



Dennis Townsend, Chairman
Tulare County Board of Supervisors

House Committee on Natural Resources
H.R. 2989 (Rep. McCarthy), the “Save Our Sequoias Act”

May 10, 2023
Longworth House Office Building, Room 1234

Video Clip: Full Length: <https://vimeo.com/565949881/c9065382c6>

Video Clip: Edited: <https://vimeo.com/824567337>

Chairman Westerman, Ranking Member Grijalva and Members of the Committee, thank you for inviting me to discuss a topic that is dear to me and my community: protecting our nation’s Giant Sequoia groves. I am Dennis Townsend and I’m here in my capacity as Chair of the Tulare County Board of Supervisors. Many of the groves - including those in the Giant Sequoia National Monument - are in my supervisorial district. What we are discussing is, quite literally, in my “backyard.” This is truly personal and not a distant or theoretical public policy discussion. We are living with the consequences of decades of failed federal forest management policies.

The video which you see highlights the stark contrast between our state demonstration forest and our national forest after a wildfire burned through the area.

Tulare County is roughly the size of the state of Connecticut with approximately 50% of its land mass owned by the Federal Government. We are home to about 60 Giant Sequoia Groves which contain the vast majority of the Giant Sequoia trees in the world today. Hundreds of thousands of people visit each year to experience them. Historically, these Federal lands also produced a vibrant timber industry. This coupled with tourism played a key role in Tulare County’s economy.

Giant Sequoias, and their mixed conifer ecosystems, are threatened by drought, the related bark beetle infestation, and high-severity fire. Over the past decade, devastating wildfires have destroyed Giant Sequoia groves, critical habitat, and communities. More than eighty-five (85) percent of all Giant Sequoia grove acreage across the Sierra Nevada has burned in wildfires between 2015 and 2021, compared to only one quarter in the preceding century. Within that eighty-five (85) percent burn scar, twenty (20) percent of the world's mature giant Sequoias were lost in SQF and Windy fires alone.

The property and economic losses experienced are significant but, losing these national treasures, these Monarch Giant Sequoia trees, far exceeds all these losses. These majestic Giants are simply irreplaceable in our lifetime.

High severity fire is caused by the accumulation of fuels coupled with severe droughts. High accumulations of fuels are a result of overly dense forests the result from the suppression of naturally occurring wildfires over the past 130 years, and high tree mortality in recent years. While the US Forest Service has committed to change, and Congress has provided some tools to facilitate that change, the on-the-ground reality remains vastly unchanged. The most recent wildfires prove this.

NEPA and ESA reform are paramount to successfully managing today's forests. In 2020 the US Forest Service received a streamlined categorical exemption for hazard tree removal but are not utilizing this exemption on the SQF and Windy Fire burn scars for fear of litigation. Organizations use NEPA and the ESA to litigate projects that protect and improve critical ecosystem infrastructure, which is counter to the intent of both Acts.

Much of Tulare County's economic infrastructure supporting forest products is shuttered or limited. Tulare County once had three active sawmills, but now there is only one with limited capacity. The result is scores of log decks waiting to be transported to market. There are currently log decks from the 2016 Cedar fire still waiting to be moved to market, despite some species becoming unmarketable two years after they are harvested.

Tulare County has experienced detrimental impacts to communities, resident's quality of life, economy, and critical environmental infrastructure from catastrophic wildfires. Our County has been covered in smoke for the past 6 summers due to wildfires that have cost us about 20% of the world's mature Giant Sequoias. These will not be replaced in our lifetimes and, in fact, cannot be replaced for generations. I was personally involved in a round table discussion with environmental groups, firefighters, loggers, Forest Service officials, residents, hunters, fishermen, wildlife enthusiasts, local, state, tribal and federal representatives from both sides of the isle. I was amazed that there was total agreement that what we have been doing is not working. There is no controversy about this bill's language with that group. That is very uncommon today and highlights the need for this legislation.

This type of management can be done. Visit our County's Balch Park and its Giant Sequoia stands. Visit Cal-Fire's Mountain Home Demonstration State Forest which has several of the largest and oldest Giant Sequoia trees in the world. More than 4,500 old-growth Giant Sequoias are being protected through active management of the mixed conifer forest that surrounds them.

A full toolbox must be provided to the Forest Service and others to achieve active forest management, reduce wildfire risk and create healthy ecosystems. Returning prescribed fire to the land, allowing mechanical operations where effective and efficient and with proper oversight, and utilizing forest products to remove marketable material off the land are critical in protecting these Giants.

If we can't work together to get this done and protect our national treasures, these Giant Sequoias, then what can we ever get done? This legislation benefits everyone, and no one loses. On behalf of Tulare County and our residents, I give this legislation our full support and endorsement and urge this Committee to get it passed and operative as soon as you possibly can.

It has been an honor and privilege to address you today.

Thank you.