

Committee on Resources

Witness Testimony

Testimony on H.R. 2458

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President

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Before the

House of Representatives

Subcommittee on Forests and Forest Health

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Madam Chairman, my name is Harry V. Wiant, Jr., President of the Society of American Foresters (SAF). The more than 18,000 members of the Society constitute the scientific and educational association representing the profession of forestry in the United States. SAF's primary objective is to advance the science, technology, education, and practice of professional forestry for the benefit of society. We are ethically bound to advocate and practice land management consistent with ecologically sound principles. I am especially pleased to be here today and I thank the Subcommittee for its continued support of professional forestry. I thank the Chair for the opportunity.

The public policy activities of SAF are grounded in scientific knowledge and professional judgment. From this perspective we review proposed forestry and related natural resource programs to determine their adequacy to meet stated objectives and public needs.

SAF has been involved in maintaining the health and productivity of American forests since Gifford Pinchot, first chief of the Forest Service, founded the organization in 1900. As a diverse organization encompassing all facets of forest management, the concept of forest health and how to achieve it is one we have struggled with in recent years. Our recent report entitled *Forest Health and Productivity: A perspective of the Forestry Profession* comes to these conclusions:

- Professional foresters believe there are serious forest health and productivity questions in many parts of the country.
- Forest health is an informal and technically inexact term.
- Assessment of forest health and forest productivity requires an understanding of both the condition of the forest and the objectives for the management of that forest; recognizing that objectives are set by landowners be they private, public, tribal or trust, and also by society through policy and regulation.
- Forest health is determined at the local level; therefore, a single national prescription to achieve healthy forests is inappropriate.

We believe your bill addresses the bulk of these issues, and we truly support its intent. The bill identifies a significant problem that exists on some federal forests, provides land managers the opportunity to address this problem, and allows for a mechanism to pay for associated projects.

However, there are some areas of the bill that could be strengthened. SAF believes the definition of the wildland urban interface needs to be better defined. We suggest the focus should be on communities in the urban wildland interface. The definition of hazardous fuels also needs to be more applicable. Any accumulation of any amount of material has the potential to ignite. With limited funding, we need to make sure this initiative is focused on the biggest problems we face.

SAF believes the bill should focus on fuel buildup only. Under Sec 101 paragraph a2., the bill also mentions treating other forest management needs. If the bill mentions "other forest management needs" we believe some interest groups will misinterpret the intent of the bill, which we interpret as an effort to resolve the fuel buildup problem.

The bill requires the local Forest Service or BLM manager to determine areas in need of fuels reduction treatment. We support this because the local manager most often knows the ground best. However, it does not explicitly encourage land managers to seek out the views of community members, other natural resource professionals, and state and local government officials when identifying areas in need of treatment. In particular, the state forestry organizations and local community groups have special expertise in fire management and should be consulted. We believe this addition will strengthen the bill significantly.

As we read the bill, we believe the NEPA exemption applies only to the process of identifying areas in need of fuels treatment. Once an area is identified, we interpret the language in the bill to indicate that the NEPA process will be triggered for implementing specific projects. If this is the case, we strongly support this concept.

We are concerned that the use of a credit system will embroil this bill in controversy, and as the Chairman knows, the one thing our federal forests don't need is more controversy. These forests, particularly in the inland west, need management by natural resource management professionals who, with the help of community leaders and state and local government, can identify areas of need and prescribe management solutions to address them. Although a credit system is warranted and used extensively in the private sector, in addition, we believe Congress should appropriate significant funds to address the wildfire problems we face. A credit system, although effective, is not always the most efficient means of performing such operations. Many national forests that have forest health problems do not have adequate timber resources to offset the costs of fuels reduction, especially those in southern California and other areas in the arid southwest. The material causing some of these forest health problems has little, if any, commercial value. In some cases, operators have to be paid to take this material away. We believe Congress and the administration should make substantial investments in our national forests. While life and property are at stake, so are many other resource values. Investment is needed to safeguard them as well. We need to stress that the forest health problems we are facing cannot be solved by the green timber sale program alone. A CRS study estimated the cost of reducing these fuel loads at \$3.5 billion.

The bill should establish a specific credit allocation process. We recommend the Secretary determine the amount of forest management credits for each sale as your bill instructs. However, as it is currently written, there are no limits on the amount of credits he can apply to a specific project. The bill should direct the Secretary to determine those credits based on the estimated cost of the project. In addition, the bill provides no guidance for the amount of credits the Secretary can apply against the green sale program. Theoretically the Forest Service could use all the money achieved from green sales as forest management credits for forest health, and there would be no funds to maintain the 25% payments to counties. The bill should address this issue.

The credit system may work against the small operator. Small operators do not have the fiscal resources to perform forest management work waiting for the return on a future sale. These operators would benefit from

direct payments for services. As you know Madam Chairman, timber sales can be tied up for years. Small operators can go out of business waiting to cash in their credits. There may also be small operators who specialize in fuels reduction who have no interest in harvesting timber. These operators may have more skill, more desire to perform the work, and they may be able to do it cheaper; however, if they can't take advantage of the credit system, they may not want to get involved in the project.

We have some serious reservations about the grazing provisions of the bill. While the bill addresses grasses and forbs control by livestock grazing, another serious need in forested areas and some rangelands, from a fire-fuels management perspective, is brush and noxious weed control. Cattle grazing won't deal effectively with this problem. Even if grazing cattle and sheep could address the fuel problems, it would require intensive, very expensive, management. The accumulation of brush and the invasion of noxious weeds is a major fuel build up problem in rangelands and adjacent forests. The bill should recognize and address this situation.

We believe county commissioners should be involved in the process of identifying fuel hazards. However, they, along with communities and other state and local officials, should be consulted by professional land managers rather than being responsible for determining the problem.

The management options presented in the grazing portion of the bill are too prescriptive. The manager on the ground should determine the best course of action to follow. As it stands, this bill would not allow managers to use prescribed burns, biological control, or selective herbicides as management tools.

In conclusion, we support the intent of H.R. 2458. Reducing the fuel loads in the federal forests and ranges should be one of our highest priorities, especially where lives and property are threatened. The SAF strongly encourages Congress to appropriate significant funds to address these forest management issues. We believe the suggestions we've offered today will make for a stronger bill that will address some of these very serious issues we face.

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