

Committee on Resources

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Congressman Jim Gibbons

March 7, 2003

Opening Remarks-Wildfire Field Hearing- Flagstaff, AZ

Thank you, Mr.Chairman

Having lived in the great state of Nevada my entire life, I have witnessed countless wild fires run faster than horses through our prized forest and brush lands- destroying everything in their paths.

If the absolute destruction of forests, brush land and private property isn't catastrophic enough, consider the tremendous amount of smoke that fills our skies and pollutes the air we all breathe.

With no vegetation to hold the soil in place, thousands of tons of sediment is dumped into our streams and lakes, greatly reducing the high water quality that Nevada enjoys.

Precious habitats and wildlife are destroyed as the fires ravage our wild lands.

Yet, these catastrophes can be prevented.

Now is the time to start preparing for the upcoming fire season.

The National Weather Services reported that Reno, Elko, and Winnemucca, Nevada, recorded the warmest January in meteorological history.

Currently, there are places in my district that only have 39% of the average snowpack, 13% of the average annual precipitation, and reservoirs at 8% capacity!

I know that I am not here to give you a weather report, but these statistics are of great concern to me because the on-going drought conditions dramatically increase the speed at which a wildfire can overtake thousands of acres of forest land.

If substantial precipitation does not occur in the next couple months, Nevada could be facing its worst fire season ever!

Last year, Nevada's fire season was considered mild in that only 90,000 acres burned!

Nevertheless, Nevada's fire fighting resources were exhausted last year because they were loaned to other states who weren't so lucky to have a "mild" season.

In the absence of sufficient resources, Nevada relied heavily on assistance from the National Guard.

The activation of 23% of Nevada's National Guard troops and reservists to the Middle East - with the strong possibility that even more will be called up in connection with a potential war in Iraq - will leave my state short-handed when this year's wildfire season flares up.

Additionally, 1/3 of the fire-fighting airtanker fleet is grounded.

Our resources for fighting these fires are becoming more and more limited.

Shame on Congress for allowing this problem to culminate to the point we are at today.

Shame on Congress if we do nothing, and if we give-in to radical environmentalists who want us to leave the

forests completely alone.

Shame on Congress if we become more concerned with some special interest group's environmental scorecard than we are with doing what is right!

If we do as they wish, if we do nothing, we will only watch thousands of more acres, habitats, and homes go up in flames.

Currently, each time our public land managers propose to do the responsible thing by managing our forest lands to lessen the severity of the fires, radical groups who supposedly care for the condition of our forests, file lawsuits to tie our hands.

Their lawsuits, dragged out for years and thus prohibiting any progress towards protecting our forests, oftentimes guarantees that these lands will catastrophically burn.

We can continue on this dead end path until every acre of forest land in the western United States is diminished to charcoal .

... or, we can cut through the bureaucratic red tape and give the Forest Service and the Department of Interior the tools they need to expeditiously manage our forest lands.

By reducing the overgrowth and removing the dead trees on the 10 million acres of public lands at risk of severe wildfire, we will prove to be the true environmentalists and stewards of America's treasured lands.

This Congress, we have the opportunity to reduce the risk of wildfire. We have the opportunity to protect our forests, wildlife, and environment for future generations to enjoy and treasure.

Therefore, I urge my colleagues to support the efforts of the House Committee on Resources to pass the President's Healthy Forests Initiative.

We stand to lose just too much if we don't.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman, for your fight and persistence on this important issue.

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