

Committee on Resources

Subcommittee on Forests & Forest Health

Testimony of Professor William McKillop, Chair, CA Forest EIS Review Team, Forest Science, University of California Berkeley

**WRITTEN STATEMENT FOR THE RECORD OF
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HEARING ON HOUSE BILL 3467**

**BEFORE THE COMMITTEE ON RESOURCES
SUBCOMMITTEE ON FORESTS AND FOREST HEALTH
UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
MARCH 24,1998**

My name is Dr. William McKillop. I am Professor Emeritus, College of Natural Resources, University of California, Berkeley. My degrees are in economics, statistics and forest science. I have authored over 100 research publications, and conference papers in the area of forestry and natural resource economics. Prior to joining the UC Berkeley faculty in 1964, I was a research officer with the Canadian Forestry Service. In addition, I have undertaken temporary assignments with a number of national and international organizations, including the United Nations and the U.S. Forest Service.

Since early last year I have been Chair of the California Forest EIS Review Committee (CFEISRC) which was formed at the request of Senator Larry Craig's Subcommittee on Forest and Public Land Management and your Subcommittee. Other members of CFEISRC are Professor Thomas Bonnicksen, Texas A&M University; Professor Chadwick Oliver, University of Washington; Dr. Lawrence Ruth, University of California, Berkeley and Professor Gene Wood, Clemson University. We have analyzed in depth the US Forest Service Revised Draft Environmental Impact Statement (RDEIS), "Managing California Spotted Owl Habitat in the Sierra Nevada National Forests of California", and related reports and information.

The RDEIS is an analysis that strikes a proper balance between the many conflicting demands that society places on the National Forests and the biological capabilities of those forests. It used the best available science to come up with a meaningful set of alternatives that addresses, in a realistic way, the full span of feasible options for managing and protecting the forest and its associated wildlife communities.

HR 3467 is bill that will greatly enhance the environmental and social benefits provided by the National Forests of the Sierra Nevada. It is a win-win piece of legislation that deserves the support of everyone who truly cares about the environment and our forests.

As a forest scientist and a citizen who is strongly supportive of genuine efforts to preserve the quality of our environment, I see the legislation as a very important vehicle for moving us in the right direction in our efforts to protect the forest and its many resources.

It is well known that wildfire poses, by far, the greatest threat to the forests of the Sierra Nevada and to their wildlife communities. Because of the prevalence of frequent light fires prior to European settlement, much of the forest area was in an open condition at that time with a patchy, mosaic-like structure of young and old forest stands, often dominated by shade-intolerant species such as ponderosa pine. Programs of fire suppression over the last hundred years or so have allowed shade-tolerant species such as white fir to take over forest stands, clog up the understory and create a dangerous vertical and horizontal continuity of highly-combustible fuels.

From an environmental and budgetary point-of-view it is impossible to halt this development in the short-run. What we must do is choose the management alternative that reduces the probability of severe wildfire to the greatest extent.

In 1993, the Forest Service adopted the recommendations of the California Spotted Owl Assessment Team as an interim strategy pending the preparation and adoption of an environmental impact statement. The RDEIS analyzed seven feasible alternatives in detail for protecting the spotted owl within a broad ecosystem management framework, as well as several others. The RDEIS Team chose Alternative D as its Preferred Alternative. Alternative G was designed to analyze the effect of implementing the current interim guidelines. Other alternatives covered a wide spectrum of options, from very active vegetation management to predominantly passive management.

The current interim guidelines are not appropriate for continued use. It was intended that they would be in operation for only a few years, but now five years have passed and it is essential that they be replaced. Furthermore it is essential, as required by the bill, that a firm deadline be set for completion of a Final EIS in the near future. The RDEIS team is a group of dedicated, hardworking, very well qualified professionals that began its work five years ago and must be allowed to complete the job as quickly as possible.

The RDEIS shows that in the long run under Alternative G (continuation of current interim guidelines) there would be a steep increase in the number of acres with a high potential for severe (stand-replacing) fire, that spotted owl habitat areas and protected activity centers would remain at risk, that there would be infrequent opportunities for using controlled burning, that dense continuous forest structure would increase in a number of vegetation types, that rates of fire spread would be high and that firefighter safety would be jeopardized.

On the other hand, the RDEIS notes that the Preferred Alternative "would provide the maximum degree of flexibility and restoration capability for achieving sustainable fire regimes that best individual forest types" It is clearly the best choice among all of the feasible alternatives available to the Forest Service, and is much better than Alternative G.

Over the next ten decades, relative to Alternative G, the Preferred Alternative will break up the continuity of dense forest stands in 60 percent more acres, it will create 25 percent more acres of fire-resilient vegetation types, and its potential for severe, stand-replacing fires will be 22 percent less. The Preferred Alternative will lead to an increase in the number of large trees (40 inch diameter or greater) from its current level of 8.7 million to the same 18.5 million as Alternative G, but will reduce the volume of smaller, more fire-prone, trees by 20 percent relative to G.

In addition, the Preferred Alternative includes an Aquatic/Riparian Conservation Strategy which prohibits commercial timber harvest in riparian management zones and emphasizes the restoration of watersheds and fish habitat and the maintenance of water quality. Current interim guidelines, on the other hand, do not provide consistent standards across forests for protecting riparian zones.

So far I have stressed the environmental merits of this bill, but as an economist, I am also well aware of the many social benefits that the legislation will provide. In particular, it will enhance job opportunities in rural communities, and it will provide school districts and local governments with much needed funding. Relative to the current interim guidelines, the Preferred Alternative will increase direct National Forest-based employment by 69 percent and payments to schools and counties by 95 percent. These are very important issues that should not be overlooked.

In conclusion, I wish to emphasize that this legislation is a very wise and moderate step that should be taken to safeguard our forests without delay. In some situations, doing nothing may be an appropriate course of action because there may be no adverse consequences. In this case, however, doing nothing will be very costly in terms of destruction by wildfire of forest ecosystems, wildlife habitats and riparian vegetation, and will result in greater-than-necessary expenditures for suppressing severe wildfires. I urge you to approve the bill.

Literature

USDA Forest Service. 1996. Revised Draft Environmental Impact Statement. Managing California Spotted Owl Habitat in the Sierra Nevada National Forests of California: An Ecosystem Approach. Pacific Southwest Region. San Francisco. August 1996.

Vemer, J. K., B. Noon, K. McKelvey, R. Gutierrez, G. Gould, and T. Beck. 1992. The California spotted owl: A technical assessment of its current status. ("CASPO Report"). General Technical Report PSW-GTR-133. Albany CA. USDA Forest Service. Pacific Southwest Research Station.

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