

April 10, 2010

Field Hearing: U.S. Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests, and Public Land
Losing Ground. The War on Buffelgrass in the Sonoran Desert

Testimony by:

Sarah Brown Smallhouse

Chair, Southern Arizona Buffelgrass Coordination Center

Thank you for this opportunity to give testimony on the buffelgrass issue in Arizona. This is a matter of pivotal importance to southern Arizona now, and the threat is expanding. For an easy-to-digest overview please watch the 10-minute video on the home page of www.buffelgrass.org.

I am a native Tucsonan. My parents moved to Tucson from the East because they were attracted to the community and the Sonoran Desert setting. They were entrepreneurial and started a company, Burr Brown Research Corporation, that manufactured high precision electronic equipment and became world renowned. The University of Arizona and Pima Community College educated and trained most of the employees that worked at Burr Brown and who created its capacity for great success in the world market place. When the company was sold to Texas Instruments in 2000 it constituted the largest corporate sale ever in the state of Arizona. My sister and I now carry the legacy of our parents and we are deeply committed to this community and its ability to prosper long into the future.

The Brown Family Foundations have given many gifts over the years: Tucson Medical Center, the Arizona Cancer Center, the Tucson-Pima County Library, the University of Arizona, Pima Community College, San Miguel High School, the Wildcat School, the Sunnyside School District, and to key strategic initiatives benefiting the region. We were major supporters of the Southern Arizona Regional Town Hall. Our contributions of start up funding for the Critical Path Institute and Science Foundation Arizona significantly helped those organizations launch. We have endowed professorships at the University of Arizona, including that of Peter Smith, the first civilian scientist to ever lead a NASA mission. The Phoenix Mars landing was another historic moment for Arizona and we were very proud to have played a part. Many students at the University of Arizona benefit from scholarship programs we have funded; most recently we gave \$2 million to the Arizona Assurance Program designed to help the most financially challenged – but talented and motivated - kids who apply to the University of Arizona. Pima Community College significantly updated their health sciences teaching facilities and upgraded technology needed to train respiratory therapists, radiological technicians and nurses with our help. We offer programs for public school teachers for professional development. We have substantially contributed to the public dialog through research, symposiums and forums in the areas of energy,

infrastructure, immigration, and growth. We feel gratitude for our good fortune in Tucson and give back to the community in a myriad of ways.

I participate in civic affairs in other capacities too. I serve on the Board of Directors of Tucson Regional Economic Opportunities (TREO), our local economic development agency, and participated in creating its strategic roadmap for investment and direction. I am also an active member of the Southern Arizona Leadership Council (SALC), a CEO group aimed at facilitating long term planning and leadership in Southern Arizona. These entities are the two most influential business organizations in the community and are where we put our collective stock in preparing for a productive future and continued high quality of life. They are both aware and deeply concerned about the potential impact the expanding base of buffelgrass threatens.

I became aware of the buffelgrass issue at a meeting of the SALC Strategic Initiatives Committee of which I am a member. Dr. Julio Betancourt, a Senior Scientist with the U.S. Geological Survey, gave an overview presentation that shocked all who were in the room. I think it is fair to say many of us had been aware of invasive species issues in general, and may have even known buffelgrass was of particular concern, but the picture Dr. Betancourt painted took us all back. The potential consequences of this particular invasion have the potential to undermine the very foundation(s) of our community; our quality of life and the basis of our economy are threatened by buffelgrass. It hardly seems like it could be true – it is almost like the plot of a science fiction horror film – but the scientists and land managers in the region are all in agreement, are all deeply concerned, and none of them feel adequately equipped to address what needs to be done.

Land managers organized themselves and wrote a strategic plan for how to most efficiently attempt to bring the invasion under control. There was recognition that many governmental jurisdictions and private property owners would have to coordinate their efforts to be successful. After all, if one property owner lets buffelgrass spread unchecked, regardless of how diligent his neighbor might be, the neighbor will never be able to keep their land clear as the buffelgrass will just keep reseeding itself. One of the principal recommendations of the strategic plan was to form a neutral non-profit entity that could provide such coordination and help focus resources. This is how the Southern Arizona Buffelgrass Coordination Center (SABCC) came into being. It is now the hub of all buffelgrass related activity in the community and is diverse and inclusive with participation from all sectors of the community. This is the body through which community choices are discussed, where all ideas have a forum and all sectors of the community come together to evaluate inevitable trade-offs. SABCC facilitates community-wide decisions and then organizes the teamwork necessary for progress.

The Brown Family Foundation made an enabling gift to SABCC in 2009 and I personally contribute about a quarter of my time to this issue. I choose to do so

because it is important, it is urgent, and the outcome – one way or another – will have a huge impact of this community. I am committed to seeing this through. There is too much at stake to be complacent or wishful. We must act intelligently, and fast.

I have come to appreciate the hard facts facing us: either we focus, invest substantial amounts up front now and try to contain the spread of this grass at some level that can be feasibly managed on local resources indefinitely into the future, or we concede we have waited too long to address the problem and start preparing for a grass fire-dominated environment. Neither of these paths will be costless; the fire regimes we can expect will be very expensive indeed and we certainly do not have the equipment or personnel to fight them now. In many ways this is a situation analogous to the dikes in New Orleans prior to Hurricane Katrina. We could have fixed the dikes – and yes it would have cost a bundle – but the eventual cost of not doing so far exceeded what preventative action would have cost, and it would have saved the terrible human suffering that came about from the extensive flooding. I believe we are facing a comparable problem here, but it has to do with the Sonoran Desert, grass and fire. Our choice is this: Do we mitigate the spread of buffelgrass, or delay and face forced (and more costly) adaptation to a hostile fire-prone environment?

There is no doubt among those who understand this desert ecosystem that wholesale conversion of our landscape will be inevitable without intervention, and it won't take that long either. Not only will we lose the magnificent desert that creates enormous quality of life for the people who live here, but we will have saddled ourselves with ugly, expensive, and dangerous fires forever. The tourism industry, which now contributes billions annually and employs close to 50,000 people here, would surely disappear. People like my parents would choose other communities to start a business. Companies considering relocation or expansion might easily choose more friendly environs for their new operations and a higher quality lifestyle for their employees. Things could get pretty bad here.

If this ugly future is to be avoided, procrastination is not an option. The situation is changing too fast. Estimates are the buffelgrass doubles annually; a large effort is needed upfront to contain the invasion to a smaller land area that can reasonably be managed with much smaller budgets going forward. This is why we have brought this matter to your attention. Right now we need your help. State and local resources have been pushed to the brink and we simply can not manage this effort on our own right now. The appropriations request SABCC submitted earlier this year is for funds to begin on federal lands in southern and central Arizona. This is a responsible and meaningful first step.

We believe this is more than a local matter of concern as well; the Sonoran Desert ecosystem is unique to the southwest and is already doomed in the northern states of Mexico due to widespread established buffelgrass. The Sonoran Desert of Arizona is the last place saguaros have a chance. Our giant

cacti are symbols of the Wild West and embody the enchantment of the American frontier. They are recognized throughout the world. To lose the Sonoran Desert and all the biodiversity it holds would be more than just a local travesty.

The broader Tucson community mobilized quickly once the true ramifications of buffelgrass spread were realized. All jurisdictions, area Tribes, parks, transportations departments, conservation and environmental groups, the business community, the utility companies, the University, the tourism industry, home builders, contractors, realtors, public safety officials and fire fighters, neighborhoods and homeowners, hikers, bikers and nature lovers, school kids, boy scouts – even the Porsche Club of Arizona - all these groups have come together to do what they can. This community has united in a totally unprecedented way to prevent a terrible future from unfolding. We are all very appreciative of Congressman Grijalva for responding quickly to the threat we see and bringing this matter to the fore.

Our community has fully engaged and formed alliances and collaborations that never would have been imagined before so we can be as effective as possible. But for all this good work, valiant effort, and broad spirit of cooperation and volunteerism, the buffelgrass is still spreading faster than we can keep up. We need help, and it is not within the capacity of our local or state governments to provide it. Right now we need help from Washington. The goal is to contain the buffelgrass spread, reduce the acreage infested, and then keep it under control through ongoing diligence. But for this plan to work there needs to be significant resources now to bring the problem under control.

I lived for awhile in Southern Sonora, the Mexican state just south of Arizona. I often drove the road between Alamos and Tucson. Over the years I watched buffelgrass take over the Mexican landscape. The scientists I have spoken with are unanimous: the Sonoran Desert of Mexico is gone for good. No chance of it ever recovering at this point. It seems unbelievable that the same could happen here, but it is true. And it might not take that long either – a few decades. Please intervene and direct resources our way so we can keep this from happening.