

Committee on Resources

Chairman's Statement

The Honorable Helen Chenoweth (R-ID), Chairman,

Subcommittee on Forests and Forest Health

H.R. 2458, The Community Protection and Hazardous Fuels Reduction Act of 1997

September 23, 1997

I would like to welcome our witnesses and the Members to this hearing today on H.R. 2458, the Community Protection and Hazardous Fuels Reduction Act of 1997.

Last year, wildfires burned over 6 million acres and cost nearly one billion dollars to fight. These intense fires are now frequently occurring in America's back yards. In the early part of the century, a clear delineation existed between the urban center and what was considered rural America. This no longer exists.

Over time, cities have grown into suburbs, and suburbs have blended in to what was once considered rural. This complex landscape has come to be known as the wildland/urban interface. Forests and grasslands are intermixed with housing, businesses, farms and other developments, posing new challenges for fire management and suppression.

The intensity of many of the wildfires witnessed in recent years are of a magnitude seldom seen before. They are the result of unnaturally high fuel loads, caused by 70 years of aggressive suppression, forest disease, and grossly overstocked stands. This is an unhealthy dangerous condition that must be properly dealt with now.

Last Spring, the Subcommittee traveled to several forests in the West. The Forest Service provided us with an excellent tour which gave us an idea of what can happen if we do not take action. In the Boise National Forest alone, the Forest Service showed us an area larger than Los Angeles County that had been burned from catastrophic fires over the past five years.

During this trip and others that I have had a chance to take this year, the Forest Service employees working on the ground have asked for the authority contained in this bill to help deal with the fire danger and forest health problems that plague our nation's forests.

There is no doubt that something must be done. The question is not if our forests will burn from catastrophic fires, but when. These intense fires not only threaten the destruction of communities, putting human life and property at risk, they also damage water supplies, destroy fish and wildlife habitat, and damage ambient air quality. The unnatural temperatures of these fires also damage soil to the degree that it substantially reduces the ability of the land to support future stands of trees and greatly increases the potential for massive soil erosion.

Regarding the importance of protecting our forests, President Teddy Roosevelt, one of our greatest conservationists said this: "If there is any one duty which more than any other we owe it to our children and our children's children to perform at once, it is to save the forests of this country, for they constitute the first and most important element in the conservation of the natural resources of this country."

Quoting from a Forest Service brochure on forest health the agency states: "The Forest Service has identified the

factors that are weakening the forest. There are a number of acres affected and it will take time, effort, resources, and cooperation to restore the balance. The Forest Service has a vision; a vision of a healthy, balanced self-sustaining forest."

I agree with this vision, and for this purpose I introduced the Community Protection and Hazardous Fuels Reduction Act of 1997. This bill is the result of listening to the on-the-ground experts. It provides the Forest Service with a new tool that will ity to help protect forests, fish and wifdlife habitat, air quality, water quality, as well as human life and property.

I look forward to working with the Forest Service and interested Members as we move this bill forward. In light of last year's severe fire season and the threat that remains in our forests, now is the time to properly deal with the unnaturally high fuel loads that lead to loss of human life and property as well as most of the environmental damage and taxpayer expenditures that result.

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