing on Wildfires and Their Aftermath: Protecting Communities, Watersheds, and Wildlife

U.S. House of Representatives, Committee on Resources Subcommittee on Forests and Forest Health

October 4, 2006

Good morning, Chairman Walden and Congresswoman McMorris. On behalf of the Confederated Tribes of the Colville Reservation (“Colville Tribe” or the “Tribe”), I would like to welcome you and your staff to Okanogan. My name is Virgil Seymour and I am a member of the Colville Business Council, the governing body of the Colville Tribe. Today, I am accompanied by Cody Desautel, Tribal Forest Engineer and Lead Fuels Planner, who will assist me in answering the Subcommittee’s questions.

I currently serve as the Chair of the Colville Business Council’s Community Development Committee and the Vice-Chair of the Natural Resources Committee. In those respective capacities, I am responsible, in part, for overseeing the Tribe’s natural resources policies. Thank you for giving the Colville Tribe the opportunity to testify on its preparation for and responses to wildfires, a subject of critical importance not only to the Colville Reservation, but also to the surrounding jurisdictions.

My testimony today will focus on three main points: (1) the Colville Tribe’s Integrated Resources Management Plan and how it provides the framework for the Tribe’s wildfire and forest management practices; (2) the Tribe’s preparation for wildfires; and (3) the Tribe’s response to wildfires.

Background on the Colville Tribe and Its Enterprises

I would like to take this opportunity to provide some brief background on the Tribe. Although now considered a single Indian tribe, the Confederated Tribes of the Colville Reservation is a confederation of 12 smaller aboriginal tribes and bands from all across eastern Washington state. The Colville Reservation covers approximately 1.4 million acres, and its boundaries include parts of Okanogan and Ferry counties. The Tribe has more than 9,200 enrolled members, making it one of the largest Indian tribes in the Pacific Northwest and the second largest in the state of Washington. About half of the Colville Tribe’s members live on or near the Colville Reservation.

Timber provides the backbone of the Tribe's economy. The Colville Reservation has approximately 900,000 commercial and noncommercial forested acres. Harvesting timber in a timely manner is critical to the economic well-being and success of the Tribe.

The Tribe's Natural Resources Department has approximately 375 employees and provides secondary work for other timber jobs, including log truck drivers, contract loggers, and slashing crews, which add an additional 200 jobs.

In addition, the Tribe's enterprise division, the Colville Tribal Enterprise Corporation ("CTEC"), operates two lumber mills, Colville Indian Precision Pine and Colville Indian Power and Veneer. CTEC is a corporation established under tribal law, and has its own board of directors and independent management. CTEC's Forest Products Division employs approximately 430 people and injects millions in payroll dollars into the local economy.

Collectively, the Colville Tribe and CTEC is the largest employer in north-central Washington, with the largest number of employees working in the natural resources area.

The Tribe's Integrated Resource Management Plan

As the Tribe previously communicated to the Subcommittee in August 2005, it has developed an Integrated Resource Management Plan ("IRMP"), which is a management plan that governs all of the Tribe's natural resource activities on the Colville Reservation. The IRMP was designed to respond to promote a healthy forest, support species populations and, perhaps most importantly, sustain a supply of timber to maintain a stable reservation economy. The plan also provides for protection and restoration of watersheds on the Colville Reservation to ensure water quality and fish habitats. The Tribe developed the IRMP through a series of staff and public meetings, and the final IRMP was adopted in July 2001.

Through a Cooperative Agreement with the Bureau of Indian Affairs ("BIA"),¹ the Tribe has been able to apply the management concepts in the IRMP to functions and activities carried out by the BIA. This arrangement thus allows the Tribe to seamlessly incorporate its resource management principles into all natural resource activities carried out on the Colville Reservation, whether those activities are conducted by the Tribe's employees or by BIA employees.

The IRMP is comprised of various component plans, each of which has been approved by the Colville Tribe and the BIA and sets forth in more specificity the management of a particular resource. One of these component plans is the Fire Management Plan ("FMP"), which outlines

¹ The Tribe's Cooperative Agreement with the BIA is made possible by the Indian Self-Determination and Education Assistance Act, 25 U.S.C. § 450 *et seq.* That Act allows Indian tribes, under certain circumstances, to contract or compact with the BIA to assume functions that would otherwise be carried out by the BIA. The Tribe believes that its Cooperative Agreement is unique in the flexibility that it provides the Tribe in working with the BIA, particularly in the area of forestry.

the forest management principles for the prevention and response to wildfires on the Colville Reservation. Other plans that have been adopted include the Forest Management, Range Management Plan, Water Quality, and Parks and Recreation plans.

To comply with the National Environmental Policy Act (“NEPA”), an Environmental Impact Statement (“EIS”) was completed for the IRMP. Because an EIS was prepared for the IRMP, subsequent approval of the component plans requires only an Environmental Assessment (“EA”). With the EAs completed and the component plans approved, further NEPA compliance is accelerated because the EIS and the respective EAs already address the most of the larger issues. When issues arise that require federal approval of activities on tribal lands—such as salvage logging in the aftermath of a wildfire—this tiered approach allows the Colville Tribe’s personnel to act quickly to identify mitigation measures and complete materials necessary for public comment.

The Colville Tribe’s Preparation for Wildfires

The lynchpin of the Colville Tribe’s wildfire preparation is its aggressive promotion of hazardous fuels reduction activities on and around the Colville Reservation, all of which are provided for under the FMP. As the Subcommittee is aware, weather, topography, and arrangement of fuel determine how intense a wildfire will burn. Weather and topography cannot be controlled, but the amount and arrangement of the available fuel can be modified to some extent. The goal of fuels management is to break up the continuity and reduce the available fuel, so that when a wildfire does start, there will be areas where control measures are more effective.

Wildland-Urban Interface

These fuel reduction efforts include treating wildland-urban interface acres. These efforts include tree spacing, lop and scatter, brush cutting, pruning, and pile and burn treatments to reduce fuels and ensure forest health, and focus on areas within 1.5 miles of residential structures or populated areas. While these treatment efforts have occurred on tribally-controlled lands, the Tribe has also worked with private landowners on lands within the Colville Reservation, reducing the likelihood of serious fires. The Tribe has treated 4,850 wildland-urban interface acres in 2006, and has treated a total of approximately 8,000 acres since 2001.

Hazardous Fuel Reduction

In addition to wildland-urban interface treatments, the Colville Tribe also conducts hazardous fuel reduction (“HFR”) treatments in high-fuel load areas. HFR is designed for areas that are not necessarily in proximity to urban areas, but have a high probability for large uncontrolled fire growth. These areas have high fuel loadings due to the lack of fire from suppression over several decades. The goal of HFR projects is to reduce the fuel loading and ladder fuels and to return the area to a condition that was similar to historic conditions. Treatments for these projects include a combination of prescribed underburns, mechanical treatments, and hand treatments. The mechanical and hand treatments involve the cutting of brush and sub-merchantable trees, pruning of the remaining trees, and piling and burning of the

slash that is generated. The Colville Tribe has treated almost 5,000 acres using HFR in 2006, and a total of approximately 15,000 acres since 2000.

Logging

Another form of fuel reduction on the Colville Reservation is logging. Although the primary purpose of logging is revenue for the Tribe, it is also beneficial for fuel reduction. The IRMP allows the Colville Tribe to cut approximately 78 million board feet annually. This helps fuel loadings, stand health, and breaks the continuity of the fuel over the landscape. The timber stands are usually treated because there is some problem with forest health, whether it disease, insect infestation, or overstocking. Keeping these types of stands treated minimizes the amount of dead debris on the ground. The Tribe treats approximately 10,000 acres per year by logging on the Colville Reservation.

The Colville Tribe's Response to Wildfires

Once a fire is controlled, the Colville Tribe dispatches a Burned Area Emergency Rehabilitation ("BAER") team to survey and analyze the site. The BAER team is composed of both tribal and BIA personnel with professional experience in different disciplines. Some members of the BAER team possess fire qualifications that allow them to be out on the fire lines prior to the fire being controlled. The BAER team is the first step in determining what mitigation and rehabilitation measures will be needed for each fire, and if a salvage sale is needed.

If salvage is determined to be feasible, those members of the BAER team from Tribal and BIA Forestry will also develop a salvage plan with BIA Forestry. Within seven days of the control date of the fire, the BAER team will have completed its analysis, drafted a report and, if applicable, have completed their respective portions of the EA for the salvage plan. All of the mitigation measures that are identified by members of the BAER team from the members' respective disciplines are incorporated into the EA and the salvage plan, which expedites the entire process. Again, because the major environmental issues have already been addressed in the EIS for the IRMP and in the EAs for the component management plans, the scope of the EA for salvage plans is much narrower, which allows the process to be completed very quickly.

Public input is solicited on the salvage plan within 10 days of the fire being controlled, and if concerns are identified, they are addressed by tribal and BIA staff. The EA is then reviewed and approved, and the salvage plan will then be reviewed for a Finding of No Significant Impact ("FONSI"). Once the FONSI is issued, the salvage plan goes to the Colville Business Council for final approval.

Once approved by the Colville Business Council, the Tribe will award a contract for the salvage. These contracts are usually given to CTEC so that the salvaged logs can be used by the two sawmills in Omak, Washington. By having tribally owned and operated mills that can utilize the salvage timber immediately, the Colville Tribe can bypass the bidding process altogether and decrease the time it takes to initiate the salvage plan. In all, timber salvage

activities on the Colville Reservation generally commence within two months of a fire being controlled.

Compared to the U.S. Forest Service, the Colville Tribe believes that it can treat its forests and salvage its timber much more quickly and efficiently. The reason behind this is simple: the Tribe aggressively harvests timber on the Colville Reservation. Being the largest single source of the Tribe's revenue, timber provides the lifeblood of the Tribe's budget and economy. For the Colville Tribe, lost timber equals lost revenue. Therefore, the Colville Tribe has developed management plans that minimize delay and ensure that salvageable timber is delivered to our tribally-controlled sawmills in the most expeditious manner possible.

Thank you for allowing the Tribe to make this statement. We look forward to working with the Subcommittee to enhance forest management. I would be happy to answer any questions that the Subcommittee members may have.