

**Statement of
Brian K. Veerkamp
El Dorado Irrigation District Board Chair, Former County Supervisor,
and Wildland Fire Consultant
House Committee on Natural Resources
Honorable Bruce Westerman, Chairman**

**Hearing on Building U.S Infrastructure through Limited Delays and
Efficient Reviews Act 2023
February 28th,2023**

“Consequences of Good Intentions”

Good afternoon and thank you for this opportunity to testify to my knowledge, factual data, personal observations and experience relating to NEPA, Catastrophic Wildfire, the Endangered Species Act, and the need for reform/change. Being an elected official at multiple governance levels, I have a “Special” respect for all of you and your public service to our Country.

As introduced, my name is Brian K.Veerkamp. I am a 5th generation Northern California native, descending from two Gold Rush era families. For over 150 years our family has been involved in managing our private and public lands, both in the semi-urban and mountainous forest settings. Living and utilizing the land for ours and the environments mutual benefit. I also spend at least a month a year traversing our California Forests along with lands in Montana, Idaho, and Wyoming. Usually on foot. Whether it be hunting, recreational hiking or enjoying our public lands, but also taking note of the conditions on the landscape. My career was in Emergency Services, culminating as a Fire Chief and Director of our Emergency Services Authority. During my tenure in the Fire Service, I helped plan Fire Resilient Communities, served on a State Incident Management Team,

responding to and mitigating disasters of many kinds throughout California, Idaho, Montana, and Louisiana. In 2019, I was honored to testify before this Committee on the Topic of “Wildfire Resilient Communities”.

During my previous testimony I highlighted the facts of what the landscape was looking like in our Forests, Rural areas and in the Wildland Urban interface. It was not pretty and still isn't. Since that testimony we have experienced some of the most catastrophic wildfires in history.” Dixie Fire” (Butte, Lassen, Shasta, and Tehama counties, 90+ days and 963,300 acres).” Caldor Fire” (El Dorado, Amador, and Alpine counties, 70 days, 220,000 acres, Tressel Fuel Modification project in progress for 4 years, completed only by the devastating fire; complete loss of the community of Grizzly Flat, wildlife habitat including the spotted owl, a grammar school and major ski resort). “Moose Fire” (Lemhi county, Idaho, 100 days, 130,000 acres). “Mosquito Fire” (Placer and El Dorado county, 60 days, 76,000 acres). These fires have been responsible for civilian deaths, major economic loss to the tax base of the area, disruption and devastation of Public Education, devastation of our forests, wildlife and habitat, drinking water supplies, watersheds and the two Most Important items: Suppression costs in the Billions and the damage to our Environment. The Fires of 2020 wiped out 17 years of Greenhouse gas reduction work. Think of what the fires of 2021-22 have done. The air quality alone for the duration of these fires brings many things to a halt and the effects will be felt for years to come. The consequences to Public Health, Education, Drinking Water, Economics, etc. far outweigh any benefit realized by the current NEPA Protection regulations. These protections have created far more serious consequences and must be amended for NEPA to meet its intent. Tree mortality is at an all- time high, primarily due to choked up stands and the trees cannot survive, they are weakened allowing insects and dry conditions to kill them. Being nearly 50 years old, this regulatory framework must be updated and modified. There are many other

regulatory opportunities to protect the environment and so many in fact they compete with each other to the detriment of their intent. The protections from NEPA and the Endangered Species ACT handcuff anyone from accomplishing the needed tasks to mitigate catastrophic consequences from occurring. Whether it be Environmental Lawsuits or time delays, reality takes over and the fallout goes against any common sense solutions most would utilize. Locally we have been attempting to mitigate hazards along roadway infrastructure and the Environmental Assessments have taken a year and a half and there still not complete. These are existing roadways in the Public Forests needed for ingress and egress. One has to ask why does it takes so long, especially when it's for existing infrastructure?, If we don't speed up processes and streamline them, there won't be any habitat, forests, or environment left to protect. My Grandfather (George Wagner 1899-2001) and I used to discuss this issue of land management. During his era, they learned from our Native Americans and others to use fire as a tool, girdle evasive trees when young, graze animals, harvest timber as a crop, create breaks in the fuel, etc., to manage the landscape. There used to be a multitude of resources (loggers, ranchers, livestock grazing, etc.) available on our Public Land, but now there are restrictions at times for public access due to potential danger, making people fearful for stepping onto our taxpayer funded Public Lands.

So, what do we need to do? Support language such as introduced in this Act. There are many examples of these processes already working, but the rules have been modified to accomplish results. Case in point, the fuels work that had been done in the Tahoe Basin thanks to a NEPA categorical exclusion. That streamlined authority was brokered by Senator Feinstein and Congressman McClintock and signed into law by President Obama. It created a 10,000 acre categorical exclusion to expedite the NEPA process so the work could be done in a timely manner. This work had a beneficial consequence, it made a great fuel break to help stop the Caldor Fire from devastating the Lake Tahoe

Basin. The Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation in which I am a Life Member also works with the USFS, Federal Fish and Wildlife, State Fish and Wildlife, and others to accomplish habitat restoration and fuel modification work for the preservation of Wildlife, the Environment, improve habitat, and develop long term action plans to keep the land that way. There are many studies and a lot of data that they have developed to more than justify their action plans. Through the years I've had many conversations with Forest Supervisor's wanting to do work in their Regions and the challenge of NEPA and lack of funding prohibits any progress from being made. Well, funding is beginning to flow and now its time to take off the other handcuff. We need to utilize the tools that are in the toolbox. Stewardship contracts, Good Neighbor programs, utilize our Resource Conservation Districts, just as is occurring currently at the devastated Ski Resort, Sierra at Tahoe. (Caldor Fire) Unfortunately for them its on rehabilitation work. But still, it is an example of how with some reform we can tackle this problem of overgrown and out of control vegetation proactively. They may as well be called jungles, not Recreational Forests. There are many other "Best Practices" that can be instituted across the landscape that the professionals know and the amazing thing is, they are items from the past and other Countries deploy them and they work. We tend to spend forever trying to do it in some newfangled way or it gets delayed, when the simple, common sense solutions are right in front of us. We are making major mistakes in managing our Natural Resources, specifically Vegetation, and it's smacking us right in the face. When is enough, enough? I recently visited Wallace Idaho to review the Polaski Trail and the current level of vegetation in the area. I was aware of the History of the Great Fires in the Inland Northwest in 1910, consuming over 3,000,000 acres and destroying so much, including 87 deaths. As you hike the Polaski Trail the Kiosks along the way speak volumes to you about the extreme vegetation levels throughout the region and the need for proper management of the landscape during that period and that contributed to the devastating fire. I found this very hypocritical,

as the vegetation as of that visit was so thick and overgrown it was crazy. Have we not learned a thing, or do we just talk about it. Oh, did I mention it had been hot and dry for some time leading up the fires. Records of drought and extreme moisture exist through our El Dorado Irrigation weather archives and regional records. They verify that things such as weather, change over time and there is enough patterned history to reasonably predict and prepare for too much or not enough precipitation. I learned long ago "If its Predictable, its Preventable"! Again, we fail at looking to the past to predict the future.

In Conclusion, one can see reform and modification is needed. Could be exemptions for Vegetation Management work (such as we instituted in our Vegetation Management Ordinance for El Dorado County), modifications such as proposed in this Act, Best Practices, or combinations of all three that have and will work in the future. If we don't manage our Public Lands for the benefit of all interests that can be prioritized, we may as well give the land to other entities who can. All we are doing is creating a huge "Liability" for our Federal Government to have to come in post incident or occurrence and mitigate. These mitigations are costing Billions, just look at the recovery costs paid out by FEMA of late. Our Governments lack of proactive actions as evidenced by the devastating consequences warrant paying any FEMA claim. We can and should do better. We have the tools. We have the intelligence, we have the history to learn from. Its more than time to be proactive and not reactive. We can be strategic, surgical and protect our environment while doing so. Billions should be prioritized and spent on proactive management and the eventual overall costs will go down. Working together behind the scenes and on the Landscape is the answer Let's get to it. I leave you with a couple simple Veerkamp truisms and a question.

An ounce of prevention is worth thousands of pounds (our environment) of cure!

Per my Grandfather, "Manage the Land or it will Manage YOU!

The question: NEPA- At what cost?

Thank you for this opportunity. I wish you all well, God Bless and Godspeed! Please feel free to ask questions.

Also, I have included some photos of Pre and Post project work on our Water District recreational property, the drinking water supply canal for El Dorado County damaged by the Caldor fire, Caldor Fire photos of damaged forest and Ski resort.