TESTIMONY BEFORE THE U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
COMMITTEE ON RESOURCES

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CRISIS ON OUR NATIONAL FORESTS: REDUCING THE THREAT OF CATASTROPHIC WILDFIRE TO CENTRAL OREGON COMMUNITIES AND THE SURROUNDING ENVIRONMENT

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Mr. Chairman:

Man's disruption of natural disturbance regimes is arguably the single greatest threat to sustaining healthy forest ecosystems across the United States. The effects of catastrophic fires fueled by unnaturally dense vegetation have been well documented and are increasingly evident. Fires of uncharacteristic severity threaten the very existence of forest ecosystem components, including forest wildlife, that evolved through millennia in response to conditions wholly different from those that exist today.

We can't turn the clock back a century or more to undo what man has done through well-intentioned efforts to "protect" our nation's natural resources. However, we can learn from past mistakes and recognize the critical role periodic disturbance plays in shaping our forest landscapes.

Because of society's presence throughout, and influence on the forests of the western and eastern United States, it is generally not possible to allow natural fires to return to historic levels. Therefore, the active management of forest vegetation through prescribed fire and mechanical and other treatments is essential to help ensure long-term forest health and ecosystem integrity.

Proposals to limit restoration activities to arbitrarily delineated zones surrounding rural communities, commonly referred to as the wildland/urban interface (WUI), are shortsighted and will not secure the health of our nation's forests. Proponents of such proposals must consider whether healthy, functional ecosystems outside of the WUI are as important as those within. Out-of-sight out-of-mind is not a solid foundation for sound resource policy.

Limiting restoration activities to the WUI will pose a new series of problems by increasing the likelihood of human/wildlife conflicts. Thinning projects increase the amount of sunlight and moisture that reaches the forest floor. This in turn increases the production of succulent herbaceous forage for ungulates such as elk and mule deer. Migratory herds of elk and mule deer will find treated landscapes attractive as wintering areas, as will the large predators that prey upon these herds. Conflicts are inevitable as high-density wildlife populations compete for space with rural communities, competition that will occur literally in our own back yards.

We must treat hazardous fuel conditions where we find them. The Biscuit Fire in southwest Oregon provides an example of the ramifications to wildlife of our failure to do so.

During the summer of 2002, the Biscuit Fire consumed 500,000 acres in southwest Oregon. This total included 160,000 acres of Late Successional Reserve, lands set aside to "protect" them from active management, which was presumed to be the greatest threat to wildlife of old forests. As a result, 69,000 acres of critical habitat for the northern spotted owl was burned and 63% of this acreage experienced > 50% canopy mortality, thereby significantly reducing its value as spotted owl habitat. The burn area included 49 known spotted owl nest sites, 24% of all known nest sites on the Siskiyou National Forest.

It is not possible to assert with absolute certainty that mechanical thinning or other forest health restoration treatments would have negated the loss to the local population of spotted owls from the Biscuit Fire. However, neither is it reasonable to suggest that such treatments would have had no benefit. The Biscuit Fire offers a classic example of the need to balance the short-term risk to forest health from the implementation of active management and the long-term risk associated with the failure to do so.

Like those in the West, the forests of the eastern United States are also changing as a result of man's disruption of natural disturbance regimes.

Oak forests have dominated much of the East for the past 6-9,000 years. Although recent trends vary by region, oak forests are declining through much of the eastern United States.

Oaks, of course, produce acorns. Acorns provide food for many species of forest wildlife. In some years, acorn production is the very foundation of the wildlife food chain. The black bear, wild turkey, white-footed deer mouse and the mammalian and avian predators that prey on small mammals all thrive when acorn crops are abundant. As oaks decline in abundance, so too will this important food source and the wildlife it supports.

Historically, fires likely played a significant role in maintaining oak forests. Young oak seedlings and saplings can survive periodic fires, whereas maples and other thin-barked tree species that compete with oaks for growing space are typically killed by fire. In addition, historic fires in oak forests killed some or many of the canopy trees, thereby increasing sunlight penetration to the forest floor. The combined effects of fire; reducing competition and providing additional sunlight for young oaks allowed this genus to long remain dominant on many sites throughout the East.

By precluding natural fires and limiting the implementation of active management as a partial surrogate for fire, we are placing in doubt the future of oak forests and changing the face of our eastern forest landscape. As stated by Healy et al. (1997), "The net result…may be that the genus that dominated a vast ecosystem for thousands of years will be reduced to a minor component within a century."

The virtual elimination of fires in the East has not only complicated efforts to sustain oak and some pine forests, it has hampered the establishment of important young forest habitats and associated forest wildlife. Young forest habitats are dominated by a dense growth of shrubs and small trees that are free to flourish when the canopy of a mature forest is removed by fire, mechanical treatment, or some other disturbance.

These habitats support a suite of wildlife species that do not exist in mature forest or exist only at very low population densities. Wildlife that rely upon young forest habitats include the ruffed grouse and American woodcock, two important game species pursued by almost one million sportsmen and sportswomen each year in the eastern United States. In addition, many types of nongame wildlife require the protection from predators afforded by thick, young forest habitats. The mourning warbler, field sparrow, yellow-breasted chat, and the golden-winged warbler (classified by the US Fish & Wildlife Service as a species of highest conservation priority), all nest almost exclusively in shrub-dominated or young forest habitats. These and many other wildlife species that require young forest habitats are declining in the eastern United States, as these habitats become increasingly rare.

Forest inventory data document that young deciduous forest habitats (<20 years old) have declined by 41% over the past 2-3 decades in the eastern United States. Exceptions to this general trend include Minnesota and Maine where significant active forest management has occurred over the past 2 decades resulting primarily from the commercial regeneration of mature aspen and birch forests.

Breeding Bird Survey data for the eastern United States from the US Fish & Wildlife Service show that 50% of the bird species that nest in shrub-dominated or young forest habitats have decreased since the Survey was initiated in 1966, whereas only 24% of the bird species that nest in mature forests have decreased during this period. Conversely, 39% of the species that nest in mature forests have increased, while only 19% of the species that nest in young forests have increased. These data do not suggest that we ignore the demonstrated conservation needs of certain species characteristic of mature forest habitats. However, these data clearly document the compelling need to address ongoing declines of wildlife that require young forest habitats.

In summary, disturbance is a natural component of forest ecology. By largely precluding natural disturbance, society has allowed the health of our nation's forests to deteriorate. Where it is possible to return

disturbance to the landscape consistent with likely historic patterns, society should strive to do so. Where it is no longer possible to allow natural disturbance to play its role in sustaining healthy forests and associated wildlife populations, the only responsible option is to thoughtfully implement active management treatments.

*** On 10 July 2003, 22 wildlife conservation organizations representing over 4 million

hunters, wildlife resource professionals, and other conservationists provided

recommendations to the United States Senate regarding legislative efforts to enhance

the health of our nation's private and public forests and rangelands (attached).

These recommendations included:

a. Emergency health conditions within the wildland/urban interface and municipal watersheds should receive priority, however, treatments outside of these areas on lands identified as at significant risk by assessment processes as referenced above may be necessary to protect and enhance components of ecosystem health, including essential wildlife habitats, and should be applied as appropriate.

b. During the development and review of proposals designed to address

emergency health conditions, agencies should give equal consideration to both

the short-term risks of forest and rangeland restoration activities and the long-

term risks resulting from no action.

c. Projects designed to address emergency health conditions should not be

subject to post-decision appeal.

d. Judicial review of projects designed to address emergency health conditions

should be expedited.