Testimony
of
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Department of the Interior
For the Field Hearing
on
Issues Affecting Forest Health and Management in Eastern Washington –
National Forests, Tribal ands and Local Communities
Before the
Forests and Forest Health Subcommittee of the Resources Committee
United States House of Representatives
at Colville, Washington

August 29, 2005

Good morning, Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee. I am honored to be here today to provide testimony about the Indian Forestry Program. My name is John Vitello and I am a Senior Forester with the Bureau of Indian Affairs' (BIA) Office of Trust Services in Washington, D.C. My testimony this morning will provide an overview of the Indian Forestry Program with appropriate Powerpoint slides, which are provided as part of the record.

History of Indian Forestry

Before and during the 19th Century, Indian timber was exploited similar to the exploitation of natural resources that occurred on the public domain. There was widespread illegal timber cutting on both Indian and public domain lands. On the Indian lands, Indian agents, not foresters, administered tribal timber sales. Planning for forest sustainability and benefits to Indian people were largely absent.

In 1909, funds were appropriated to the Department of the Interior (Department) for the first time, which were dedicated to the management of Indian forests. The very next year, legislation created the Indian Forest Service within the Department. The Indian Forest Service was a precursor to what is known today as the BIA Division of Forestry. The Act of 1910 (25 U.S.C. § 406-407) also authorized timber sales on Indian lands and the regulation of Indian forests.

The post World War II era taught many tribes the importance of sustained yield and the benefits that the harvesting of timber could provide to their people. In addition to tribal revenue, these benefits include employment, infrastructure development, and secondary manufacturing of forest products with tribal sawmills.

Self-Determination

The policy of "Self-Determination" was passed in 1975 (Public Law 93-638). The Act called for increased involvement of tribal leadership in all decision-making, including forestry. In 1994, Self-Determination was further modified by adding the "Self-Governance" amendments to the Act. The Self-Governance amendments provide for the transfer of Federal authority toward Indian authority over programs and services. The transition from Federal authority to tribally managed Indian forest resources has been successful. The BIA now manages about 25 percent of the trust forest acres without tribal co-management, while tribes manage about 21 percent of their forest acres with minimal federal oversight. The remaining acres, nearly 54 percent of the commercial Indian forest, are managed jointly as a partnership between tribes and the BIA.

Befitting to this co-management scenario, nearly 50 percent of the BIA Forestry appropriations are converted to tribal dollars through self-determination contracts and self-governance compacts. In fiscal year 2005, that total appropriation was slightly more than $51 million.

Self-Determination has not changed the way federal environmental law is applied on Indian forest lands. The BIA and tribes must still fully comply with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), the Endangered Species Act (ESA), the National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA), and other federal laws, as well as tribal laws and ordinances.

Current Program

Most of our responsibilities lie west of the Mississippi River. Here in the Northwest, it is apparent that there are some

substantial forested acres on Indian reservations, particularly in Washington State. There are about 18 million acres of Indian forest lands in trust. Of this total, about 6 million acres are considered commercial forests, where forest management activities are performed. We currently estimate that there are 43 billion board feet of standing forest inventory on these commercial forests. In a sustainable fashion, we harvest less than 1.5 percent of this total inventory each year. This harvest is slightly less than the annual board foot growth that these forests are increasing by.

Our latest figures show a reforestation need of nearly 400 thousand acres; and we have identified nearly 900 thousand acres that may benefit from commercial thinning or other treatments.

Accomplishments

In fiscal year 2004 the Indian Forestry Program harvested 597 million board feet for a return of $83 million to tribal owners. Approximately 100 thousand acres of forest were treated silviculturally as a result of the commercial harvest. In addition, 40 thousand acres were thinned, 21 thousand acres reforested, and there were 192 thousand acres of hazardous fuel reduction treatments.

Over the last five years, the Indian Forestry Program has averaged an annual harvest of 605 million board feet with about $84.5 million in revenue to the tribal owners. We have also averaged 41 thousand acres of pre-commercial thinning and 15 thousand acres of reforestation.

Over the past eleven years, we harvested between 73 percent and 83 percent of what was allowable through our management plans nationwide. There are many reasons for not reaching the allowable harvest. For example: national or regional market conditions that don't allow for the marketing of the full product; and in some cases, the lack of tribal desire to harvest at their allowable level. Our program, however, has been very consistent through the years with regards to the level of output.

The Northwest Region by far surpasses the timber revenue generated in other regions for tribes. The Northwest Region contributed 77 percent of the revenue to tribal owners over the last five years because of the higher level of harvesting in the region, but also because of the higher valued products growing on reservations in the Northwest.

There are many facets to the Indian Forestry Program. These include: silvicultural evaluations and prescriptions; timber sale planning and harvest; forest development thinning and planting; woodland management; forest protection from insect, disease, and trespass; fuels management and wildland fire fighting. Some tribes have even begun to market the carbon sequestered in their growing trees to the global carbon trading market.

The cornerstone of the program is the forest inventory process and the resulting forest management planning. The congressionally mandated Indian Forest Management Assessment (Public Law 101-630), an analysis of the program performed every ten years by an independent team of forestry experts, concluded that our continuous forest inventory program is among the best in the forest industry. The program provides a trend analysis of what is happening to the forest over the long term.

The inventory process leads to the forest management plan. Whether it be a stand alone plan, or imbedded within an integrated resources management plan, the forest management plan for each reservation embodies the tribal vision for that forest so that forest managers will know what each tribe's goals and objectives are for their forest. Input from the tribal public is critical and an integral part of the forest management planning process.

This year, we have developed a comprehensive strategy whereby every forested Indian reservation in the United States will have its own current forest management plan within the next ten years. This is an ambitious undertaking that has not been done historically. The Administration committed to the undertaking as a result of findings from a Program Assessment Rating Tool review in FY 2003. An independent assessment team agreed with the recommendation.

Conclusion

Landscape archeologists and historians know that many of the forests of this continent have been historically fire adapted, in part because American Indians used fire to manage these areas. These fire adapted forests are now in poor health and at risk for catastrophic events because they haven't been managed with fire in recent history.

The Indian Forestry program is very active in forest management and treating the forest. Perhaps forestry on Indian reservations can serve as an example that you can have active forest management while preserving traditional time-

honored values in the forests and the tribal vision.

Thank you for the opportunity to present testimony today and I will be happy to answer any questions you may have.