

# Committee on Resources

## Full Committee

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### Witness Statement

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#### STATEMENT OF

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**Before the**

**Committee on Resources**

**United States House of Representatives**

**Concerning Issues associated with preserving roadless areas**

**in the National Forest System**

**November 3, 1999**

#### **MR. CHAIRMAN AND COMMITTEE MEMBERS:**

*"In 1891, Congress authorized the President to establish forest reserves (now called National Forests) ..... Congress took this action because the forests of the great mountain ranges in the West were being destroyed very rapidly by fire and reckless cutting. It was realized that unless something were done to protect them, the timber resources of the country and the many industries dependent upon the forest would be badly crippled..... At the start there was much opposition to the Forests. Often this opposition was just; for although Congress had set apart the lands and their resources it had made no provision for their use or their protection. The timber was simply locked up and left to burn. This mistake was remedied in 1897, when a law was passed which made it possible to use all the resources and give them suitable protection....." (Gifford Pinchot (1907) - ***The Use of the National Forests*** >).*

This statement is not my words, but words of Gifford Pinchot, our nation's first professional forester and first Chief Forester of the Forest Service. Chief Pinchot clearly saw the danger that fire possessed to unmanaged forests not only to timber production, but from a multiple use standpoint that included watershed protection, wildlife management, and recreation. The potential for catastrophic destruction by fire of areas in our National Forests proposed by President Clinton and Vice President Gore as forest preserves (= Forest Preserve Proposal) is only one concern. Additional concerns include sustaining biodiversity in the

proposed preserves over time and the disruption of current Forest Plan revisions in various National Forests if this proposal is adopted.

The road building ban and potential elimination of logging and other disturbance-related activities to maintain "unique ecological values" (quote from White House Briefing Statement, October 13th) in the roadless areas will augment existing management problems and raise the probability of catastrophic fires. Management options to control pests, prevent fuel load accumulation, or to fight massive fires are already relatively limited in these areas. Catastrophic events such as pest infestations, or wind and ice storms, have periodically caused extensive mortality over large areas within National Forests. Particularly devastating are native bark beetle infestations in southern and western National Forests and European gypsy moth infestations in eastern National Forests. Preventative or controlling management practices, e.g., thinning dense stands to control pine beetle populations or host species specific reductions in areas with gypsy moth, can be impractical or costly in roadless areas. Standing dead trees from infestations are a serious safety threat to recreationists, as falling limbs and trunks have the capacity to injure or kill. Large numbers of fallen trees make the forest impassable for management activities, fire fighting, or recreation, particularly in western forests where the decay rate is relatively slow. Prescribed burning to reduce the fuel load in roadless areas can be risky and removal of downed timber can be expensive and is often litigated against by private citizen groups. Dead trees from large infestations cause a severe fire hazard and if ignited, the lack of roads will hinder rapid response of fire fighters and their equipment. If management options to prevent or control pest populations and reduce fuel loads are completely eliminated from these areas, catastrophic fires will occur which can destroy adjacent parcels of land.

To put this potential problem in perspective, consider what happened to five wilderness areas within the National Forests in Texas (Billings, 1994). These areas were established in 1984 and consisted of 37,000 acres dominated by mature stands of loblolly and shortleaf pines. By the end of 1993, the southern pine beetle had destroyed approximately 40% of the mature pine type, for which these areas had been preserved. The beetle populations also invaded adjacent private lands. Mortality was in excess of 12,000 acres within the wilderness areas, which are now potentially capable of having catastrophic fires that could impact public and private lands. Wilderness area characteristics and policies restricted timely beetle control and the resource suffered greatly.

Exotic pests have taken a toll on biodiversity in North American forests. Chestnut blight, white pine blister rust, beech bark disease complex, hemlock and balsam woolly adelgids, butternut canker, dogwood anthracnose disease and Port-Orford-cedar root disease have and are dramatically impacting the composition of forest tree species in National Forests. Additionally, exotic pests cryptically impact plants, animals and habitat associated with each host species. Biological control research and breeding for host resistance have given hope for return of many of these host species. Reintroduction of seedlings to restore or sustain biodiversity, if allowed under the proposal, will require site preparation and post-planting care that would be difficult and prohibitively expensive in the proposed Forest Preserves.

Loss of oak regeneration on good sites in eastern forests is a growing problem and is probably impacting local biodiversity. Oaks provide a myriad of values, including the major source of hard mast (food) for wildlife. The reduction of oaks is complex, relating to fire control, pests, and forest use history. Research from many different perspectives has been conducted, and it is clear that some type of management and/or planting with subsequent management is necessary to maintain or restore oaks to the forest. As with exotic pests, management and/or planting activities would be very costly.

The combination of fire and white pine blister rust can endanger certain populations of western white and

whitebark pines in western National Forests. Seeds from whitebark pine are especially important for grizzly bears, as they are high in fat. White pine blister rust has reduced these species, particularly whitebark pine, to remnant populations in some areas. Catastrophic fires could eliminate these marginal populations causing an overall loss of diversity within each species and confound subsequent restoration efforts (if allowed) due to lack of a proper seed source. Additionally, if planting is not allowed in these roadless areas and natural regeneration of these species proceeds, the trees will not be resistant to blister rust and will be severely impacted on sites conducive to the pathogenicity of this exotic pest.

The Forest Preserve Proposal is a classic example of a centralized federal proclamation that shows little regard for local forestry planning efforts that have been negotiated in good faith. Two forest inventory processes, RARE I (Roadless Area Revision & Evaluation) and RARE II, have evaluated primitive and roadless areas in the National Forests for consideration as wilderness areas under the 1964 Wilderness Act. Based on the RARE I inventory, 274 wilderness areas were created. These existing Wilderness Areas were not included in the later RARE II inventory of roadless areas. The second phase of RARE II was used to evaluate these areas for use. As a result, RARE II lands were designated as additional wilderness areas or designated for nonwilderness (multiple use) areas or areas for further planning, which falls under the usual Forest Planning process. What the Forest Preserve Proposal will do is to place the areas designated as nonwilderness and for further planning into a new planning process. This will affect current revisions of existing Forest Plans throughout the country. For example, in the Appalachian National Forests of the Southern Region, the Southern Appalachian Assessment Report has been used as the basis for revisions of Forest Plans. The Southern Appalachian Assessment was an interagency effort that assessed the resource from biological, economic and social aspects. The present revision process has been conducted in conjunction with the general public and has been ongoing for sometime. If the Forest Preserve Proposal is approved, this will disrupt the process of localized decision making by people who best understand the community values a local forest has to offer.

The Forest Preserve Proposal will be debated in the forthcoming months, and the above concerns should be addressed to ensure that the proposed actions are in the best interests of the nation. At stake is the future of a significant portion of the National Forest System. Gifford Pinchot said "*Fire destroys quickly; trees grow slowly. It often takes a hundred years to make good the damage done by a single day's fire.*" The same can be said of bad policy decisions and law making affecting our natural resources. If we truly wish to preserve the National Forests for future generations, the deliberations must be made on fact, not emotions or political tradeoffs. The forestry profession has a number of dedicated men and women in state and federal agencies, universities and private industry with many years of experience. At times, it seems that forestry professionals are characterized as timber beasts who would cut any forest in any manner to achieve a profit. To be sure, some people are like this as in any profession. But I have never met a forestry student that didn't have a love and deep sense of respect for the environment. These students, and past students like them, are our nation's professional foresters. Seek them out and listen to their experience on how this proposal will affect the roadless areas in our National Forests.

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