

April 11, 2013

Honorable Rob Bishop, Chairman  
Honorable Raul Grijalva, Ranking Member  
House Subcommittee on Public Lands and Environmental Regulation  
1324 Longworth House Office Building  
Washington, DC 20515

Legislative Hearing on HR 818, the Healthy Forest Management and Wildfire Prevention Act

Good morning. I am Cindy Dozier, Commissioner from Hinsdale County, Colorado. I'm honored to be here before you this morning to speak on behalf of House Resolution 818.

Hinsdale County is one of the most beautiful places anyone would ever want to visit. It is also the most remote county in the lower 48 states. With 96.5% public land, less than 1,000 full-time residents, and only one town and one school, we are very aware that the things that make our county wonderful for visitors and residents alike, are the very things that can present challenges; challenges that come partly from being surrounded by forested land in our San Juan Mountain location.

The health of our forests, which we all so love to enjoy, is paramount in importance to all of us, both in the West and across America. Our area is the place where folks come to find great remoteness and beauty. Forest health impacts many areas of the health, safety and welfare of our people including our watershed, air quality and tourism-based economy.

As you are aware, the State of Colorado and much of the western United States have been hit with severe drought conditions for several years. This, coupled with areas of extensive insect infestation and thick stands of forest overgrowth, has created an environment ripe for intense wild fire activity. In fact, the summer of 2012 saw one of the worst fire seasons in recent memory. Hinsdale County had the largest wildfire in its known history, the Little Sand Fire, which burned nearly 25,000 acres in Archuleta and Hinsdale Counties at a cost of \$7.5 million. We therefore support proactive measures to address forest health and mitigate the dangers intense wild fires pose to human safety, property, infrastructure, wildlife habitat, and water and air quality.

Because we are primarily public land, the issues addressed in HR 818 are of extreme importance to us and, we think, to any other state or county with forested lands. Hinsdale County is a smaller picture of what is happening on a larger scale in forests all over the West.

HR 818 specifically identifies the issue at hand, and of great importance, vests actual authority to identify high risk areas and initiate mitigation measures to the respective states in coordination with county governments; to those of us locally who are most able to recognize the risk and with the most at stake should a wild fire erupt.

The bill also recognizes the importance of cooperative mitigation efforts, in the spirit of which it provides for Good Neighbor authorities wherein the federal government may contract with the states to carry out forest health restoration activities. We support this heavy local involvement.

The stewardship contracting time frame of up to 20 years allowed for in the bill is, in our view, a common sense measure fostering comprehensive, long term forest health projects.

In the past, many contractors have been reluctant to set up long term solutions for dealing with timber because of the uncertainty of supply.

We further appreciate the expedited procedures allowed for in HR818 for emergency hazardous fuels reduction projects in identified high risk areas. While we emphatically support due diligence in preparation for fuels reduction projects, risks to property, infrastructure, irreplaceable historic and cultural sites, and life and limb dictate a sense of urgency in mitigating nearby fuel load risk. With common sense measures and caution, especially high risk areas can be protected in rapid fashion.

It is the nature of the western United States climate to see cycles of ample precipitation and drought, and insect infestation will always be a part of the equation. We have been aware for a long time that the state of our forests' health was, in many areas, experiencing some deterioration and a lack of diversity in tree age. This condition lends itself to large, intensive and destructive wild fires which we, unfortunately, have experienced recently.

When I visit around my county and nearby counties, I see beetle devastation in many areas. The headwaters of the great Rio Grande River are surrounded by standing dead conifers, nearly 100% in that particular valley. And dead trees don't hold water.

We all remember the terrible fires of 2002, the Hayman Fire and the Missionary Ridge Fire especially. Predictions are that this year will be another very challenging year as far as precipitation is concerned. The repercussions of our poor forest health are with us right now. We urge you to act NOW. If HR 818 were to languish this year, I believe, based on last year's wild fire season, that we could possibly see even more devastating consequences this year in our county and all over the West. Please do not let that happen!

It is our view that action to combat the dangers posed by wild fires ought not be reactive, but proactive. In that light, we view HR 818 as a valuable tool and much needed step to address forest health and fire mitigation in both the short and long term. As a Hinsdale County Commissioner, I wish to express our full support of the bill. Please help give us the tools to do the right thing in our forests and for our people.