

Hon. H. Robert “Bob” Morton
Washington State Senator

Testimony
Before the Subcommittee on Forests and Forest Health
United States House of Representatives

Oversight Hearing on Wildfires and Their Aftermath:
Protecting Communities, Watersheds, and Wildlife
October 4, 2006

Need for an Adequate and Timely Restoration Plan in the Wake of Forest Fires

Most of Northern Washington has been submerged in a haze of smoke this summer due to the Tripod Complex Fire--made up of three fires northeast of Winthrop, burning in mixed conifer. The fire started July 4th and continues today with 175,114 acres burned.

Actions to improve the health of our forests could have reduced the size and intensity of these fires. But red tape blocked efforts to save our diseased and dying forests.

Environmental litigation prevented crop rotation, fuels reduction, and productive management. This resulted in too many mature trees becoming susceptible to disease, too much fuel loading, and finally, widespread fires.

So when the smoky haze begins to clear, restoration work must begin immediately. It is imperative that the area not be plunged into yet another haze—this time a haze of paperwork and litigation over restoration plans—as has occurred in the past. For prompt action to occur, the United States Forest Service needs a more feasible salvage process to remove wildfire-damaged trees. Emergency salvage rules should provide for immediate restoration and salvage to reduce future fuel loads and hasten forest recovery.

One example of many is the 2002 Mt. Leona fire in Ferry County that burned 5,000 acres. Through the cumbersome NEPA (National Environmental Policy Act) process, it was first determined that only 1,500 acres would be salvaged. Additional delays and court appeals, however, further reduced the salvageable amount to only 220 acres. In the end, only 4 percent of the burned area was salvaged, over one year after the burn.

In addition, when the window of salvage time is stretched by bureaucratic paper work, the timber to be salvaged deteriorates in value. This money could be used to rehabilitate the forest, wildlife habitat, and watersheds. The delay also results in losing the fall window for re-seeding, and the salvaged area loses a year of growth because seedlings were not seeded before snow and frozen ground.

For the areas hit so hard by this summer's fires, the public expects, and is entitled to, a good stewardship and restoration program from the DNR (Department of Natural Resources_ and the National Forest Service. This plan needs to include at least the following basic criteria:

- Immediate timber cruising for the sale bid;
- Sale data, bid date, and estimated amount of salvageable timber;
- Date salvage of merchantable timber can begin;
- Date harvest will conclude;
- Dates for scarification and soil preparation;
- Seedling plantings needed and appropriate sources;
- Grass seeding to prevent erosion; and
- Date total project will conclude

While we are working to recover from these devastating fires, we also need to ask what we can do to reduce the impact of major forest fires in the future. The implementation of active forest health plans would clearly help. But NEPA, as it is currently being implemented, hinders our ability to keep forests healthy.

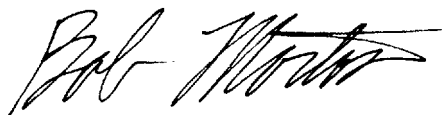
As Duane Vaagen, President of Vaagen Brothers Lumber Company, noted in previous testimony, our good neighbors, the Colville Confederated Tribes, manage about the same amount of timber acres as the Colville National Forest. The difference is that the Colville Tribes have an exemplary forest management program. While they also have to comply with NEPA, their annual harvest is 75 million feet compared to the Colville National Forest harvest of only 25 million feet, a figure forecast to decline to about half that amount within 2 years. Another comparison worth noting is that the tribe has only one NEPA Coordinator, while the adjoining Okanogan National Forest has 31 people.

We need to put common sense back into forest management decisions. As state and federal resources are being shifted to litigation support, our forests are not being managed appropriately. A recent US Forest Service study indicated about 40 percent of Forest Service time is spent on NEPA compliance. Our tax dollars should be improving the forest environment, watersheds, and wildlife habitats, NOT THE MARBLED HABITATS OF ENVIRONMENTAL LAW FIRMS AND THEIR ATTORNEYS—who profit most from NEPA's red tape and bureaucratic paralysis.

Achieving healthy forests is a shared responsibility, between the federal agencies, their state counterparts, and private landowners. We must all work together to lower fire risks, prevent forest disease, and protect and restore our precious forest resources. The status quo is not acceptable. We must do better.

Thank you for this congressional hearing on such an important and timely matter. The opportunity is NOW.

Cordially yours,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Bob Morton", with a stylized, flowing script.

BOB MORTON
State Senator