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Testimony
Before the Committee on Resources
United States House of Representatives

Hearing on Wildfires and Their Aftermath: Protecting Communities, Watersheds, and
Wildlife
October 4, 2006

To Whom It May Concern:

I am writing this testimony for the scheduled oversight hearing to be held by the United States House of Representatives Subcommittee on Forests and Forest Health regarding “Wildfires and Their Aftermath: Protecting Communities, Watersheds, and Wildlife” to be held in Okanogan Washington on October 4, 2006. My comments will be specific to the economic affects that the Tripod Complex (Okanogan County WA) and the Columbia Complex (Columbia County WA) Wildfires had on cattle producers and their operations.

Some background is in order. Ranchers in these counties are highly dependent on public lands to make their operations economically viable units. Typically a ranching family will own private base property that is their home, a place to have working facilities for handling cattle, cropland to grow winter feed, and grazing lands that are used when cattle are not on public lands. These public lands may consist of ownership on both Federal and State levels controlled by a host of agencies. Depending on area and range dynamics ranchers may be on public lands anywhere from two to six months, most often in the summer months.

This summer, huge wildfires in Okanogan and Columbia counties burnt across Private State, and Federal lands that are used by cattle ranchers for their livelihoods. Fourteen cattlemen in Okanogan County grazing over 8,000 head on U.S. Forest Service and Washington State Department of Natural Resources permits were affected by the Tripod Complex fire. Twenty-two cattlemen grazing 1,925 head were affected by the Columbia Complex fire. There is a wide variation in the short and long term affects that these fires are having on these cattlemen as information is still being collected and digested with agency personnel. I believe though, that from conversations I have had with cattlemen and public land managers, some economic analysis can be made at this time.

Economics in the most basic form can be broken down into revenue and expense categories. On the revenue side, wildfires as large and explosive as these, can obviously lead to direct loss of livestock and property and in extreme cases loss of human life.

Fortunately, at the time of writing this no human life has been lost, but livestock was lost in Columbia County. It is too early to know whether any cattle were lost in Okanogan County until the fall roundup is completed. Ranchers affected by large wildfires, can see a lifetime of work disappear in a short time. Even the best of insurance does little to compensate for the loss of cattle, property, and a way of life that has been passed on through generations. Usually it is a prohibitive cost to cover all of the risk with insurance. Most ranchers I have talked with have had to move their cattle prematurely to protect them from harm. If this move was made to less productive pastures some weight loss may occur. Some have had to sell calves earlier than normal leading to reduced earnings. Others have started to reduce herds resulting in the loss of future earnings. Future earnings may be affected by the inability to use pastures that cattle are familiar with or management systems operators are not used to employing, leading to decreased productivity, either through lower weight gain or decreased reproductive rates, for examples. The economic impacts to individual cattlemen are magnified through out local rural economies by loss of supply sales and ultimately loss of employment.

On the expense side, a host of short and long-term costs from the wildfires can have dramatic affects on a rancher's bottom line. In the short term a rancher may lose valuable genetics that they have developed to be productive on the lands they graze their cattle. Cattle developed for a certain environment can not easily be replaced. Early movement of cattle from high mountain pastures is difficult when their internal clock tells them it is not time to go home, increasing time and effort, thus increasing expenses. Movement to new, unfamiliar pastures can result in less productivity, plus additional expense in travel costs the further you get away from home. Some rancher I have talked with have already started feeding forages stored for the winter use which will mean additional costs when winter does arrive. Long term affects to cattlemen from wildfires will depend on whether they will be able to return to pastures that were burned? Some ranchers report that, depending on final analysis by agency personnel, they may not return to their permits until the 2009. This means they will either face herd reduction, herd dispersion or finding pastures for two seasons to replace that portion of the year affected by the fires. These wildfires have caused great loss to range improvements, especially fence and water developments that are necessary to good management strategies. Some natural boundaries have been opened up so improvements not needed before will have to be added to prevent drift of cattle between permits or within allotments. Watersheds burned by these fires will have to go through a restoration process before their water and soil functions are back to normal. Increase soil erosion and lower water retention may cause increased expenses to cattlemen whose lower elevation base property is damaged by run-off or decreasing crop production necessary for winter feeding. Some of these property owners have worked with NRCS and local conservation districts to implement conservation measures to protect riparian habitat. These projects may be at risk for damage or increased maintenance costs due to the affect that is sometimes harder to put into dollars and cents. Increased stress to ranch families can not always be measured in a strictly economic sense. Restoration expenses such as straw mulching will increase the value of straw, affecting ranchers many miles away that use that forage as a part of their winter feeding program. Local business that supports the ranching community will suffer

if there is decreased revenue or money is directed away from typical purchases. Some businesses will benefit from restoration projects though.

I would like to make some closing comments. As a whole, the ranchers I have talked to are optimistic that they can continue to operate. Only when the full analysis is received and recommendations are made from agency personnel will the ranchers know the extent to which their permits have been affected. Time is of the essence. It is of utmost importance that these cattlemen know what lies in store for them in both the near and distant future. Management strategies take time to formulate. In the short term, they need to know how to take care of their cattle. As an industry, large scale cattle reductions can have a profound affect on markets. Vendors and lenders dependent on our economic viability like to know we can meet our obligations. Future fires, which can and will happen if forest conditions continue to exist, will put more pressure on cattlemen as a whole. Solutions to benefit ranchers include timely grazing of CRP lands in close proximity to their base operations with no penalty to the CRP contract holder and no fee to the grazer. Disaster payments may be in order to qualified individuals if they have to feed hay on an extended basis. Additional monies may be needed to monitor range conditions so permittees can return to their pastures as soon as possible. Timber salvage would be helpful to restoring the forest and would prevent future fuel build-ups. These fires burnt areas with ESA listed species, such as the Canada Lynx, Steelhead and Bull Trout. The relationship between ESA listed species and cattle grazing has been tenuous at best and I would hope the good work cattlemen have done to reduce this conflict will not go unnoticed. Money may need to be budgeted to help recover both grazing and wildlife to these wildfire areas.

Thank you for letting me comment on the economic impact of these wildfires to the cattle industry. Especially Congresswomen Cathy McMorris and her office and the Washington Cattlemen's Association Executive Vice President Jack Field for their diligent work to help the industry work through this wildfire season.

Sincerely,

Vic Stokes, President
Okanogan County Cattlemen's Association