Opening Statement - Congressman Greg Walden
National Fire Plan Oversight Hearing
Subcommittee on Forests and Forest Health
July 31, 2001

Thank you Mr. Chairman. I want to thank you for affording me the opportunity to sit on this subcommittee today. I'd also like to commend you for holding this important oversight hearing on the progress of implementing fuel hazard reduction projects prescribed under the National Fire Plan. As a member who represents a district that is nearly 56% federally owned and has all or part of 12 national forests, this is an issue that is vital to both me and the communities that I represent.

Mr. Chairman, from the Wallowa-Whitman and Malheur National Forests in eastern Oregon to the Fremont National Forest in south central Oregon, the 2nd Congressional District is home to 12 national forests, in addition to substantial holdings of state and private forest lands. Unfortunately, Mr. Chairman, due to years of poor land management policy by the federal government, many of the forests in my district have become overcrowded and thus ripe for a cataclysmic blowup similar to those that occurred in Idaho and Montana last year and that we just witnessed last week in Wyoming. I can't emphasize enough how important it is for us to proceed with the fuel reduction projects made possible by the National Fire Plan. Mr. Chairman, I saw firsthand the different ecological effects a fire has on areas of forest that have undergone a mechanical treatment versus those that have not when I took a tour of areas in the Deschutes National Forest affected by the Newberry Fire of August, 2000.

Since pictures speak louder than words, I would like to show the subcommittee some pictures taken of the forest within the Newberry fire area before and after this fire had run its course.

- In the first picture you'll notice an area of the Deschutes National Forest that has become severely overgrown, which is regrettably common in the forests of Eastern Oregon and Eastern Washington. Absent any mechanical treatment, the ponderosa pine, like the picture illustrates, gets choked with young trees, competing species and a lot of dead debris creating a flammable understory that is so shaded that seedlings can't grow. If a fire were to occur, the accumulated fuels could explode into an inferno.
- That's exactly what we see in this second illustration where a fire has raged through this area of the Deschutes killing the ponderosa. The fire has burned so long and hot that it has killed animals and underground roots, and the superheated soil no longer absorbs rain, causing erosion.
- Let's compare that devastation with an area of the Deschutes National Forest that has been mechanically treated. As you can see, due to this treatment a healthy ponderosa pine forest has developed consisting of widely spaced trees and brush. The forest floor contains only modest amounts of dead fuel and wood. If a fire were to travel through this area, it would kill only a few large trees while cleansing the understory of debris.
- And as this final picture illustrates, such a mechanically treated forest can recover from a fire of this type because the fast-paced fire doesn't superheat the soil, thereby letting animals and underground roots survive.

Although maintaining a healthy forest is our primary goal in performing mechanical treatments on our national forests, we can't overlook the ancillary effects that these treatments have on watershed health. My friends in the environmental community often forget how sediment runoff from a devastated area of forest made hydrophobic by a severe burn can affect a nearby watershed. Such a situation exists in Wallowa County, located in the extreme northeast corner of my district. In 1990 the Canal Fire devastated approximately 18,000 acres of forest-land making the soil acutely hydrophobic. To this very day, a tremendous amount of sediment is washed into nearby streams each time a significant rain event moves through the area. This erosion not only delays the successful rehabilitation of the forest, but it has a detrimental effect on the recovery of listed species of fish.

Mr. Chairman, I'd like to close my remarks by briefly commenting on the potential effects that mechanical treatments have for biomass cogeneration not only in my district and throughout my state, but in many other areas of the country as well. Disposing of the biomass that stockpiles on these lands from overcrowded and dying timber stands, timber sales that actually materialize, and thinning projects is not only environmentally sound, but represents a valuable resource if used properly. Converting forest biomass to energy is a beneficial source of renewable energy production - particularly during our national energy crunch. Furthermore, it can provide at least a slight economic boost in many of our struggling rural communities that were once able to rely on consistent employment and revenue from well-managed timber sales. Many of the communities in my district continue to suffer from the decline of timber sales on state and federal lands. Providing incentives for biomass cogeneration through fuel hazard reduction would provide a welcome economic boost to many communities in Oregon, while benefiting the environment by simultaneously reducing the chance of severe wildfires.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I yield back the balance of my time.

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