

**OPENING STATEMENT FOR THE
HONORABLE SCOTT McINNIS, CHAIRMAN
SUBCOMMITTEE ON FORESTS AND FOREST HEALTH
OVERSIGHT HEARING ON THE
IMPLEMENTATION OF THE NATIONAL FIRE PLAN
JULY 31, 2001**

This Subcommittee has spent more time working on the issues surrounding wildland fire than on any other subject. This is appropriate. There is no other federal forest issue that results in more public spending, more damage to forests or more hardship for people. Anyone who has been surprised by the size and severity of forest fires during the last few years has either ignored the issue or has been in denial, and there is no question that denial ran deep in the previous Administration. Since the late nineteen-eighties, commission after commission, report after report, all called for a dramatic and improved response to this explosive situation. Even in the face of these dire warnings, a business-as-usual approach dominated the previous Administration's behavior for the better part of eight years, until the impacts of their negligence became undeniable and unbearable during last years disastrous fire season.

Fortunately, since then, the issue has been infused with a new vigor in terms of greatly increased funding, and new direction in the form of a National Fire Plan. But the years of negligence have created an institutional momentum that won't be easy to curb. While some aspects of the fire plan are being effectively implemented, others are not. The GAO is going to testify that there are some crucial issues that have yet to be adequately addressed. The timing of their comments could not be better. Since this Administration is still in the process of staffing key positions and establishing new policies, it can use the GAO's remarks to help organize its basic strategies for implementation of the National Fire Plan. This also ties in well with the Administration's current collaborative efforts with the Western Governors' Association to develop a ten year comprehensive strategy.

To help ensure that these efforts move forward in an efficient, coordinated manner, I recently proposed that the position of "Fire Czar," or its equivalent, be created to oversee all federal wildland fire operations. A position such as this would help give the issue the attention, direction and emphasis it deserves, and would be a unifying force between Departments and a catalyst for inter-agency cooperation. These objectives may be accomplished by other means than by the appointment of a "Fire Czar"; what is most important is that the objectives are met.

Even though we have a long road ahead of us, I believe, for the first time, that we have broad understanding and recognition of the problem, a critical mass of support, the financial means and the collective will to begin a decades long battle to protect our nation's forests and adjacent communities from the indiscriminate ravages of catastrophic wildfires. Hopefully, this hearing will help us to continue to move these efforts forward in a positive manner.

#