

Subcommittee on Federal Lands

Tom McClintock, Chairman

Hearing Memo

April 21, 2015

To: All Natural Resources Committee Members

From: Gary Schiff, Majority Staff, x6-7736
Federal Lands Subcommittee

Hearing: Oversight hearing titled, *“Wildland Fire’s Devastating Impacts and the Need to Better Manage our Overgrown, Fire-prone National Forests.”*

The Subcommittee on Federal Lands will hold an oversight hearing to receive testimony on *“Wildland Fire’s Devastating Impacts and the Need to Better Manage our Overgrown, Fire-prone National Forests,”* on **Thursday, April 23, 2015 at 9:00 a.m. in Room 1324 Longworth**. The hearing will focus on the devastating impacts of wildfire and the need to significantly increase forest management efforts on our national forests.

Policy Overview

- America’s national forests are increasingly becoming overgrown, fire-prone thickets due in part, to a lack of active management such as thinning forests to reduce fire danger. As a result, catastrophic wildfires are growing in number, size and intensity with devastating impacts to the environment.
- The Forest Service is entrusted with managing mostly forested areas in 43 states and Puerto Rico, an area equivalent to ten percent of the continental U.S. land base. Agency staff recently identified 58 million acres¹ as high risk for catastrophic wildfire or almost a third of the 193 million acre National Forest System. The identified wildfire at-risk area is equal to an area almost the size of the states of Pennsylvania and New York combined. This year the agency plans thinning on *less than three percent* of that acreage.²
- Significant concerns have been raised about the Forest Service’s anemic forest management efforts, both in terms of administrative obstacles (e.g., cumbersome planning processes, high costs and analysis ad nauseam); and legal obstacles in approving forest management projects.
- The amount of forest area thinned is often accomplished through commercial timber harvest. From the mid 1950’s through the mid 1990’s, the average amount of timber harvested from the national forests averaged ten to twelve billion board feet.³ During the

¹ Agency firelab.org website, “fifty-eight million acres of national forests are at high or very high risk of severe wildfire.”

² Forest Service FY2016, Budget Justification, Page 129, 2.9 million acres planned; subtracting projected prescribed burning acres per information request to agency staff.

³ FY 1905-2014 National Summary Cut and Sold Data and Graphs, USDA Forest Service

same period, the average annual amount of acres burned due to catastrophic wildfire, was 3.6 million acres per year.⁴

- By contrast, due to litigation and subsequent cautionary actions and added process by the Forest Service in an effort to prevent further litigation, those numbers changed rather substantially. Since 1996, the average amount of timber harvested annually was between 1.5 and 3.3 billion board feet.⁵ Also since 1996, the average annual amount of acres burned due to catastrophic wildfire was over six million acres per year.⁶

The Impacts of Catastrophic Wildfire

- 1) One of the biggest post-wildfire challenges is the impact of ash and debris on domestic water delivery. Water agencies have spent hundreds of millions of dollars to dredge reservoirs, clean intake facilities and replace burned-up infrastructure.
- 2) In addition, the adverse impacts to wildlife habitat has been quite significant. Agency staff rate wildfire as one the biggest threats to endangered species habitat.
- 3) The post-fire forest rehabilitation costs to the Forest Service have topped 142 million dollars over the past four years.⁷
- 4) The impact to homes has been devastating as well. Between 2006 and 2014, the Forest Service reports that 3,716 structures were destroyed. (Many more received significant damage.)
- 5) Yet, most tragic has been the 348 wildfire-related fatalities which have occurred over the past twenty years.⁸

Tribal Forest versus National Forests

While thinning of the national forests is hampered by increasing and lengthy process and legal challenges, active forest management on the 18.6 million acres of neighboring tribal forests is being efficiently accomplished.⁹ Tribally-owned and managed forests must comply with the same federal laws in which national forests comply (including the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA)). The 2013 Indian Forest Management Assessment Team Report to Congress noted that tribes are able to accomplish more on their forests with far less funding than other federal managers and their work could serve as a model for others. (Note: In order to file an administrative appeal on a tribal forest project, one must have a direct financial interest in the

⁴ National Interagency Fire Center, Historical Wildland Fire Information (website)

⁵ FY 1905-2014 National Summary Cut and Sold Data and Graphs, USDA Forest Service

⁶ National Interagency Fire Center, Historical Wildland Fire Information (website)

⁷ Information provided by agency in response to Committee staff request

⁸ FS BAER/Fire Rehab Expenditures Report and Data Provided by Agency Fire Management staff

⁹ Information provided by Deputy Director, Department of Natural Resources, Yakama Nation

outcome.)¹⁰ Tribes are concerned by the lack of management on adjacent national forests and point to examples of where wildfires on federal forests have spread to tribal forests due to forest management project planning delays and the threat of litigation.¹¹

Collaborative Efforts on National Forests

The Forest Service has begun engaging in large landscape level collaborative efforts involving environmental interests, industry and local citizens in developing plans for forest management. The agency funds and tracks twenty-three separate formal collaborative efforts ranging in size from 130,000 acres to 2.4 million acres (To understand the scale, the size of the State of Connecticut is 2.5 million acres).¹² While increased engagement of all sectors of the public is important and valuable, so is timeliness and outcomes. The number of acres treated by these projects and amount harvested pales in comparison to the need. The average annual amount harvested over a three year period for twenty three collaborative efforts with all of the meetings and discussions those efforts entailed, was less than four percent of what the annual harvest was for the national forests from the mid-1950's through the mid-1990's.¹³

Forest Infrastructure

The ability to thin the forest depends to a significant extent on having timber processing capacity (saw mills, biomass plants, etc.) and capabilities in proximity to the area requiring thinning. This capacity has been significantly diminished due to a lack of supply. Across the West, between 1986 and 2003 the processing capacity decreased by one-third.¹⁴ Without the commercial component, which often pays for thinning through the sale of commercially viable wood products, thinning becomes a much more expensive proposition for the taxpayer.

Witnesses Invited (One Panel)

Philip Rigdon, Deputy Director
Yakama Nation, Department of Natural Resources

Diane Vosick, Director of Policy and Partnerships
Ecological Restoration Institute, Northern Arizona University

Andy Fecko, Administrator
Placer County Water Agency, Placer County, CA

Mitch Friedman, Executive Director
Conservation Northwest, Bellingham/Seattle, WA

¹⁰ BIA implementation regulations per Inter-Tribal Council staff

¹¹ Written Testimony, President Inter-Tribal Timber Council, before the House Natural Resources Committee, Federal Lands Subcommittee, April 23, 2015

¹² Collaborative Forest Landscape Restoration 5-Year Report, March 2015

¹³ Comparison of data provided by agency in response to staff request

¹⁴ Timber-Processing Capacity and Capabilities in the Western United States, Journal of Forestry, July/August 2006