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**Testimony of**

**Tom Spezze  
National Director of Field Conservation  
The National Wild Turkey Federation**

*on*

**Western Wildfires and Forest Management**

**Before the  
GOP Forum to the House Committee on Natural Resources  
United States House of Representatives**

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## Introduction

Members of the House Natural Resources Committee, I am Tom Spezze, National Director of Field Conservation for the National Wild Turkey Federation (NWTF), and I appreciate the opportunity to speak with you today as you look for solutions to the ever-deteriorating forest conditions and raging wildfires in the western United States.

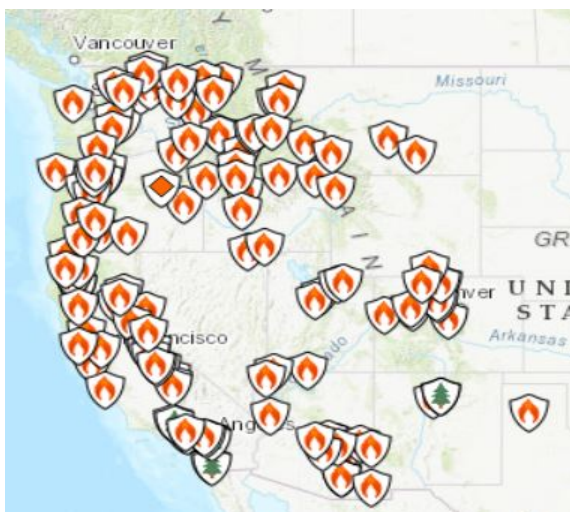
Founded in 1973, the National Wild Turkey Federation is a national non-profit wildlife conservation organization dedicated to the conservation of the wild turkey and preservation of our hunting heritage. The National Wild Turkey Federation is 230,000 members strong and maintains local chapters in every state. With the successful restoration of the wild turkey complete, the National Wild Turkey Federation has recognized the importance of quality habitat for wildlife conservation and its significance to our hunting tradition. Our efforts today are largely focused on creating and maintaining healthy forests through active management.

Unlike most nonprofits, the NWTF does not simply advocate for our cause, we put conservation directly on the ground through serious forestry work on private and federal public lands in some of the most important landscapes across the country. The NWTF has over 50 professional conservation staff located across the nation, including 28 professional foresters. Our staff work daily with state agencies, federal agencies, and private landowners to implement forest management and other wildlife habitat projects. Since 1985, we have helped to conserve or enhance more than 20 million acres nationwide.

The NWTF has a long-standing formal partnership with the U.S. Forest Service (USFS) dating to 1986. Together, we have worked to deliver thousands of projects benefiting wildlife and wildlife-based recreation. The NWTF has been a leader in stewardship contracting, implementing one of the first stewardship agreements on national forest land nearly two decades ago. Since then, we have partnered on over 120 successful stewardship agreements scattered across all USFS Regions. This important forestry work demonstrates the benefits of collaboration and has resulted in management of thousands of acres of sustainable forests and enhanced wildlife habitat. In 2019, the NWTF was ranked 4<sup>th</sup> nationally of all purchasers of federal timber by volume and frequently ranks in the top five. We understand first-hand the power of collaboration and the impact that working together on Shared Stewardship

can achieve for forest management. Properly scaled and active forest management results in healthy forests that burn less, slows climate change, and benefits wildlife, people and communities. Working alongside state and Federal partners, we see the challenges public agencies and private landowners face when implementing active management on the ground.

The NWTF's professionally trained biologists and foresters know that forest diversity at the landscape level is the key to achieve robust species diversity. Wildlife managers consider active management the best solution to meet the habitat requirements of the largest variety of species. Throughout the U.S., we are losing this habitat diversity, and in many cases, it is because our forests are becoming more homogenized and over-mature. Active management creates young forest habitat, which provides food sources, nesting habitat, and hiding places for forest-dependent wildlife. Western forests also are being significantly impacted by beetle infestations and wildfire burn scars that have greatly diminished wildlife habitat, water quality, recreation opportunities and the security of surrounding communities. The U.S. Forest Service and the Natural Resources Conservation Service have recognized the need for young forest habitat, and thanks to members of Congress, those agencies provide funding and prioritize resources to increase forest management at a grander scale than ever before.



### **Catastrophic Wildfires**

Unfortunately, we have become accustomed to increasingly devastating wildfire seasons. Poor management of our forests across public and private lands is the predominate cause of the “catastrophic” nature of these fires. They are not only damaging to the ecosystem during the fire but result in years of diminished water quality, wildlife habitat, access for recreation and the increased vulnerability of communities downstream.

More than 68 million acres of forests have burned in the past decade with over 10 million acres in 2020 alone. As wildfires continue to rage in the West, forestry practices championed by Mr. Westerman in the Resilient Federal Forests Act and supported by members on both sides of the aisle are needed to change the status quo. Congress must enact bipartisan policies that help increase the pace and scale of federal forest management – and keep pressure on USDA to use the authorities they have to catch up. Wildfire fighting alone will never fix this problem. The debate about whether western forests are in poor condition due to climate change or forest practices has been settled: It is both. We can certainly change the latter, sooner rather than later. ([www.inciweb.nwcg.gov](http://www.inciweb.nwcg.gov))

- In California, 7,718 fires have burned 4.7 million acres, or about 5% of the state, making 2020 the largest wildfire season recorded in California history.
- In Colorado, the 139,007-acre Pine Gulch Fire became the biggest wildfire in state history, but it was soon topped by the 170,163-acre East Troublesome fire and quickly eclipsed by the Cameron Peak Fire, which is now the largest in Colorado history at 206,977 acres. All of Colorado's 20 largest wildfires on record have occurred since 2002, with the 3 largest in 2020.
- In Oregon, the 2020 wildfire season was one of the most destructive on record. Fires there have burned more than one million acres and have killed at least 10 people.

### **NWTF and Shared Stewardship**

NWTF is THE leader among conservation organizations in advancing the USDA's **Shared Stewardship Initiative**, launched in 2018. In February 2019, at the NWTF National Convention, Sport Show and Conservation Conference, NWTF CEO Becky Humphries and Forest Service Chief Vicki Christiansen challenged each other to find a place in the West to create a pilot for what Shared Stewardship could look like when partners come together in an “all hands, all lands, and all brands” approach to forest restoration. As a result, we co-convened the **Rocky Mountain Restoration Initiative (RMRI)** in May 2019. Chief Christiansen and Ms. Humphries hosted in Denver a group of 12 highly influential leaders, who committed to a shared investment and approach to landscape-level forest restoration through Shared Stewardship. Colorado was chosen because there was a robust collaboration of

forest partnerships in place, and partners were willing to drop jurisdictional boundaries to do forest restoration in the highest priority landscapes at a pace and scale that would prove to be transformational and lead the West in Shared Stewardship.

As of today, RMRI ([www.restoringtherockies.org](http://www.restoringtherockies.org)) is represented by 40 organizations and over 170 partners and is guided by 4 shared values: Water, Healthy Forests/Wildlife Habitat, Robust Recreation and Resilient Communities. RMRI is focused on 3 highest-priority landscapes, along with the cross-cutting issues of biomass, work force development and social license. Southwest Colorado was chosen as the number one priority landscape with a 10-year goal of impacting 300,000 acres of forested landscapes. With 2020 being the first implementation season of RMRI and during a pandemic, SW Colorado realized more than 31,000 acres of treated forests staying on task for the 10-year goal.

The NWTF, through partnerships like RMRI, plans to change the severity of western wildfires, while improving wildlife habitat through transformational, landscape scale projects.

**Western Shared Stewardship and Stewardship Agreements** In 2020, the NWTF launched the **Western Shared Stewardship Initiative (WSSI)**, designed to bring private partners into the investment strategy for funding RMRI-like efforts in other states across the West where a Shared Stewardship MOU has been signed. Several highly influential partners in the outdoor sporting and timber industries have invested in WSSI and provided a funding source to create a shared investment of private and public dollars that will be leveraged at or above a 5:1 ratio. The strategy of WSSI is to incentivize and transform traditional forest restoration work into a truly scaled-up forest restoration effort with a Shared Stewardship approach to chip away at the 80 million acres of USFS lands in need of active management.

NWTF has expanded **stewardship agreements in the west** to a more Shared Stewardship and landscape scale deliverable approach. In addition to RMRI and stewardship agreements on the GMUG national forest in Region 2, the NWTF is engaged in these USFS Regions:

**USFS Region 1** - Montana, emerging Shared Stewardship approach to a stewardship agreement between the USFS and NWTF to address Governor Gianforte's challenge to the USFS to double the amount of yearly timber harvest in 2021 and forward.

**USFS Region 3** - New Mexico contains NWTF's longest standing forest stewardship agreement, the Bundled Bluewater/Zuni Mountain Stewardship Agreement, now at 10 years, 10,000 acres and \$10 million dollars invested.

**USFS Region 4** - Utah, Provo Watershed Stewardship Agreement engages partners through the Watershed Restoration Initiative across all venues, public and private for a shared investment approach to forest restoration.

**USFS Region 5** – California, El Dorado National Forest is in its 5<sup>th</sup> year of a stewardship agreement with NWTF for an aggressive fuels-reduction program in the fire-prone reaches of northern California.

**Region 6** - Pacific Northwest, longstanding stewardship agreements on the Malheur and Ochoco National Forests to treat an overburden of fuels and enhance wildlife habitat.

## **Water**

In 2019, the NWTF formally recognized the obvious but untold story of the connectivity between forest health and water. The NWTF hired its first-ever Western Water Specialist to shine a light on the importance of watershed health as it relates to healthy forests across West. As a keystone of the aforementioned Rocky Mountain Restoration Initiative, Colorado is known as the “Headwaters State” for the 4 major river basins of the Colorado, Rio Grande, Platte and Arkansas Rivers. These critical rivers have headwaters that originate on national forests and provide water to 18 downstream states, 2 countries and 170 million users. The Western Water Specialist position has been key to bringing non-traditional water partners into the conservation conversation as well as into the middle of RMRI and Shared Stewardship. In addition, the NWTF now has created new partnerships and is engaged in the Colorado River Drought Contingency Plan, the 4 States Drought Plan, the Colorado Water Plan implementation, Colorado Forest and Water Alliance



and Colorado Water Congress. All of these water partnerships realize and are focused on a forest health component with NWTF a leader in those conversations.

### **Western Governors Association**

In 2021, the NWTF became a Platinum Sponsor for the Western Governors Association (WGA) which represents 19 western states. As such, the NWTF has been directly engaged in the conversations that surround wildfires and water in the West led by Idaho Governor, Brad Little as Chair and Colorado Governor, Jared Polis as Vice Chair. NWTF's opportunity with WGA will elevate the discussions with Secretary Vilsack and newly appointed USFS Chief Randy Moore in investment in our national forests through use of Great American Outdoors Act funding as well as the Resilient Federal Forests Act being shepherded by Congressman Westerman.

### **Conclusion**

As today's discussion has shown, NWTF's longstanding partnership with the U.S. Forest Service has supported our strong commitment to addressing the emergency of our forest conditions, the wildfire paradigm, and impacts to the quality of life in the western United States. The NWTF leads the way in supporting the sustainable and active management of our national forests, changing the trend of catastrophic wildfire and impacts to water in the West while meeting our mission to conserve the wild turkey and preserve our hunting heritage. The NWTF strongly encourages Congress to seek out a collaborative, bi-partisan and bicameral approach to furthering a truly transformational, landscape-scaled focus to forest management through the funding already supported by Congress through the Great American Outdoors Act and now the pending Resilient Federal Forests Act and potentially through a bipartisan infrastructure bill.

Previous generations of federal agency and national leadership have attempted this and talked about current forest needs and what the future forest condition should look like for sustainable water, habitats, recreation, and resilient communities. We owe it to future generations to set aside party differences and to leave behind a conservation legacy we can be proud of. Mr. Westerman and members of this forum have much to be proud of for pressing forward with this important work for our future.



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I am deeply grateful and have been honored to have this opportunity to speak today. Thank you for your time, consideration, and desire to work on these critical issues. I am happy to answer any questions.