

Committee on Resources

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Testimony of Doug Robertson Douglas County (OR) Commissioner

before

Chairman Greg Walden's
Subcommittee on Forests and Forest Health:
" In the Aftermath of Catastrophic Events: Restoring and
Protecting Communities, Water, Wildlife, and Forests"

Field hearing held in Sisters, Oregon
August 18, 2004

Mr. Chairman, and Members of the Committee:

I would like to thank you for taking the time to organize and hold this congressional field hearing, and particularly for concentrating on the subject (among other things) of post fire management and recovery.

As a local elected official (along with every other school board member, city councilor and special district representatives in this state) I am faced daily with the escalating challenges of keeping service delivery to the public at an acceptable level. It has become apparent in recent years that there are alternative methods and options of management after catastrophic fire that could potentially have a very positive impact on the social and physical infrastructure of our communities and at the same time, expedite the environmental recovery of critical habitat, sensitive watersheds, and the burned landscape in general.

Because of the time consuming nature of the bureaucracy that controls post fire management in many situations, by the time the federal government has slogged through the process of determining an appropriate management action, there is nothing left to manage. Let me cite just one of many examples to amplify my point. In 1996 the Spring Fire occurred in the Umpqua National Forest. It burned approximately 17,000 acres, 11,000 of which were in a designated wilderness area. That left 6,000 acres of burned timber and landscape that could be managed. After 8 years, these 6,000 acres have become a wasteland of dead, rotting timber, and a brush field as high as this room. Immediately after the fire the dead trees represented tens of millions of dollars in value, millions of board feet of lumber for homes, hundreds of jobs, and as important as anything an opportunity to begin to recover the wildlife habitat and other environmental amenities that the public so highly values.

We are seeing this scenario repeat itself on the Baked Apple Fire, the Tiller Complex Fire, the Biscuit Fire, and within about eight miles of where we are today, the B&B Fire. This is a time when many of our schools are shortening their school year due to lack of funding; our institutions of law enforcement and health and social services are experiencing damaging cutbacks, our state budget is in serious disarray, and Oregon ranks third in the nation in unemployment.

With all of this considered, it seems incomprehensible that the federal policies in place today require us to, in essence walk away from hundreds of millions of dollars in value in the form of dead trees, thousands of jobs, and a condition that will almost surely guarantee that the dead material will combine with the brush and hardwood to provide the fuel for the next fire.

There is a clear alternative to the current policy, and we need only to look within our own state and region to see it. Sixty five years ago the Tillamook forest landscape looked very much like the area burned by the Biscuit Fire. Today, however, the Tillamook Forest provides a diverse habitat for a large number of birds, animals, fish and vegetation. It contains four productive, clean river systems and eight state park campgrounds that provide a huge array of recreational opportunities for millions of people. Simply put, the beauty of the forest is stunning. The Tillamook Forest exists today because the citizens in the counties and communities involved, committed themselves to doing everything possible to ensure that their children and

grandchildren would once again be able to enjoy the benefits of this region that existed before the fire.

There is an alternative to the delay and waste that is inherent in our current federal policies.

Approximately one year ago, there was a tour sponsored by the Roseburg Area Chamber of Commerce. The tour included the aftermath of the 2002 Baked Apple Fire on the Umpqua National Forest and the Spring Fire of 1996, mentioned earlier. Those on the tour included tribal leaders, the newspaper editor, president of our community college, a school superintendent, the chamber president, and many others business and community leaders. In a word, they were outraged at what they saw. The ability to actually see the incredible waste and destruction first had has resulted in formation of a group called "Communities for Healthy Forests". The group's message and goals are best summarized in a video that has been produced, and is available to those interested after today's hearing.

Mr. Chairman, the federal policies in place today represent one view of how best to manage after a catastrophic wildfire; which is basically not to manage at all. There is another option. It would provide direction to the federal agencies responsible, to quickly assess the damage in the area burned and move forward in a responsible way to maximize the economic recovery from the dead material and expedite the ecological and environmental healing on the damaged landscape. It is the hope of the Communities for Healthy Forests that the general public will have an opportunity to provide input on this issue and to demonstrate which of these two options they prefer.

Respectfully submitted by

Doug Robertson,
Douglas County Commissioner