



“Confronting America’s Out-of-Control Wildfire and Forest Health Crisis”

Testimony of Stefanie Smallhouse

President of Arizona Farm Bureau

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Members of the Committee, I want to thank you for inviting me to speak on behalf of 2,500 of Arizona’s farmers and ranchers. My name is Stefanie Smallhouse. My husband and I currently own and operate a cow/calf operation in the San Pedro River Valley. We are the fifth generation on the ranch and hope to pass it onto the sixth. Our commitment to conservation to ensure we can pass the ranch down to the next generation means that I am especially thankful for your continued commitment to American agriculture and your interest in working with our industry in addressing the wildfire and forest health crisis in our country, its impacts to ranchers, and thereby the resiliency of our food supply.

The COVID pandemic reminded many of the importance of the resiliency of our food supply from local production systems to national infrastructure. As we emerge from the pandemic, and think about our future, we must carefully consider how we can improve this resiliency for the food security of this country and the sustainability of the natural resources farmers and ranchers depend on to produce the food and fiber we all depend on.

For Arizona’s farmers, the Colorado River, Arizona’s most important surface water source, provides irrigation water for crops across Arizona. In Yuma, Arizona, the source of 95% of the nation’s winter lettuce production, the Colorado River is used to irrigate these high-value seasonal crops. Prolonged drought threatens the health of the river and the health of these key industries.

Recent data from a self-reported survey of our members has demonstrates that in 2022, there has been a 34% reduction in planted acres and a 39% decline in livestock herds, all attributable to drought. The survey indicates a 39% decline in overall surface water delivery. In Central Arizona – such as in Pinal County – there are estimates that nearly 50% of agricultural land has been



followed due to recent cuts on the Colorado River. These numbers contribute to an average of 32% in farm revenue across our state. For an industry that contributes 23.3 billion dollars to our state's economy, these numbers are grim and showcase that without both proactive and reactive strategies to address drought, we are undermining the ability for our nation to produce a safe, affordable, and efficient food supply.

Drought also contributes to what is perhaps the most visible natural resource catastrophe in the West: the dramatic increase in frequency and intensity of wildfires.

There are over 5,800 grazing permittees with over 1.2 million head of cattle permitted on the National Forest System. The Bureau of Land Management administers nearly 18,000 grazing permits. In Arizona, the State Land Trust administers grazing leases on over 7 million acres of non-urban acreage. To put it simply, thousands of ranchers across the West use livestock grazing as a tool to manage working landscapes while converting millions of acres of plant cellulose into a digestible food source for human consumption. They are the ever-present boots on the ground. They are directly impacted by the wildfire crisis gripping the American West, where wildfire has increased 20-fold in the last 30 years in over-grown forests and the parched landscape of an enduring Mega-drought.

The last three years have been three of the worst fire seasons in Arizona history, providing a dire reminder of the need for effective forest management. Not only do catastrophic wildfires threaten human life and property, but they displace people from the land, devastate rural communities and economies, destroy valuable resources, and impact the ability of watersheds to function properly – further amplifying the impacts of drought on the larger landscape.

Many times in the history of land management in this country, starting in the early 20th century, ranchers have pivoted our priorities and reassessed our methodologies in fire response and forest management. Unfortunately, our industry again at cross-roads. Last year, the Forest Service has launched a 10-year strategy called “Confronting the Wildfire Crisis: A Strategy for Protecting Communities and Improving Resilience in America’s Forests,” which will combine a historic amount of funding with scientific research and collaborative planning to increase forest



treatments. Noticeably absent in all these conversations, commissions and roundtables are ranchers.

The need to reverse decades of over-growth in our forests, combined with the slow-moving bureaucracy of fire planning and underfunded programs have placed pressure on agency administrators to attempt to manage wildfires – uncontrollable upon ignition - for natural resource benefit rather than full suppression. In tracking the largest fires in the Southwest from 2013 to 2020, the Southwest Fire Consortium reports that on average, only about 53% of fire response was full suppression, with all other activity managed fire response or some other strategy.

Although this crisis was created because of timber harvest neglect and lack of fire on the landscape, attempting to reverse decades of neglect under the current climate circumstances -- with real-time decision making that is complex and often by fire officials in unfamiliar environments -- will and is resulting in unintended consequences to all resources and forest users. The findings of a recent Mixed Method Review paper by PhD candidate, Stephen Fillmore out of the University of Idaho, reveals that there are over 100 factors involved in the decision framework of whether a fire should be “managed” for resource benefit or fully suppressed. How can agency administrators or firefighters on the ground, possibly be expected to make such complex decisions in the tense moments of fire behavior?

The exponential increase in burned acres every year has resulted in fires becoming more dangerous, more destructive, and more widespread across multiple ownership boundaries. This has made fighting fires more complicated and therefore created the obvious need to re-evaluate communication gaps and planning among stakeholders. The decisions regarding managed fire lack transparency; ranchers, permittees, lessees, and public land managers are included only marginally, despite their extensive knowledge of the range conditions, water supplies, locations of outbuildings and cattle, and other key information. There are inconsistencies among regions and districts within regions. With historic investments recently allocated to prevention and suppression, it is especially important that members of Congress learn from previous experiences and implement changes.



But just as the Southwest has unique challenges to overcome, it also has unique opportunities to contribute in the way of solutions. Policy that addresses proactive measures to prevent wildfires and programs to respond to the aftermath of drought and wildfires cannot be one-size-fits-all. Any given policy may or may not work for the landscape, industry, and ecology present in that region. Every farm and ranch are unique according to its financial capabilities and the dynamics of its resources.

Prescribed fire is an invaluable tool, which brings together stakeholders and allows for building community support while incorporating the use of pre-fire resource tools, maximizing fire behavior control, and planning for rehabilitation measures post-fire. However, when used incorrectly and without proper consultation it damages the relationships with agencies and stakeholders. I was recently told that a prescribed fire near our ranch this spring was prioritized due to the current attention of the 10-year strategy but had been in the planning stages for 10 years. That is unacceptable.

As mentioned above, grazing is a critical preventative forest management tool. As we look towards solutions to wildfires, we must urge the U.S. Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management to allow for flexible implementation of their grazing regulations. Producers should NOT be removed from their grazing allotments due to drought without flexibility in making this determination. This eliminates a critical, efficient, and effective fire management tool at a time that we need it most.

Now more than ever, local resource managers, those impacted the most by wildfire, need to be present in the conversation.

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads 'Stefanie A. Smallhouse'.

Stefanie Smallhouse, President
Arizona Farm Bureau Federation