

# Committee on Resources

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TESTIMONY OF DR. HUGH BIALECKI,  
PRESIDENT OF THE SAVE OUR FOREST ASSOCIATION,  
ON FOREST HEALTH CRISIS IN SAN BERNARDINO NATIONAL FOREST  
BEFORE THE HOUSE RESOURCES COMMITTEE  
LAKE ARROWHEAD, CA  
September 22, 2003

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Chairman Pombo, Congressman Lewis, and members of the committee. Good afternoon and welcome to Lake Arrowhead. I am Dr. Hugh Bialecki, President of the Save Our Forest Association, Board member and past president of the Lake Arrowhead Communities Chamber of Commerce, and am speaking today on behalf of the Save Our Forest Association, the leading local conservation organization in the San Bernardino Mountains. I welcome the opportunity to address the panel today.

As a long time resident of the San Bernardino Mountain's community, I and the constituents I represent are very interested in and concerned about the on the ground effects of the Healthy Forest Bill, as passed by the House of Representatives earlier this year. Before I get to that, I'd like to applaud the committee's request to the congress to pass a wildfire fighting supplemental addressing this year's fire fighting needs.

First, we agree that work must be done to address the health of our forest environment and that action is needed to address the many short and long term issues our forests face. We agree that harmful logging practices and effective fire suppression have created forest conditions that threaten communities and in some cases may threaten the wild characteristics American's seek when they live in or visit a forest. I believe that Martha Marks, President of Republicans for Environmental Protection, expresses the feelings of most Americans when she describes our national wildlands as, "...an intrinsic part of this nations patriotic heritage, the symbol of our national vigor and freedom, and an irreplaceable trust for our future." I thank the committee for bringing focus to this very important national issue.

Our primary concerns with the Healthy Forest Initiative have to do with the lack of direct funding through block grants to assist communities in creating and maintaining community protection zones, the lack of opportunities for communities to be directly involved in the creation and review of the many fuel reduction options the forest service should consider when creating and maintaining community protection zones, and the severe limitations of our right to challenge the federal agencies in court when we believe the agency is moving in a direction that will not or is not creating conditions that improve or protect our quality of life and the quality of the forest experience for visitors.

Lack of Focus and Direct Funding to communities though block grants.

In light of the legislation's first purpose, "to reduce the risks of damage to communities," we see little or nothing contained within the legislation that will immediately increase the efforts of the agencies to create and maintain community protection zones, the areas within 500 yards of a community. The Forest Service, the Western Governors Association and a host of fire scientist around the country have repeatedly said that the most effective protections for communities will occur within the community protection zone and immediately around structures. Today, adequate community protection zones are in their earliest stages of design and implementation. Public land advocates have been asking the forest service to create CPZ's around our forest communities since the mid 1990's. I point to the Sierra Nevada Framework as an early example.

One could imagine the greater security in communities like Crestline, Lake Arrowhead, Running Springs, Big

Bear and Idyllwild would have if maintained CPZ's existed, and all of our homes and common buildings had defensible fuel zones. The threat of fire would be greatly reduced. However, much of this does not exist, and there is much to be done by the community, the county, the state and federal government. For instance, updating county zoning regulations specifically defining and mandating defensible space while also providing for adequate monitoring and enforcement will make our communities safer tomorrow. We'd still be removing those dead trees killed by the bark beetle, but there would be a lot less work to do. Since the early 1990's the Save Our Forest Association and the Sierra Club's San Geronimo Chapter have been prescient in the education of our community by hosting forums calling attention to the need for fuels reduction and responsible logging practices. For instance, the removal of small diameter trees and brush reduction.

Unfortunately, it takes the overt threat of disaster to get people to recognize what needs to be done. Today, as we are addressing the issue, other obstacles are in our way. The local, county and state governments are all operating in deficit and money and manpower are scarce; however, an emergency situation requires the federal government to step in. I would like to take this opportunity to recognize and thank the efforts of Congresspersons Lewis and Bono and County Supervisor Hansberger and Forest Supervisor

Zimmerman for recognizing the threat to the community and working with us to obtain emergency funding. We understand that the latest five million dollars to come to the San Bernardino National Forest was money that had been appropriated for fuel reduction projects in the eleven national forests of the Sierra Nevada. While we obviously appreciate the prioritization and movement of the money, we ask that those affected forests are reimbursed in full, as soon as possible. It would be a tragedy if other needed fuel reduction projects could not be completed because the money was directed elsewhere, leaving other communities at risk.

#### Priorities...

In the light that the administration has identified the increased threat to communities from forest fire due to successive years of drought, dead trees and insect infestations, I'll speak now to funding priorities. The fiscal year 2004 budget put forward by the administration proposes to spend \$265 million dollars on commercial timber sales, while only \$228 million dollars are going for hazardous fuel reduction projects. What is more important, getting the cut out, or protecting communities by thinning small diameter trees and clearing brush? Furthermore, while the Healthy Forest Initiative would appropriate \$25 million dollars a year through 2008 to biomass companies, it appropriates zero dollars to communities through block grant programs. We agree that if the slash and small trees removed in the creation and maintenance of community protection zones can be utilized commercially, they should be; however, we are very concerned that the focus of forest health not be dominated by the economics of extraction and the pursuit of profitable balance sheets. Commercial logging or resource extraction under the guise of forest thinning /fuel reduction will result in the further degradation of our forest resources. Our community will not accept a trade-off that endangers its wildlife, aesthetic values, recreational opportunities and watersheds. The bill has an excessively broad definition of areas that will be eligible for thinning operations, and locally would include the entire forest, even remote roadless areas far from our community. Scientists, including former Forest Service Chief Jack Ward Thomas, have identified that the critical areas to be treated occur within 500 yards from a community. We can contemplate a situation where the local forester is tasked to create revenue by logging large trees away from the community, moving scarce resources from the creation and maintenance of community protection zones.

#### Public Comment....

There is a well-established right for the people to fully participate in the formulation of federal administrative actions. The Healthy Forest Initiative attempts to scale back public participation in crucial community decision-making. The position that allowing the public to participate in the formulation of local policy and that lawsuits have prevented fuel reduction projects from occurring is misleading and unfounded. Two successive reports from the General Accounting Office in 2002 and 2003 state that 95% of fuel reduction projects proceed without objection and 97% proceed within the 90-day appeal process. Furthermore, I have a local example of a fuel reduction project in 1991 that was found to be cutting trees in excess of 22" in diameter leaving behind smaller trees, brush and slash. This was a commercial timber sale under the guise of a fuel reduction project. Only through community involvement was the inappropriate cutting of large trees stopped, with a legal settlement that specifically allowed the Forest Service to cut trees 22" in diameter or less and those "... infested with mistletoe, insects, parasites or disease creating a danger to the health or vigor of a surrounding tree or tree stand. The Forest Service may thin small trees in any of the units as a silviculturist deems necessary."

Additionally, over the last couple of months, the forest community has participated in the San Bernardino National Forest Mountain Summit which brought together over 200 people, from various backgrounds and points of view, to discuss the future of this forest fifty years from now. Protecting the quality of life and visitor's experience in the San Bernardino's was the dominant theme. There was consensus that fundamental to the mountain quality of life is the protection of wildlife, the watersheds, recreational opportunities and fire safe communities. Ultimately we agreed that only by increasing the communication between our community and the agencies can the public gain the confidence that the forest service is managing this national forest effectively.

Finally, the work that must be done in our forests and communities is not only long term, but perennial. Only through the provisions of the National Environmental Policy Act can we know that forest projects are being planned and executed appropriately. Open and transparent deliberations are the cornerstone of sound public policy and the most direct route to creating a healthy future for the San Bernardino's and all our national forests.