

**TESTIMONY BEFORE THE
SUBCOMMITTEE ON FORESTS AND FOREST HEALTH
COMMITTEE ON RESOURCES
U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES**

**By
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concerning
Oversight hearing: Wildfires and the National Forest:
An Update on the 2002 Wildland Fire Season
July 11, 2002**

Good morning, Mr. Chairman and members of the Subcommittee:

My name is Mark Pearson. I am executive director of the San Juan Citizens Alliance, a Durango-based citizens conservation group of about 500 southwest Colorado residents. We have monitored and participated in Forest Service planning and management decisions on the San Juan National Forest for the past 15 years. I greatly appreciate the opportunity to participate in this hearing to update Members of Congress on the status of the 2002 Wildland Fire Season. We who live in Mr. McInnis' district, and who live in and around Durango, have a particularly keen interest in wildland fires this year.

By the end of last week, the Missionary Ridge fire had burned across approximately 73,000 acres of the San Juan National Forest outside Durango. Like many of my friends and neighbors in Durango, I've had an involuntary front row seat to the fire. I was evacuated from my home for one week during the fire, but fortunately returned a week ago Monday to find my home and property unscathed.

Missionary Ridge Fire Occurred Under Historic Drought Conditions

The Missionary Ridge fire has occurred under extraordinary circumstances. Southwest Colorado remains in the grip of the greatest drought in recorded history. Until a brief storm last week, Durango had received just one-inch of precipitation since the start of the year, compared to an average of over seven inches. As the Chairman has noted, standing trees in the San Juan Mountains currently have less moisture than kiln-dried boards at lumber stores. The grass is crunchy underfoot everywhere through our mountains, a tinder-box waiting to explode as the number of recent fires attest.

Prior to Missionary Ridge, and the 137,000-acre Hayman fire near Denver, the record fire in Colorado was another San Juan blaze, the Lime Creek burn of 1879. Historic newspaper accounts report that winter snowpack and spring moisture in 1879 closely mimicked this year's conditions. The snowpack was miniscule, and news editors in the new mining town of Silverton touted the region's balmy winters as an inducement to draw more miners and settlers to the region. By May, fires were already burning in the upper Animas River valley, and by early June, 1879 a fire ignited in lower Lime Creek that would burn for a month through the high elevation aspen and spruce forests all the way to the edge of Silverton. The tinder-box conditions that permitted our moist San Juan forests to burn at high elevation in June, 1879 were re-created this year. In essence, what we've seen this year is a once in a century set of climatic conditions, a drought so extreme that it has broken all known records.

The drought's conditions have resulted in accidental ignitions of almost unbelievable cause. The Coal Seam fire near Glenwood Springs ignited when an underground coal fire that had burned without incident for decades was fanned into a conflagration by a coincidence of howling dry winds and kindling fuels. Ten

homes were consumed in an hour by the Valley Fire near Durango ignited by an electric fence in contact with weeds and grass. The 73,000-acre monster Missionary Ridge fire was set off by an innocent motor vehicle spark or backfire.

According to the fire incident commanders, the Missionary Ridge fire exhibited extreme behavior. A typical scenario in this fire was the creation of towering, 30,000-foot columns of superheated smoke and embers spiraling skyward late into the evening. As the fires consumed available fuel on the ground and the heat diminished, the columns collapsed. In some cases, these collapsing smoke columns rained burning debris three or four miles in advance of the fire lines. One such column collapsed onto the Aspen Trails subdivision the night of June 14, igniting dozens of spot fires and sending the fire racing across thousands of additional acres through forested subdivisions.

I was personally evacuated at 3:00 pm on Monday, June 24 when the fire exploded out of the top of Haflin Creek. Haflin Creek is one of the steep, rugged canyons that plunge to the Animas Valley from Missionary Ridge. The canyon rises over 3,000 feet in just two horizontal miles. Dense stands of white fir, Douglas fir, and aspen grew in the head of Haflin Creek. When the fire hit these dense stands in precipitous terrain, some of it so steep it is almost impossible to stand, the resultant fuel cell burned vigorously and created another towering column of fire and embers that spurred evacuation of downwind residences such as mine. This particular cloud exploded over the top of the ridge, broke the firelines, and surged downhill. A combination of aspen stands that dropped the fire to the ground and aggressive attack by air tankers, helicopters and ground crews restored the defensive perimeter.

The fire fighting effort for Missionary Ridge was an extraordinary example of well-coordinated local and federal cooperation. Durango residents and area homeowners do not have enough praise for the unbelievably heroic efforts made by firefighters who literally saved dozens if not hundreds of homes by their gritty determination not to lose any more homes than absolutely necessary. The quick response by Red Cross, FEMA, and countless other relief organizations greatly relieved the burden on residents displaced and those that lost homes, businesses, and property. Our sincerest sympathy goes out to the family of firefighter Alan Wyatt killed in a tragic accident last week while working to defend our homes and forests.

Missionary Ridge Fire Burned Through Aspen and Other Cool, Wet Forest Types

The Missionary Ridge fire was ignited by a motor vehicle on a forest access road on private property on June 9. Gusting winds quickly drove the fire uphill, into mixed conifer, aspen, and spruce amidst some of the most heavily logged and roaded parts of the national forest. The first day, Missionary Ridge grew to 7,000 acres in a matter of hours. It quickly roared through 40-year-old spruce clearcuts and crested the ridge. At this point, the dried grasses of the clearcuts served simply to accelerate the fire even faster than it was moving through the crown of forest.

Despite this fire's extreme behavior, in many other instances it burned as a cool, backing fire very similar to the prescribed fires set in spring and fall by fire managers. Particularly in the abundant aspen stands present in the fire perimeter, the fire dropped to the forest floor and burned undergrowth in a patchy mosaic of fire. In many ways, the Missionary Ridge fire is probably indicative of the mid-19th-century fires that reportedly burned across the landscape and created the vast tracts of contiguous aspen that characterize the San Juan Mountains. It seems quite likely that most of the over 70,000 acres within Missionary Ridge will quickly regenerate as vibrant young aspen stands.

I know many residents are dismayed by the seeming moonscapes that surround some of their homes and businesses. My friends and neighbors in subdivisions like Enchanted Forest and Aspen Trails are relieved by the survival of their homes, but discouraged about the blackened condition of the surrounding forest. If folks can hang on to a bit of optimism at Vallecito and other resort areas, they will likely see the forest recover as one of the most scenic and stunning vistas in all the San Juans, with shimmering aspen forests surrounding a jewel-like mountain reservoir.

Missionary Ridge Fire's Role in Ecosystem

The Missionary Ridge fire also addressed one of the other major concerns of forest managers in southwest Colorado. Both the Colorado State Forest Service and the San Juan National Forest have asserted that the aspen forests created by landscape-scale fires in the 1800s and earlier are slowly succumbing to succession by spruce and fir. Forest Service documents describe that "suppression of wildfires over the past century has allowed most of these seral [aspen] stands to mature. As the seral aspen gives way to conifers throughout the Region, there will be an overall loss of diversity in plant communities." (Clyde Lake Timber Sale EA, February 1999) The Missionary Ridge fire has reset the ecological clock on over 70,000 acres of existing and future aspen stands, dwarfing the few hundreds of acres addressed by any specific aspen timber sale. Prior to the fire, Missionary Ridge offered a panoply of fall colors anyway, but the rejuvenated aspen stands from this fire will match or surpass any forest in Colorado.

Role of Wilderness Areas in Fire Fighting Strategies

One of the key fire fighting strategies utilized in both the Missionary Ridge and Hayman fires was to direct the fires towards safe havens in wilderness areas, far from homes and property. The presence of the Weminuche Wilderness Area on the northern periphery of the fire allowed fire commanders to focus their resources protecting homes and property on the southern flanks of the fire. Fire commanders continually pinched and nipped at the fire's edges to slowly maneuver it into the wilderness where it no longer threatened homes, and where fire should naturally be restored to the ecosystem anyway.

Wilderness served a similar purpose in the massive Hayman fire near Denver, where the Lost Creek Wilderness Area anchored the western flank of defensive efforts. Here, fire commanders also left the wilderness as a sort of "fire sink" where they could send the fire to burn unattended for days until more critical areas were contained, and then finally turned their attention at the end to the more remote spaces of the wilderness.

San Juan National Forest is Taking a Sound Approach to the National Fire Plan

Like many forests around the country, the San Juan National Forest has been gearing up to increase its fire management strategies in the past two years since enactment of the 2000 National Fire Plan. After receiving funding from Congress last year, the San Juan National Forest is aggressively moving forward with public outreach and involvement, and implementing numerous fuels reduction projects. For example,

- The San Juan National Forest has scheduled at least 18 fuels reduction and thinning projects near rural subdivisions. Specifically, four of these projects were already planned for this summer and fall along the edges of the Missionary Ridge fire perimeter. As an example, the Vallecito Project planned to thin ponderosa pine, white fir, and oakbrush to reduce hazardous fuels adjacent to private land and Forest Service campgrounds.
- The San Juan continues its program of aggressive prescribed burns near Durango and other communities, such as last April's 1,000-acre prescribed burn in the Log Chutes area just northwest of the city limits.
- Close to home, in my own neighborhood, last summer the BLM initiated a 40-acre fuels reduction project to clear oakbrush and thin ponderosa pine. Local residents were invited on tours to observe and offer comments.
- A week from today, on July 18, the San Juan National Forest is holding a La Plata County focus group to help ascertain better ways to educate the community about fire risks. Previous efforts in conjunction with homeowners and fire chiefs have laid out priorities for protecting homes in rural

subdivisions.

The San Juan National Forest offers an excellent model for implementing the National Fire Plan. The necessary fuels reduction projects are now in the pipeline a year and a half after direction by National Fire Plan. In conjunction with local fire chiefs, public involvement and education about reducing community risks is in full swing. The Forest is focusing its fire money and staff on projects in those places close to homes where local homeowners and fire chiefs agree the risk of wildfire is severe (the wildland-urban interface).

I understand that National Forests elsewhere have approached implementation of the National Fire Plan differently. For example, the Grand Mesa, Uncompahgre, and Gunnison (GMUG) National Forest just north of the San Juan is using a legitimate fuel reduction project as the anchor for a controversial commercial timber sale which the Forest Service admits may increase fire risk. Specifically, the Ward Lake Fuels Reduction Project combines a light-on-the-land fuels reduction effort around the boundary of extensively developed and fire-prone private lands with the Skinned Horse project, an old shelterwood timber sale and road-building proposal that the GMUG has twice withdrawn from consideration after public opposition. This combination of projects is sure to generate controversy about the agency's implementation of the National Fire Plan. We urge the Forest Service to follow the San Juan's model, and focus fuel reduction efforts near homes – where fire chiefs and residents of my community want them focused.

No Logging Projects Were Proposed or Appealed in Missionary Ridge Fire

The Missionary Ridge fire burned in the middle of June through normally wet and moist forests of aspen, spruce and fir. That it was able to do so emphasizes the extraordinary nature of climate this year. Some have expressed concern about whether logging or other forest management projects have been unnecessarily delayed in these fire areas that might have made a difference in the fire's intensity and extent. Within the Missionary Ridge fire perimeter, there had not been a single logging project proposed by the Forest Service in the past decade in part because the upper elevations were extensively logged through the 1960s and never regenerated. Because there were no proposed logging projects, public involvement played no role in delaying any fuels reduction activities. This is similar to the national statistics reported by the GAO, that only a handful out of more than 1,671 fuels reduction projects it reviewed in August 2001 were appealed by various public interests, and none litigated.

Hayman Fire Burned Primarily Outside the Upper South Platte Project Boundary

Some have expressed concerns more specifically about the Hayman fire and objections raised by conservation groups to parts of a proposed Upper South Platte Project located around near and outside the northern end of the fire. Last September, the Forest Service approved implementing logging and thinning on 12,000 acres, with work beginning on the ground this spring just before the Hayman fire started. This decision, which involved thinning adjacent to home and communities in already roaded areas, was not challenged by anyone. Local conservation groups had challenged logging on an additional 5,200 acres located in undeveloped roadless areas, asking for better definition of exact locations of proposed logging, whether the proposal would retain larger, more fire-resistant trees, and how the trees would be removed without the need for constructing new roads. These concerns and others were raised by the Environmental Protection Agency and Congressman Mark Udall as well as by conservationists. The Project itself – both in its scope and nature – was a new type of proposal for the Front Range. It would have removed more timber than virtually any other Forest Service logging project in Colorado over the past decade. It is not surprising, then, that a project of this nature, particularly where it involved more remote areas, would involve some controversy.

The Upper South Platte project also highlights one of the scientific uncertainties about fuels reduction projects. While there is some general consensus about what our pine forests may have looked like

in the 1800s, prior to European settlement, many scientists still view thinning projects aimed at restoring forests as experimental in nature. Because of this uncertainty, forest biologists at Colorado State University and University of Wyoming argue against invading roadless areas with these experiments, and focusing efforts instead on lands near homes and private property.

Some have argued that the Upper South Platte Project provides a textbook example of why laws that protect our water, wildlife, and wild places and that ensure public involvement in forest management must be changed. I disagree. The Pike-San Isabel National Forest did not identify where it wished to begin its thinning efforts until September 1999 – less than three years ago. Given that the project would have taken up to 8 years to implement, and given the tinder dry condition of the forest, it is not likely that the Project would have halted the Hayman blaze sooner, even if all environmental laws had been ignored. Public input ultimately improved some parts of the decision, and helped the Forest Service better explain and clarify its vision for the project.

In any case, the Project is located at the far northern end of the Hayman fire, far from the original point of ignition. The Hayman fire burned tens of thousands of acres long before it came near the area of the Upper South Platte Project. Approximately 98% of the fire occurred in areas not impacted by citizen appeals to revisit the Roadless Area portions of the decision, and the fire ultimately stopped in roadless areas at the fire's periphery.

Best Defense For Homeowners Remains the 100 Feet Around Houses

The Missionary Ridge fire provides stark evidence to buttress the advice reiterated by fire chiefs and Forest Service scientists time after time -- the single most critical element to saving or losing a home to wildfire is the defensible space created in the 100 feet surrounding a house. Metal roofs and cleared brush still make the greatest difference. Fire researchers report that outside a 100-foot radius, even the radiant heat generated from a raging crown fire won't spontaneously ignite wood siding on a house. Homeowners who create defensible space can knock down a crown fire to a manageable level and give their property a fighting chance at surviving even a howling firestorm.

The Missionary Ridge fire provided a wake-up call that Durango residents cannot ignore. County commissioners are now considering what changes to land use codes and building requirements are needed to minimize problems of access, steep and narrow roads, lack of water supplies, and other difficulties encountered by firefighters trying to save homes. So many homeowners are now rushing to create more defensible space around their homes that local tree trimmers and fire protection businesses are swamped with work, with waiting lists stretching to months.

Keys to Success in Fire Prevention Include Local and Federal Efforts and Favorable Climate

Rain showers have started to bless the San Juans. Over an inch of rain fell on the Missionary Ridge fire last week, draining its vigor. The National Fire Plan is on track in the San Juans. Congress needs to fully fund it, make sure that firefighting efforts do not so severely deplete the coffers as to shortchange the preventative efforts agreed upon by homeowners, fire chiefs, foresters, and residents that will protect property in the event dramatic drought conditions persist through the remainder of the summer and into next year. Local residents and elected officials must grapple with difficult land use and zoning decisions to improve defensible space and limit development proposed for indefensible locations.

Thank you for your attention and the opportunity to offer these thoughts. I would be happy to address any questions.