

Testimony of Duane Vaagen  
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Before the Subcommittee on Forests and Forest Health  
Committee on Natural Resources  
United States House of Representatives

Regarding Issues Affecting Forest Health and Management in Eastern Washington- National Forests, Tribal Lands, and Local Communities

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Colville, Washington

This morning you are located in the heart of our Nation's greatest opportunity to demonstrate optimum forest health restoration and thinning treatments. The Colville National Forest is positioned to maximize the utilization of all the tools provided by the new stewardship authorities on a sustained basis. I will explain.

The current regional infrastructure includes 4 high tech small log mills, 3 co-generation plants, 3 pulp and paper facilities and 7 large log sawmills. This infrastructure has the capacity to treat over 100,000 acres per year.

Over the past 15 years, Vaagen Brothers Lumber Company has participated with the Colville National Forest in pilot projects, studies and demonstrations to determine best treatments. We have already thinned in excess of 50,000 acres of Federal Forest and 100,000 acres of private, State and tribal lands.

The Colville Confederated Tribal Land is the same size as the Colville National Forest and contains approximately the same amount of timbered acres. The harvest level on the tribal lands are close to three times the level on the Colville National Forest working with the same NEPA process.

The Washington State Department of Natural Resources has, at the direction of the state legislature, developed a Strategic Forest Health Plan that covers all state and private lands. Through collaborative efforts, this plan also includes federal and tribal lands. Several projects totaling thousands of acres have been awarded on State lands. Funding for this program and the conventional timber sales program are separate.

Private lands have generally reduced fuels while taking advantage of the high timber markets and fuels reduction grants for protection of their homes.

The vast majority of high-risk lands are the overcrowded National Forest lands. The Colville National Forest consists of 1.1 million acres of which over 300,000 acres of timberland are dense, suppressed vegetation in need of immediate thinning and fuels reduction. Approximately one-third of that is in the wildland-urban interface. Over the past 50 years, fires have ranged between 100 acres up to 20,000 acres. Prior to that time, fires were commonly over 100,000 acres. Fire suppression and lack of treatments has allowed these stands to become overcrowded and ripe for catastrophic wildfire threatening the entire forest and our communities. We can't continue to allow this threat to exist.

A ten-year project produced by the Apache-Sitgraves National Forest of 150,000 acres could be much more successful here where markets are strong and the by-products have value and can pay for the entire project. A landscape level approach such as this could provide the consistent management needed to alleviate this forest health crisis. In addition, collaborative planning and treatment efforts are beginning to work across ownerships. Innovative technology and treatments have led to more acceptable outcomes for all collaborative participants and citizens of our communities

Fire suppression costs on the National Forest averages approximately \$1,000 per acre. Instead of spending \$1,000 per acre to suppress fires, \$1,000 per acre and more have been generated through commercially thinning small diameter wood while reducing fuels. Because of the tight grain, these small diameter logs are processed into strong, desirable lumber. With the strong by-product markets available, there is no good reason for Stewardship Projects to not pay for themselves. Stewardship projects need to pass the smell test and be set up for success economically and ecologically.

Finding technical solutions that restore forest health and reduces fuels is only a piece of the overall puzzle. Finding consensus among all the interested parties on land management goals and acceptable treatments to achieve these goals have been a real stumbling block in the past. Through the work of the Northeast Washington Forestry Coalition, progress is being made. Projects with high levels of support are currently in the works which means little chance for litigation or appeals.

The Northeast Washington Forestry Coalition is currently collaborating with the Colville National Forest on 19 stewardship fuel reduction projects and 4 larger projects with forest health restoration objectives that require Environmental Impact Statements.

Stevens, Ferry and Pend Oreille Counties are each currently working on County-wide fire plans. Fire district commissioners, conservation districts, collaborative groups, and county commissioners are assessing fuel conditions and prioritizing areas of concern from a local level to maximize the success and support of forest service fuels reduction projects.

These are a few of the major reasons the Colville National Forest could be the ideal forest management model for the rest of the nation to observe. However, As all these stars are aligning, why isn't the job getting done? I will list a few of the major barriers and changes needed.

1 Budgets do not reflect the commitment level needed to make our communities safe.

2 High turnover in forest service personnel in small communities undermines

relationships, trust and commitment in the collaboration process.

- The agency needs to embrace the environmental urgency as with responses to hurricanes, floods , tornadoes and other natural disasters.
- Evolution of agency work patterns is needed especially concerning collaboration which must have a clearer definition between the FS and the community.
- FS personnel need recognition and awards to collaborate.
- Accountability must have specific performance measures.

7 Restoration following wildfire needs collaborative solutions to reward rehabilitation successes.

- All parties need to have faith in the process

In conclusion, what we have is a three-legged stool with the three legs being industry, the environmental community and the forest service. The first two legs are solid having found common interests, agreement and solutions concerning the hazardous ecological conditions on our National Forest. The third leg appears to still be wobbly. The stool will only stand if the repairs I have just listed are made. Fences are being mended, now we need to get to work on the ground. Unless fuels are physically reduced and forest health physically restored, then as we all know, catastrophic wild fires are in our future and all we have done is for not. Let's not let this happen. Help us become a model forest for the nation while these stars are aligned. Thank you.