P.O. Box 11615, Eugene, OR 97440 Tel: (541) 484-2692 Fax: (541) 484-3004 Email: andy@fseee.org

TESTIMONY OF ANDY STAHL, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR
FOREST SERVICE EMPLOYEES FOR ENVIRONMENTAL ETHICS
before the House Committee on Resources field hearing on Crisis on our National Forests: Reducing the Threat of Catastrophic Wildlife to Central Oregon Communities and the Surrounding Environment

Redmond, Oregon -- August 25, 2003

Mr. Chairman and members of the committee, I am pleased to testify today on behalf of FSEEE, a non-profit partnership of 500 Forest Service employees and over 11,000 citizen owners of our national forests.

Central Oregon's forests have changed substantially during the past 100 years. Fire suppression removed fire from its dominant role as a natural ecosystem process. Commercial logging removed most of the large pine trees that typified central Oregon's forests prior to European settlement. This combination has changed the structure and species composition of the area's forests. Tree density has increased dramatically, tree size (as measured by diameter) has decreased dramatically, and tree species has shifted to favor grand fir and lodgepole pine at the expense of ponderosa pine (Youngblood and Riegel, 1999).

As a young forest management student in the late 1970s, my ecology class visited the Pringle Falls Experimental Forest southwest of Bend, Oregon. We saw the effects that fire suppression has had on tree species composition. I saw hundreds of small white fir seedlings dot the understory beneath the mature pines. Cyclical climate change also played a role as the cooler and wetter weather common to the '60s and '70s increased the range of white fir further downslope on the eastside of the Cascade mountains.

Central Oregon's human population has also changed substantially during the past 100 years. Formerly a region dependent upon lumbering and livestock, central Oregon is now one of the nation's premiere recreation and retirement communities. Population growth in the three-county region during the 1990s averaged 3.5% annually, more than double the state-wide average of 1.6%. Job growth is highest in computing and technology, education, health, and social services. Outdoor recreation and tourism are central Oregon's most important economic engines with 4.5 million overnight visits to the region annually.

The challenges facing Deschutes and Ochoco national forest employees as they seek to sustain ecosystems across about 2.5 million acres are also substantial. Forest Service managers and scientists know that the 100-year ad hoc experiment of suppressing fire has had unintended consequences. As a result, fires burn hotter and less controllably in today's denser forests with smaller trees. And the region's robust economic growth has put more homes built without regard to fire risk in harm's way.

In sum, 100 years of fire suppression and logging have created conditions that threaten central Oregon's natural resources and communities.

Thus it is inexplicable that the solution proposed by President Bush and some members of Congress emphasizes fire suppression and commercial logging, the very practices that created today's crisis. The federal government continues to attempt to suppress over 99% of all wildland fires. The Forest Service continues to measure its success not in terms of ecosystems restored, but in fires put out. The President's Healthy Forest Initiative, as embodied in H.R. 1904, promotes commercial logging at the expense of citizen participation and oversight of the forests we own.

As Benjamin Franklin said: "The definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over and expecting different results."

It is time we tried a different strategy, one that addresses independently the protection of communities, on the one hand, and the restoration of forest ecosystems, on the other. These goals are not the same. They involve different landscapes, constituencies, and practices. Protecting communities alone will not restore

ecosystems. Nor will restoring forest ecosystems protect homes and communities.

FSEEE's Community Protection Strategy for Central Oregon

Homes burn when they ignite. This simple truism means that protecting homes from wildland fire requires preventing ignition. Two factors alone affect home ignition – the flammability of the home and the amount of heat that reaches the surface of the home.

As Sisters, Oregon, Fire Chief Don Rowe has pointed out, most houses that are destroyed by fire in central Oregon have wooden shake roofs (Strannigan, 2001). Requiring that fire-resistant materials be used in new home construction and remodeling would do the most to protect communities and homes from fire.

Forest Service research shows that limiting flammable vegetation from within 100 feet of a home reduces the amount of heat that reaches the home's surface during a fire sufficiently to prevent ignition of plywood and other common building materials, even during high-intensity fire events (Cohen, 2003). Vegetation management within this home ignition zone is primarily the responsibility of private property owners. To the extent the federal government believes it has a role to play, it can do so through grants, loans, technical assistance through extension programs, and education through the Firewise program. FSEEE is also assisting with homeowner education through our mascot Reddy Squirrel whose motto is "Forest Fires Happen. Be Ready." See http://www.fseee.org/whosreddy.htm.

Creating fire-resistant homes and home ignition zones is the only proven method of protecting communities from wildland fire. However, there is some anecdotal information that suggests that thinning and brush removal within the wildland/residential interface may assist firefighters. Such buffers around communities are expensive to create and must be maintained regularly to provide a bona fide fuel break. Thus it is important that scarce federal funds for such purposes be targeted to the land immediately adjacent to communities and not squandered in the backcountry.

FSEEE's Ecosystem Restoration Strategy for Central Oregon

The ecological processes that shape central Oregon's forests are fairly well understood. The Pringle Falls Experimental Forest, the first to be established in the nation, has been the site for ecological research since 1931. These long-term studies have highlighted the importance of fire as an ecosystem process, examined the relationship between fire, shrubs and mule deer, and explored treatment alternatives for the control of dwarf mistletoe, among many other inquiries.

The consensus view of ecologists is that fire is necessary, but not sufficient, to restoring these ecosystems. For example, fire restores the shrubs and forbs upon which mule deer rely for browse. In fire's absence these shrubs, e.g., bitterbrush, become increasingly woody and lack the succulent leaves and young growth deer prefer (bitterbrush also fixes nitrogen in the soil at the rate of 1 kg/ha/year, making this essential nutrient available for tree growth). Meeting the State of Oregon's mule deer population objectives for hunters will require fire on a landscape scale not seen since the advent of fire suppression policies in the early 20th century.

However, low-elevation, xeric forests in central Oregon have lacked widespread fire for so long (on the order of 10 natural fire rotations have been suppressed) that fire threatens to replace rather than rejuvenate forests. Tree densities in these ponderosa pine stands must be reduced substantially through thinning or other mechanical treatment before fire is restored. The Metolius Basin project exemplifies the multi-step process necessary to restoring fire to these forests (USDA-Forest Service, 2003).

Thinning treatments that attempt to impose a forest structure inconsistent with natural fire regimes are unlikely to restore ecological processes. For example, thinning that seeks to convert a low-frequency, high-severity fire forest (e.g., subalpine fir/mountain fir) to a stand structure consistent with a high-frequency, low-intensity fire forest (e.g., ponderosa pine) will likely forfeit many of the forest's natural processes and resources (e.g., woodpecker habitat). This is not forest restoration – it is forest type conversion.

No matter how ecologically meritorious, forest restoration projects will not succeed unless the public owners of national forests concur. Public acceptance is best gained through a collaborative approach that ensures disclosure and accountability. Those who seek to short-circuit public processes, as proposed by H.R. 1904, are penny-wise and pound-foolish. For example, the Metolius Basin project's success will be due, in no small measure, to the Forest Service's conscientious efforts at full disclosure, collaboration, and

accountability.

Just as homeowners must bear the cost of protecting their homes from inevitable wildland fires, so, too, the federal government must bear the cost of restoring national forest ecosystems. A century of well-intentioned fire suppression combined with removal of commercially valuable and fire-resistant large trees has created a forest structure that requires investment, not further exploitation. Although the thinning of some forest stands may produce commercially viable wood products, for the most part, central Oregon forest restoration will require practices whose costs exceed their financial returns to the government (Aycock, 2002). Unless and until the Congress makes these investments, the ecological health of central Oregon's forests will continue to suffer.

Central Oregon has been inhabited for 8,000 years, yet our society is the first that has proven itself incapable of living with fire. The economic and ecological cost of our hubris is enormous. The most challenging and profound change that must occur before central Oregon ecosystems are restored is an end to our society's war on wildland fire. More fires, under appropriate conditions, must be permitted to burn. Land managers must be rewarded for returning fire to fire-dependent landscapes. Homes and communities must be made fire resistant so that we may end the war and learn to live with fire.

Citations

Aycock, Scott, "Wildfire Risk and Treatment Methods Report (Draft)," Central Oregon Partnerships for Wildfire Risk Reduction, March 29, 2002 (http://www.coic.org/copwrr/Interim%20Report%202.pdf).

Cohen, Jack, "Thoughts on the Wildland-Urban Interface Fire Problem," June 2003 (http://www.plumasfiresafe.org/cohen.htm).

Strannigan, Shawn, "Fire Chief Urges New Fire Safety Ordinance," Nugget Newspaper, July 17, 2001.

USDA-Forest Service, "Metolius Basin Forest Management Project Environmental Impact Statement," July 2, 2003, (http://www.fs.fed.us/r6/centraloregon/projects/units/sisters/metoliusbasin/rod-text.shtml).

Youngblood, Andrew and Gregg Riegel, "Reintroducing Fire in Eastside Ponderosa Pine Forests: A Longterm Test of Fuel Treatments," in Proceedings of the Joint Fire Science Conference and Workshop, June, 1999 (http://jfsp.nifc.gov/conferenceproc/T-04Youngbloodetal.pdf).