

Hello and thank you for the opportunity to be here today, my name is Matt Bloom and I, along with my family have lived and worked on the Stanislaus National Forest for 49 years. In 1974, my family moved to Tuolumne County as my father started working for the US Forest Service, as a Timber Management Officer. During his career, my father was in charge of planning timber sales for the Summit Ranger District in Pinecrest, California. I was raised in a forest service family and have witnessed first hand many of the changes within the forest service. Many of these changes have led us to where we are today, facing a very high increase in devastating mega fires.

I started working in the Sierra Nevada mountains at the young age of 15 at different pack stations, guiding horseback trips into various wilderness areas. In 1997, I bought Kennedy Meadows Resort and Pack Station, which my family and I currently own and operate. I have felt the huge economic and emotional impacts of multiple large fires within the Stanislaus National on land managed by the US Forest Service. My experience comes from a lifetime of first-hand involvement in forest management.

I have seen many changes, most of them relatively recent to both US Forest Service Policies and Forest Management both locally, regionally and nationally; leading us to the poor position we are in today. I would like to overview the biggest changes and policies which should be immediately remedied.

Severe cuts to logging or thinning projects, including grazing, have led to a widespread buildup of ground fuels which have led to fires burning out of control. The ground fuels provide a ladder for fuels to climb into the large trees, as they reach up, the trees start to burn, the fire temperature increases and the fire begins to "crown". When a fire crowns it reaches the top of the forest canopy and extends from tree to tree, any fire fighter will tell you it's next to impossible to stop a crown fire, and they burn with such high intensity and are so hot the soil becomes sterilized, reducing the forest landscape to a pile of ash and making it difficult for even the smallest bush to return to the forest for years to come, thus also causing massive erosion. These changes in policy started when the National Environmental Policy Act

(N.E.P.A.) was used as a lobbying effort by various anti-logging and anti-grazing groups. These groups filed lawsuits against the Forest Service, halting many if not most timber sales. Thus for lack of a better term, weaponizing NEPA, not for the good of all, not for the intent and safeguards of the policy, but to get their agendas pushed through. For example, the Spotted Owl Guidelines levied on the Forest Service land managers crippled the timber industry and are at largely fault for the fuel buildup in the forest. Rather than find a mitigation to stabilize the owl habitat, everything stopped. A massive build up of fuels occurred. These fuels are what lead to the giant fires we have been experiencing. The Forest Service changed the intent of their mission statement from “multiple use” to “ecosystem management”. This change in direction has allowed a one-sided mindset in land managers far different from the previous one of “managing the forest for logging, grazing, recreation and wilderness management”.

The fire-fighting side of the Forest Service also changed its mission from “fire suppression” to “fire management”, thus creating a practically whole new management approach. Natural fire and control burning are a vital part of a healthy forest and must be part of managing the forest, however, the Forest Service should maintain a focus on suppression and be mandated to stop uncontrolled fires as soon as they start. Decisions to have control burns should be made by forest land managers and not by fire crews. Burning is a great management tool, but it should be done on the terms of those who know the forest, not left to random lightning strikes.

Another big change I have seen in the Forest Service is the level of experience in higher management positions. Due to policies put forth through affirmative action, hiring practices for the US Forest Service changed and positions haven't been filled based upon education, skill or knowledge. Positions were filled based upon mandated criteria, which is unfair, unjust and does not maintain the due diligence of the US Forest Service when it comes to care of the lands and the people. What has happened is an entire agency muddled by inexperienced land managers who lack knowledge about the actual land and forest system they are forced to steward. All of us know that managements and leadership make an insurmountable difference in any industry, for the US Forest Service this should be of particular note as it affects forest health, local economies, various watersheds, ecosystems and a multitude of user groups.

Part of the reason I am here today is because I have felt first-hand the devastating consequences of the mismanagement of the forest and fire suppression. The 2013 Rim fire burnt 257,314 acres and destroyed over 100 structures. Fighting the fire cost 127 million dollars, not counting the long-term economic damage caused by closures and bad air quality from the smoke. The Rim fire started from a campfire on the banks of the Tuolumne River. Initial suppression of the fires was curtailed because forest leadership didn't want planes dropping retardant on the fire, fearing for the effects it might have on the wildlife and scenic river area. This decision allowed for the fire to get out of control and quickly. My resort is a seasonal business, in a good year we have 150 days to survive, and we lost the busiest month and half of our 5-month season because of that initial decision.

The Donnell fire started August 1st, 2018 and burned 36,000 acres, destroying 53 historic family cabins at various recreation tracts in Dardanelles and the historic Dardanelles Resort. The fire started as an escaped campfire on the eastern shore of Donnell's reservoir, a remote location not easily accessible by vehicle. The Brightman hand crew was sent to this remote fire from Brightman Station in the Stanislaus National forest. I personally spoke with the crew members that were present the first couple of days. The Brightman crew told me they had repeatedly made requests for a helicopter to dip out of the adjacent Donnell's Reservoir to aid in extinguishing the fire, but those requests were denied by Forest Service management. The Donnell fire could have easily been stopped in a few hours with the aid requested. I and many others observed that the air was clear for flying and could not understand why they would not utilize available air support. After a couple days, the fire jumped the fireline and ran up the canyon towards the Dardanelle area. Everyone was concerned and begged the Forest Service to do more but it seemed to fall on deaf ears. They constructed additional fire lines and tried to burn it out all night but it did not work. We repeatedly asked the Forest Service to provide structure protection for the historic Dardanelles area, and were yet again ignored. The next day, the wind came up, pushing the fire over the line and towards Dardanelles. Standing at the road closure, I heard the radio call announcing that the fire was lost and would reach Dardanelles in 45 minutes. The Forest Service employee standing there turned to me and asked, "What do we do now?" It was too late, none of the structures had any protection, and the valley was

destroyed within hours. 53 family cabins and a thriving, historic resort had been reduced to ashes. The highway was closed down, my resort along with other recreation on the highway 108 corridor was shut down entirely for August and we felt a heavy economic loss. This fire running out of control can be totally attributed to wrong decisions made during the initial response to this fire. Witnessing this was sickening and heartbreaking. Not a single person was held responsible for the poor decisions that led to so much destruction and pain. Change must occur and must happen now. Forest Service leadership needs to understand that they are affecting massive forests, habitats, history and the lives of many people and families. Bad decisions cannot be allowed to continue, a National mandate for change is necessary and with it needs to be accountability on the local, regional and national levels. If change is to occur, Forest Service management must be held accountable for the bad decisions made under their leadership.

We must make bold changes to policies if we wish to avoid these devastating fires. Most people that understand what has been happening, including myself, feel that changing the following policies can drastically reduce the effects of fire on our forests:

1. Change the Forest Service's fire division's mission statement from "management" to "suppression".
2. Amend N.E.P.A. to allow for more effective logging and thinning projects. The approach should be thin it, burn it and thin it again. This is an ongoing effort.
3. Put state agencies, such as CAL FIRE in charge of structure protection on all fires occurring on Forest Lands. They have the proper equipment and experience to handle it effectively.
4. Streamline the Private equipment hiring process to avoid delays in getting vital resources to fires.
5. Increase cattle grazing contracts in areas where it is suitable to reduce the brush and grass that fuel these fires.
6. Shorten the process to allow control burning to reduce fuel loads in the forest.
7. Hire more competent hands in charge of fighting fires and offer them the necessary resources to do so. Implied in this is the need to hold line officers accountable for their poor decisions.

To conclude, please understand that there are plenty of hard working, conscientious employees in the Forest Service that want to fix these issues. Changing policies like N.E.P.A, Affirmative Action and the mission of firefighters, holding line officers accountable and providing the necessary resources for them to perform their duties well must come down from Congress and the Department of Agriculture. It is unfair to simply blame the Forest Service without making the appropriate changes needed to better protect our forests and local communities. Thinning the forest through logging, grazing and control burns are vital to reducing the number of fires, but initial suppression of fires is paramount. The fires I discussed today could have been stopped before they devastated us, if a different management approach was applied. You must seek change for these policies or these fires will never end, will become stronger and hotter while our entire forest will be reduced to ashes. Businesses, jobs, families and local communities will be severely impacted. There are two options: make some bold changes or accept these consequences.