

Committee on Resources

Subcommittee on Forests & Forest Health

Opening Statement

SUBCOMMITTEE ON FORESTS AND FOREST HEALTH
Opening Remarks for The Honorable Helen Chenoweth
for the Oversight Hearing on the GAO report entitled,
A Cohesive Strategy is Needed to Address Catastrophic
Wildfire Threats"
June 29, 1999

We are here today to discuss the recently released General Accounting Office (GAO) report entitled, "A Cohesive Strategy is Needed to Address Catastrophic Wildfire Threats."

Of the 191 million acres managed by the Forest Service, 70% are located in the dry, interior western United States. According to the Forest Service, 39 million of these acres are at an abnormally high risk of catastrophic fire. The GAO calls the region a "tinderbox." The problem is an over accumulation of vegetation that can turn what would otherwise be a low-intensity fire - which, in most instances, would not hurt larger native trees - into a blazing, catastrophic fire that destroys everything in its path.

The question is, will the Forest Service be able to reduce excessive fuels accumulation on national forest lands in a timely and responsible manner? I have serious doubts because of the points raised by GAO in this report. There is a major disconnect between Forest Service rhetoric and its actions. And, sadly, what's at stake are the lives of local residents and fire fighters, the environmental health of our national forests, the protection of adjacent state and private forests and property, and the economic well-being of local communities.

Not only do I look forward to hearing the GAO discussion on this report, but I look forward to hearing exactly how the Forest Service intends to act on this critical issue.

With that I would like to welcome Mr. Barry Hill, the Associate Director for Energy Resources, and Science Issues, with the GAO for his testimony.

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