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TESTIMONY ON “IMPACT OF THE MOUNTAIN PINE BEETLE EPIDEMIC IN THE BLACK HILLS”

July 5, 2011

Introduction

Thank you Chairman Bishop, Representative Noem and members of the subcommittee for the opportunity to testify today.

My name is Jim Scherrer, and my comments regarding the impact of the mountain pine beetle epidemic in the Black Hills are provided from the perspective of a 32 year resident of the hills, the last 10 years of which have been as owner, with my wife Sally, of 166 acres of contiguous property (Clara Belle Mine) completely surrounded by Black Hills National Forest (BHNF) land. We are located approximately 1 mile southwest of the Norbeck Wilderness Area, and less than ¼ mile northwest of FS road 352 on the border of extreme south central Pennington County and extreme north central Custer County. Our property consists of a mixture of approximately 125 acres of old growth and young timber forest surrounding approximately 40 acres of high mountain meadows. Bear Gulch Creek runs thru the property and the original “Trout Haven” recreation lake is located on the property.

Background

The variety of natural ecosystems provides diversified opportunities for recreational activities including but not limited to hunting, fishing, hiking, snowshoeing, and horseback riding. Ownership of such a unique and beautiful area is a privilege and is associated with significant stewardship responsibilities. Our private land and our neighboring Black Hills National Forest are “multiple-use lands”, and as such, require attention to each of the individual areas to assure that the health of the property is maintained. For example, fences need to be maintained to assure

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that both our livestock and those that use the BHNH upper and lower Bear Gulch grazing permits during the summer months stay separate. On our property, we have erected several cross-fences to assure that a rotational grazing schedule provides for healthy grasses. Our weed-spraying program includes an aggressive battle during the summer months to stay ahead of the ongoing invasion of noxious weeds. Diversion dams and culverts are strategically placed in the watersheds on the property to protect against erosion from excess water run off, thus assuring a healthy fishery and down stream water flows. Forest health has become the preeminent issue over these past 10 years as a result of the explosion of the mountain pine beetle epidemic.

“Scherrer Landowner Plan”

In the spring of 2001, immediately upon purchase of the Clara Belle Mine property, Sally and I embarked upon a very aggressive long-term strategy to improve the forest health of our property. We employed Jerry Muckler, who has 30 years experience as a logger in the Black Hills, on a full time basis. He immediately began to clear and thin the pine trees on the property from the meadows up into the timber. The goal is to have the entire property thinned, recognizing that not all of the rugged central hills granite rock terrain is amenable to logging activity. This work defines the first of the four “legs of the stool” that we employ to maximize the Clara Belle’s forest health.

1. The ongoing thinning program is a critical tool used to prevent devastation to our private forest by the mountain pine beetle. Jerry routinely harvests mature trees that have grown too close to each other. Inadequate tree spacing decreases the open-air canopy, which then blocks the sun’s rays to the ground, which then limits the growth of natural grasses. Most importantly, decreasing the density of the forest improves the health of the pine trees and provides some protection from invasion of the pine beetles in July, August and September.
2. In the fall of each year, after the beetles have flown from the previous year’s now dead trees, Jerry walks the entire property and “marks” fresh beetle hits. During October and November, we are able to inventory those trees that have been invaded by the beetles. During the winter months, and before June of the following year, these trees are removed from the property. Saleable timber is hauled to the mill by truck, and the non-useable residual wood is piled and burned during the winter when sufficient snow allows. The removal of the source beetles has a very significant positive impact on our healthy

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trees the following summer, in that the “volume of inoculum” is decreased and our healthy trees are spared.

3. Beginning this year, we have begun a pesticide-spraying program using a highly concentrated solution of permethrin delivered to selected trees and saturating the trees from their base to 40-50 feet up. Protection of these “legacy trees” is just that.....protection. Spraying will provide protection from invasion of the tree during one beetle flight only. The solution is ineffective after the beetles have invaded the tree. This is a costly and time-consuming endeavor (approximately \$ 8.00/tree). However, we use our own fire protection water tank and pump to dispense the pesticide and we apply the treatment ourselves. Currently, during this spring protection period, we have protected over 400 legacy trees around our home, our out-buildings and on other aesthetically important acres of the property.

Cooperative Efforts with BHNF

4. Finally, for the long-term viability of the health of the Clara Belle Mine’s pine trees, we work with BHNF personnel to have them “sanitize affected areas of pine trees” on their side of the fence. In November 2010, the BHNF added several timber-logging units to the already authorized Zimmer Timber Sale. Hundreds of acres of very dense, very unhealthy timber were harvested and removed from the surrounding forest service property, a great deal of which is immediately adjacent to our property. Before the work began, we were asked to meet with FS personnel on November 10th, 2010. At that meeting, a private landowner (Jim Scherrer) and his neighbor (BHNF), worked together to agree upon a plan of action to immediately and without any delay, aggressively treat threatened areas of the forest. **It is very important to make the point that the area surrounding our private land had already been included in a NEPA (National Environmental Policy Act) decision. Consequently, the BHNF did not have to make a new NEPA decision before treating these additional acres. Had a new NEPA decision been necessary, we, the private landowner, and the well-intentioned FS personnel would NOT have been able to move in such a timely manner.** We coordinated with several different forest service experts, all of whom were very willing to apply their expertise to the challenge facing us with the pine beetle epidemic. Because of the very close proximity of

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the already decimated Norbeck Wilderness area and the Black Elk Wilderness area (these areas are less than 1 mile from our property to the north and northeast), it had become apparent that the 5000 acres of forest service land surrounding our property had become a very high risk area for spread of the beetles during the next flight in July, 2011. In fact, the personnel that had been engaged to “mark” the fresh beetle hit trees in this area, reported that 60-80% of the pine trees showed evidence of fresh hits from the 2010 beetle flight! After discussion and agreement on the plan of action, three separate logging crews were dispatched over the next four months and hundreds of acres of land were treated. Our property now has additional “buffer space” between our land and the untreated forest service property areas. We will now wait to see what impact the beetles will have during the July 2011 flight.

Conclusions and Recommendations:

Stewardship

As a private landowner in the beautiful Black Hills, we have truly been blessed. However, “to those who have been granted much, much is expected”. Our ongoing responsibility is to assure that our land is improved during the season of our stewardship. That means that we must do all that we can to preserve, protect and improve the land on which we live. This same sense of responsibility applies to those lands owned by the United States government. We would hope that our neighbors would honor the responsibilities that accompany ownership, which includes respecting and caring for the land. The gross neglect of the public land’s forest health by the US government (which includes Congress, this Administration as well as previous Administrations) has literally destroyed huge areas of the hills and placed those of us in close proximity to their property, in significant danger from the inevitable catastrophic fires that surely will occur. That neglect is inconsistent with my understanding of responsibility.

Black Hills National Forest Advisory Board

Due in part to the evolving pine mountain beetle epidemic in the northern hills, in 2004, then Senator Tom Daschle led an initiative that resulted in the formation of the Black Hills



National Forest Advisory Board (NFAB). The board consists of 15 private citizens of the Black Hills area who are charged with the responsibility of advising the Black Hills Forest Supervisor on issues important to our hills. I have been a member of that advisory board since it's inception in 2004. The seven years of experience serving on the NFAB board has, without question, provided me with much, much more that I have given in return. I have learned much about forest health and it's challenges in a forest that has more privately owned land within the boundaries of the national forest than any of the other 155 national forests in America. Unfortunately, I have also learned that in our country," very squeaky wheels get the grease". Over the past decade, as this pine beetle devastation has gone mostly unabated, a very small minority of our citizens, most of whom are not even residents of the Black Hills, have used the court system, political manipulation, and our own over bloated bureaucracy, to slow down and in most cases, frankly, stop the forest service personnel from doing what is necessary to "stay ahead" of the beetle infestation. The federal system with it's inefficient NEPA process and all of it's attendant time consuming red tape, has simply not used an ounce of common sense, and allowed this disaster to devastate hundreds of thousands of acres of BH forest with another 400,000 acres in immediate peril. Ours is a great forest! It deserves the best that our country has to offer to allow that greatness to blossom. **It is my recommendation that you employ any and all tools that are available, and consider developing new tools as needed so that the FS can make and implement decisions in a more expedient manner. I respectfully recommend that you act quickly and decisively to minimize and if at all possible, eliminate the delays in authorizations needed by the forest service personnel to allow them to provide the necessary resources to begin "treating" the hundreds of thousands of acres of forest now at risk from this escalating pine mountain beetle epidemic in the Black Hills!**

Thank you for providing me with the opportunity to speak to this critically important issue.

