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BEFORE THE

COMMITTEE ON RESOURCES

UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

ON REDUCING THE THREAT OF CATASTROPHIC WILDFIRE TO CENTRAL

OREGON COMMUNITIES AND THE SURROUNDING ENVIRONMENT

REDMOND, OREGON

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Mr. Chairman:

We appreciate your invitation to participate in today's field hearing to discuss the threat of catastrophic wildfires to central Oregon communities. Redmond, Oregon, is an appropriate setting to discuss efforts to improve the health of our Nation's forests and rangelands given its proximity to the Deschutes and Ochoco National Forests, the Crooked River National Grasslands, and to approximately 1.6 million acres of Bureau of Land Management (BLM) public lands. As we have testified in recent hearings on forest health before the House of Representatives and the Senate, the Departments of Agriculture and the Interior strongly support the President's Healthy Forests Initiative and H.R. 1904, the Healthy Forests Restoration Act of 2003.

Background

We are living in a time of great issues and great debate. Some people and organizations argue that timber harvest levels represent the greatest threat to public forests. However loudly voiced or strongly held these views may be, they do not portray the reality of the management needs of public forests now or over the next 100 years. Today, the removal of timber and other active vegetative management efforts on federal lands before wildfires occur, coupled with sensible suppression actions when wildfires do occur, can lead to improvements in wildlife habitat; enhance watershed and ecosystem conditions; and reduce hazardous fuels. These active efforts can also address key issues associated with America's forests, grasslands and rangelands – the protection of communities from catastrophic wildfire through the reduction of the harmful

effects of destructive invasive species and pathogens.

The need for action to restore our Nation's public forests and rangelands to long-term health has never been greater. Catastrophic fires are just one consequence of the deteriorating state of forest and rangeland health that now affects approximately 190 million acres of public land, an area triple the size of Oregon. Last year, wildfires burned about seven million acres of public and private lands across the Nation. This resulted in the destruction of over 800 primary residences and the evacuation of tens of thousands of people from hundreds of communities. Oregon alone saw nearly 1 million acres burned, well above the ten-year annual average of 308,000 acres burned for the entire State. In addition, wildfires in Oregon destroyed 131 structures and 27 residences last year. Collectively, central Oregon (including the Deschutes and Ochoco National Forests and the BLM Prineville District) experienced 72,000 acres of forests and public lands burned, more than double the ten-year annual average. In addition to the direct costs of suppressing fire and the loss of property and infrastructure, the other economic impacts to small communities can be devastating.

Although wildland fire activity so far this year has been less than the average of the last ten years, we have seen some indications of the potential for destructive wildfires. As the fire season pushes north we are continuing to see large fires in Idaho and Montana. Currently there are 4 large fires totaling over 26,000 acres on Federal lands in Oregon. While this fire season has not yet produced the severe and enormous fires Oregon experienced in 2002, the on-going drought coupled with a recent series of wet and dry thunderstorms have significantly increased the potential for fire activity. All indications are that given the current conditions, the potential for large and severe fires in Oregon continues to exist.

An underlying issue is that many of our forests have become overgrown and unhealthy. We don't want to oversimplify—many forests are healthy, and some forest types were always dense. On the public forests, millions of acres adapted to frequent fires are at risk from wildland fires that could compromise human safety and ecosystem health.

Ponderosa pine is a prime example. Historically, most ponderosa pine forests were relatively open, with a few dozen trees per acre. Today, they might have hundreds or even thousands of trees per acre. In a drought, all those trees can fuel a catastrophic fire resulting in the potential loss of homes, communities, municipal water sources, and wildlife habitat. It will take decades of action to restore those forests, provided our society is willing to focus on this issue and commit the needed resources.

Federal forests and rangelands across the country are also facing unusually high threats from the spread of invasive species and insect attacks. Insects and pathogens have historically existed in our forests and rangelands. However, the frequency, extent, and timing of recent outbreaks are out of the ordinary. Changes in tree stand density, as well as in species composition and structure, due to decades of excluding or immediately suppressing fire, the lack of active management, and extended drought, are factors that have significantly affected insect infestation outbreak patterns. The result is the death of millions of trees across California, Utah, Arkansas, Michigan, Minnesota, the Mid-Atlantic States and the South. Further, the checkerboard pattern of land ownership in Oregon presents more challenges for federal land managers. Fires and insect infestations that begin on private or public lands can spread to the other quickly causing significant property damage and posing threats to public health and safety.

Healthy Forests Initiative

Recognizing the existing crisis, President Bush proposed the Healthy Forests Initiative (HFI) in August 2002. This initiative is based upon a common-sense approach to reducing the threat of catastrophic wildfires by restoring forest and rangeland health. Our goal is to ensure the long-term safety and health of communities and natural resources in our care. Our responsibility is to ensure the long-term health of our forests and rangelands for the use, benefit and enjoyment of our citizens and for generations to come. The President directed Federal agencies to develop several administrative and legislative tools to restore deteriorating Federal lands to healthy conditions and assist in executing core components of the National Fire Plan, established in 2000. Since the President's announcement in August of 2002, the Secretaries have taken several administrative actions to implement components of HFI, which include the following:

· Endangered Species Act Guidance – On December 11, 2002, the Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) and National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration Fisheries (NOAA Fisheries) issued joint guidance that allows multiple projects to be grouped into one consultation and provides direction on how to consider and balance potential short- and long-term beneficial and adverse impacts to endangered species when evaluating projects. The goal is to

recognize that project-specific, short-term adverse impacts on species need to be weighed against the longer-term watershed level benefits to those and other species that such projects will achieve.

· CEQ Memorandum & Model Environmental Assessment Projects – CEQ Chairman Connaughton issued guidance addressing the preparation of model environmental assessments (Model EA) for fuels treatment projects that improve administrative processes. These guidelines are now being applied on both Forest Service (FS) and Department of the Interior (DOI) agency model fuels-treatment projects. Some of these Model EA's are now out for public comment, including the BLM Rogue River Hazardous Fuels Reduction Project, located within the Hellgate Recreation Section of the Rogue National Wild & Scenic River. The purpose of the Rogue River Model Project is to reduce the hazardous fuels load on approximately 8,000 acres of public and private land comprising the Hellgate Recreation Section. There are approximately 190 residences within this area. The proposal and analysis assume public participation, yet there is no obligation for a landowner to participate. Scoping responses have indicated a broad level of public support. On BLM-managed lands, contingent upon fire season work restrictions, project implementation is anticipated to start in the fall of 2003. The BLM Medford District Office anticipates completing this project within two years after beginning its work.

· Appeals Process Reform – Both the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) and DOI made rule changes designed to encourage early and meaningful public participation in project planning, while continuing to provide the public an opportunity to seek review or to appeal project decisions. This enables issues to be resolved earlier in the project planning process, allowing for a more expedited application of hazardous fuels reduction projects.

· Categorical Exclusions (CE) – Both USDA and DOI have established new categorical exclusions, as provided under the National Environmental Policy Act, for certain hazardous fuels reduction projects and for post-fire rehabilitation projects. These new CEs shorten the time between identification of hazardous fuels treatment and restoration projects and their actual implementation on the ground.

· Proposed Section 7 Counterpart Regulation – FWS and NOAA Fisheries have proposed Section 7 joint counterpart regulations under the ESA to improve Section 7 consultation procedures for projects that support the National Fire Plan. The proposed regulations would provide, in some situations, an alternative to the existing Section 7 consultation process by authorizing the agencies to make certain determinations without project-specific consultation and concurrence of the FWS and NOAA Fisheries.

The Consolidated Appropriations Resolution, 2003 (Public Law 108-7), signed into law on February 20, 2003, contains stewardship contracting authority, which allows the FS and the BLM to enter into long-term contracts with the private sector, non-profit organizations, local communities, and other entities to help achieve important land management objectives. In FY 2003, the BLM will implement stewardship contracting on a limited basis. Two planned projects are in Oregon, one is in Medford and the other is in Baker City. The focus of the projects is to reduce extremely high fuel loads in the wildland urban interface and in bug-killed stands while also improving fish and wildlife habitat. Environmental analyses for portions of both projects are complete and project work could be started this fall. These projects will generate significant economic support to local communities in Oregon.

Region 6 of the FS is moving forward to implement the expanded stewardship contracting authorities along with the 12 Pilot Stewardship projects in the Region. Nine of these are in Oregon. There are three projects on the Wallowa-Whitman National Forest and one project each on the Winema, Siuslaw, Rogue River, Deschutes, Willamette, and Siskiyou National Forests. Three projects are complete, four are under contract, and two will have contracts awarded this fall or winter. The completed projects and those under contract are estimated to have generated significant wages in the local communities while accomplishing forest health, fuels reduction, and watershed improvement treatments.

The public input period for the joint agency guidance for long-term implementation of stewardship contracting closed on July 28, 2003. The agencies are completing formal analysis of the input for consideration in the development of final agency guidance which should be available sometime this fall.

We believe these administrative actions will provide federal land managers with useful tools as they work to restore public forest and rangelands to a condition where they can resist disease, insects, and catastrophic fire.

BLM Eastside Oregon and Washington Forests

BLM public domain forests in Oregon and Washington are concentrated east of the crest of the Cascade Mountains and comprise 223,000 acres of public domain forests. Due to fire, insect infestation, and disease we estimate that nearly 87 percent of these forestlands have been altered from their historic conditions and are at moderate to high risk of losing key ecosystem components, such as old forest characteristics, soil productivity, and sensitive species habitat.

In December, 2002 BLM-Oregon issued an Eastside Forest and Woodland Management Action Plan for Oregon and Washington to address much needed forest health restoration needs. The Action Plan, developed as a supplement to the President's Healthy Forests Initiative, identifies a strategy for aggressively restoring these forestlands to a more stable ecological condition by reducing stand density through thinning, favoring species composition that more closely resembles historical conditions, reintroducing prescribed fire where practical, and making use of biomass energy opportunities where they exist. The Plan's goal is to create more stable forested ecosystems that are less vulnerable to fire, insects, and disease.

National Fire Plan

The National Fire Plan's 10-year Comprehensive Strategy and Implementation Plan, adopted in August, 2001, by federal agencies and western governors, calls for reducing hazardous fuels through more active forest and rangeland management. The Plan was prepared in collaboration with county commissioners, state foresters, and tribal officials. It establishes a framework for protecting communities and the environment through local collaboration on thinning, planned burns and forest restoration projects.

The FS and BLM completed the following actions associated with implementation of the National Fire Plan in 2002.

· Awarded 38 grants in Oregon totaling approximately $5.5 million to state agencies and local communities to perform hazardous fuels reduction projects, provide education and prevention programs, and to find uses for the by-products of hazardous fuels reduction projects. For example, John Day, Oregon, was provided $91,000 to complete an interface hazardous fuels inventory and a hazardous fuels public education program.

· Allocated $1.9 million to 191 fire districts in Oregon. The funding was used for training, equipment purchase, and fire prevention activities on a cost-share basis. The town of Fossil, for example, was able to purchase a new pump, foam unit, and personal firefighting protective gear.

· Conducted hazardous fuels reduction treatments on 190,232 acres in Oregon. About 48 percent of the acres treated were within wildland urban interface areas. An example of these treatments is the Bly Mountain Interface Fuels Reduction Project which resulted in over 4,000 acres of thinning, brush removal, slash piling and prescribed burning adjacent to BLM managed public lands.

· Completed 86 projects covering nearly 71,000 acres of forest restoration and rehabilitation of burned areas in Oregon.

· Awarded 30 Forest Service Economic Action Program grants to rural communities and businesses including the Ashland Watershed Protection Project. This cooperative venture includes the City of Ashland, the Forest Service, Oregon Department of Forestry and private landowners and has resulted in treatment to over 100 acres within the city limits.

Timbered Rock Fire

The Timbered Rock Fire started on July 21, 2001, from a lighting strike and burned 27,000 acres in southwest Oregon, including 12,000 acres of BLM-managed public lands, mostly in late successional reserve timber stands. Restoration and rehabilitation efforts are currently being analyzed in a draft EIS. In addition to supporting timber salvage opportunities, the EIS's proposed alternative analyzes actions designed to restore

the area to late-successional forest condition. This would be done by improving roads and reducing sedimentation, increasing hazardous fuels reduction projects, and improving anadromous fish habitat. The public comment period for this project closes on October 15, 2003. We hope to sign a Record of Decision in December 2003, which would allow for salvage operations and restoration activities to commence in the spring of 2004.

Biscuit Fire

The Biscuit Fire burned nearly 500,000 acres at a cost of over $150,000,000 for suppression alone. Over 45 percent of the Siskiyou National Forest burned at varying levels of intensity and effect, including a complete re-burn of the 100,000 acre Silver Fire and all but a few hundred acres of the Kalmiopsis Wilderness. The Biscuit Fire left us with an important lesson, the need to treat hazardous fuels at the landscape scale.

We have completed planning and decisions on 8 projects. Specifically, we have completed documents for road maintenance, immediate reforestation needs, special forest products, and hazard tree felling and removal. Through extensive cooperation and outreach, seedlings were planted on nearly 1,000 acres this spring, including 10 acres with the local high school. Road crews are completing repairs on over 200 miles of road. Recreation trails are signed for hazards, and crews are working on 40 miles of trail. Hazard trees along roads are marked. Sales sold to date total 5.4 million board feet of timber.

We will release a Draft EIS for salvage logging, fuels treatments, reforestation and all connected actions which will address five primary issues: 1) recover merchantable dead timber before its economic value is lost; 2) restore habitat for species that rely on older forests; 3) restore, maintain, and/or enhance fish and wildlife habitat; 4) reduce risks of catastrophic wildfire to nearby communities and to adjacent private lands; 5) learn, and share our knowledge, about large fires and fire recovery. Several alternatives are being evaluated including one that directly reflects the work of Dr. John Sessions of Oregon State University.

Among our proposals is the construction and maintenance of an extensive network of Fuels Management Zones. These are linear features located along ridges and existing roads that are intended to provide safer, more defensible space for the use of prescribed fire and for fighting and containing wildfire. These fuel breaks will ‘compartmentalize’ the landscape, and reduce the chances of fires getting as large as the Biscuit Fire.

We are also working with the research community to test how we can best re-establish and maintain late successional habitat, across the landscape, in dry forest types. We are testing three different approaches: 1) a low intensity approach; 2) a more intensive approach that includes our most aggressive economic recovery of dead timber; and 3) the use of prescribed fire and salvage.

Costs

There is no question that fighting these fires was expensive – the cost in FY 2002 for all wildfire suppression was almost $1.6 billion. We are in the process of establishing new procedures that will focus on cost containment strategies in suppressing wildfire and eliminating unnecessary expenses; establishing clearer financial management accountability of incident commanders and line officers; and providing for improved controls and incentives for suppression costs.

H.R. 1904

As mentioned earlier in this statement, the Departments of Agriculture and of the Interior strongly support H.R. 1904. The bill sets out a flexible yet comprehensive approach to forest health and hazardous fuels reduction on our Nation’s public rangelands and forested areas. H.R. 1904 provides more efficient procedures for USDA and DOI to plan and conduct hazardous fuels projects on up to 20 million acres of federal land that are most at-risk from wildfires while preserving public input in agency decision-making. Projects would be selected through a collaborative process involving local, tribal, state, Federal, and non-governmental entities as described in the 10-Year Comprehensive Strategy and Implementation Plan. H.R. 1904 will provide agencies with the latitude necessary to reduce the risk of damage to communities and municipal water supplies and at-risk federal lands from catastrophic wildfires.

Conclusion

Mr. Chairman, the Departments of Agriculture and of the Interior are committed to working with Congress,

State, local and tribal officials, and the public to advance common-sense solutions to protect communities and people, and to restore forest and rangeland health. We believe that H.R. 1904 provides the much needed authorities for the agencies to move forward with the President's Healthy Forests Initiative. We were encouraged to see prompt action by the House on H.R. 1904. We hope the Senate takes up the measure soon after it returns from the August recess. Thank you again for the opportunity to appear here today to discuss healthy forests and issues specific to central Oregon. We will be glad to answer any question you may have.