

Committee on Resources

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Written Testimony of Mayor Gene Kelley, Mayor, City of Show Low

Field Hearing on "Crisis on the National Forests: Containing the Threat of Wildland Fire to the Environment and Communities"

Friday, March 7, 2003 – Flagstaff, Arizona

Last year's Rodeo-Chediski fire was something that none of us ever want to see repeated. As the Mayor of Show Low I am most grateful that Show Low was spared the devastation. I know that I speak for our entire community when I express my sincerest condolences to our neighboring communities who experienced great losses. I express our collective gratitude to everyone involved in the suppression of this fire. A special thanks goes to the Forest Service and the White Mountain Apache Tribe for the countless acres of their land that was thinned prior to the fire. We believe that this effort ultimately protected Show Low. In particular, Rick Lupe and his dedicated crew deserve a lot of the credit for saving Show Low and our neighboring communities. We are forever in their debt.

The City of Show Low has been concerned for years that what happened last summer was a possibility. We have worked hard and long in an effort to prepare our community for the possibility of such a disaster. For years before the Rodeo-Chediski fire we have been involved in forest health issues that focused on the need to thin our forests to restore them to their natural state.

During the winter and spring prior to the fire, the City of Show Low was very heavily involved in Navajo County efforts aimed at preparing our collective communities for the possibility of a catastrophic wildfire. The City of Show Low developed a "Surviving a wildfire...are you prepared?" Brochure that we believe led to a very effective evacuation of Show Low once that became necessary. In addition, the City was involved in many efforts aimed at preparing our residents for the very real possibility of a wildfire. The City of Show Low sponsored a community fire preparedness forum in the spring of 2002. It was well received by the community and helped us spread the message of the importance of preparedness. That forum aired live on City 4 Television, our city-sponsored cable station.

Prior to the fire the City had begun some projects to remove dead trees on City property in an attempt to mitigate the bark beetle problem and in the process reduce the fire danger. Since the fire, we have embarked upon a number of thinning projects on City property in an attempt to set the example for private property owners.

In addition City 4 Television has done a number of programs on the importance of protecting our homes and businesses from the threats of wildfire with firewise landscaping. One program in particular documented the effect that firewise landscaping had on a home in Timberland Acres, one of the areas hit hardest by the fire. By following the simple guidelines provided by the Firewise program, a family was able to save their home while the homes of their neighbors were lost.

We have coordinated with University of Arizona Cooperative Extension, the Northern Arizona University School of Forestry, and the Ecological Restoration Institute. Six years ago we were a partner in the formation of the White Mountain Natural Resources working group, to bring together all interested parties involved in the natural resources debate and identify workable solutions to forest health concerns in both the community forest and the Apache Sitgreaves National Forest. The group developed and implemented the Blue Ridge Demonstration Project on 17,000 acres of forest service land adjacent to the community of Pinetop-Lakeside. This project has demonstrated that all the interested parties can work together productively. To date 5000 of the 17,000 acres have been effectively treated. The treatments implemented south and west of Show Low, that enabled firefighters to keep the Rodeo-Chediski Fire out of Show Low, Pinetop-Lakeside, and beyond, were modeled after these successful treatments conducted on the Blue Ridge Demonstration Project. A special debt of gratitude is owed Senator Jon Kyl who was responsible for directing a significant amount of funding towards the this project.

Another very positive result of the Natural Resource Working Group and the Blue Ridge Demonstration

Project has been the designation of the Apache-Sitgreaves National Forest as a County Partnership Restoration (CPR) Program pilot forest. Funding for this pilot is in the current National Fire Plan. This program includes the local communities as partners in the forest restoration and management, planning and implementation process.

There is an area south of Show Low that has been designated as an area critical to the protection of Show Low and much of the White Mountains. That area must be treated if we are to protect our communities and forests from another catastrophic fire. We have been informed by our friends at the Forest Service that money for that project will not be available until May or June. If they can't start that project until the funding is available in May or June there is a good chance they will have to shut the project down (if they ever get started) because of the onset of the fire season. In response to that news the Show Low City Council recently voted unanimously to lend the Federal Government \$300,000 to facilitate that thinning project on approximately 600 – 1000 acres of Forest Service land. Unfortunately, the Federal Government has no mechanism in place to be able to take advantage of our offer. We find this to be a very frustrating catch - 22 situation. We continue to pursue this project through political means and today's hearing is part of that process.

We have had much success convincing homeowners and business owners of the importance of saving the forests in our own communities by cleaning up their own property. The Show Low City Council has passed two resolutions in support of forest health and fire protective landscaping within our community. We are in the process of preparing an ordinance that would address those issues. Now, we need your support in making it possible for the Forest Service to have the necessary funds available for critical projects on public lands like this one.

I would recommend that this committee go back to Washington D.C. and develop a mechanism to implement the solution that we have outlined. Find a way to break the impasse now. We need your support in giving us the opportunity to make a difference in our own community and throughout the White Mountains. Words cannot express how important and essential this project is to protecting our communities.