

Committee on Resources

Subcommittee on Forests & Forest Health

Statement / Witness List

**TESTIMONY OF
CONGRESSMAN JOHN THUNE
BEFORE THE
FORESTS AND FOREST HEALTH SUBCOMMITTEE,
MAY 3, 2000**

Thank you Madam Chairwoman, and members of the Committee for allowing me to testify here today regarding H.R. 4226, the Black Hills National Forest and Rocky Mountain Research Station Improvement Act of 2000. This bill contains two major provisions addressing important forest management and health needs for South Dakota.

First, H.R. 4226 authorizes the Secretary of Agriculture to sell or exchange certain lands owned by the Forest Service and to use the funds to acquire land in order to construct two administrative sites for the Black Hills National Forest (BHNF). By allowing the BHNF to construct two new administrative facilities, the Forest Service will be able to eliminate two leased offices which have an annual cost of \$150,000, thereby consolidating four administrative sites on the BHNF into two. Additionally, by allowing the sale or exchange of these lands, the BHNF can increase efficiency and communications, decrease public confusion over the location of administrative sites, and make the BHNF more visible and available to the over 4 million visitors that visit the area each year. Furthermore, according to the Forest Service, this bill will save the taxpayers and additional \$109,000 in annual maintenance costs and \$880,000 in deferred maintenance costs. The bill also contains a provision to protect property owners from being forced to sell their land for the project.

Second, this bill authorizes \$2.1 million to build a new research laboratory for the Rocky Mountain Research Center to be co-located with one of the new Forest Service administrative buildings. Authorizing the funds to build a new research laboratory is essential because the Forest Service has said it will close the Research Center if it doesn't have a new facility. Currently, the Center's laboratory needs major repairs, is not handicap accessible, does not meet OSHA regulations, and is inadequate to support the unit's mission. In fact, it is my understanding that the facility housing the Rocky Mountain Research Center in Rapid City was among the lowest ranked facilities in a recent review of all USDA research facilities by the Strategic Planning Task Force on USDA Research. The Forest Service has estimated that construction of a new lab collocated with one of the new administrative sites would save the taxpayers \$10,200 in annual maintenance costs and \$219,700 in deferred maintenance costs.

Madam Chairwoman, in addition to its fiscal merits, this bill responds to the strong comments and concerns raised at a Land Use Summit I recently held in Rapid City South Dakota. At that event, residents and multiple use groups voiced their frustration about the Center's possible closing. The funds authorized by this bill would help preserve important research positions and allow the Rocky Mountain Research Center to continue studying and addressing range and wildlife issues on the region's grasslands and woodlands. The

Research Station plays an important role in helping manage the Black Hills National Forest and Grasslands. The Station, which focuses on managing prairies to sustain livestock and wildlife, has been instrumental in decisions affecting wood production, stream flows, and fire ecology research to provide forage for livestock and wildlife species.

Madam Chairwoman and members of the Committee, this bill will provide a future for the Rocky Mountain Research Center and the valuable information it provides. I ask for your help in passing this important legislation. Thank you for your time this morning, and I would be happy to answer any questions you may have.

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