

# Committee on Resources

resources.committee@mail.house.gov

[Home](#) [Press Gallery](#) [Subcommittees](#) [Issues](#) [Legislation](#) [Hearing Archives](#)

HON. SCOTT McINNIS

## OPENING STATEMENT

### CRISIS ON THE NATIONAL FORESTS: CONTAINING THE THREAT OF WILDFIRE TO THE ENVIRONMENT AND COMMUNITIES

MARCH 7, 2003

---

It's a pleasure to be here in Flagstaff, Arizona to initiate this Committee's full court press to enact legislation to protect our communities and our air, water, wildlife and forest ecosystems from the destructive forces of catastrophic wildfire. It's appropriate that this legislative push begins in Arizona, which was ripped by the record-setting Rodeo-Chediski fire last summer. Mr. Walden and I know a thing or two about record-setting wildfires ourselves - last summer's Biscuit Fire was the largest in Oregon's history, and my home state of Colorado experienced two wildfires last summer that were bigger and more destructive than any other in our state's recorded history.

If these unnatural fires and the many others like them have taught us anything, it is that the disastrous status quo on our national forests and public lands is not acceptable.

The status quo is unacceptable not only because of the massive price it has exacted on wildland-urban communities and rural economies. It's also intolerable because of the disastrous impact of these unnatural fires on our air, water, wildlife and our forest resources. My good friend Lyle Lavery will highlight this in much greater detail during his testimony, but Colorado's Hayman Fire provides a startling example of the kind of enduring environmental degradation that these fires cause. The fire dumped massive loads of mud and soot into Denver's largest supply of drinking water, annihilated several thousand acres of cathedral-like Ponderosa Pine old growth, and polluted Colorado's blue skies with carbon heavy black smoke. The fire so thoroughly polluted Denver air that the young and the elderly were urged not to go outside, and one asthmatic even died.

Of course, these stories are no surprise to anyone in this room. The Rodeo-Chediski produced its own environmental horror stories, just as did the many other fires around this nation.

And so the take home message is this: responsible environmental stewardship requires that Congress, land managers and affected communities move aggressively to address these crisis conditions on our national forests and public lands. Managing over-dense forests is the right thing to do for our air, water and wildlife.

But to treat at risk landscapes on a meaningful and effective scale, the slow-moving process that presently constrains federal land managers must be improved. Currently, it takes our land managers on average between 3 and 5 years to maneuver a thinning project through a tangled morass of federal procedures and processes. With communities in harms way, and our environment at risk, that is plain wrong.

In the weeks ahead, I intend to push legislation, in concert with the Members on this dias and any other Republican and Democrat interested in a bipartisan solution to this crisis, that would break this cycle of bureaucracy and empower local forest managers with the tools needed to restore the nation's forestlands to a healthy state. After enduring 2 fire seasons in the last 3 years that match any in terms of ferocity and wide-ranging destruction, doing nothing is just not an option. The time for action on the part of Congress is now.

It is with this that I thank Congressman Renzi for inviting us here today for this important discussion, and commend Chairman Pombo and the others for their leadership on this critical issue.

####