

**H.R. 1045, H.R. 1655, H.R. 3187,
AND H.R. 3444**

LEGISLATIVE HEARING

BEFORE THE

SUBCOMMITTEE ON FEDERAL LANDS

OF THE

COMMITTEE ON NATURAL RESOURCES

U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

ONE HUNDRED NINETEENTH CONGRESS

FIRST SESSION

Tuesday, June 10, 2025

Serial No. 119-31

Printed for the use of the Committee on Natural Resources



Available via the World Wide Web: <http://www.govinfo.gov>

or

Committee address: <http://naturalresources.house.gov>

U.S. GOVERNMENT PUBLISHING OFFICE

60-746 PDF

WASHINGTON : 2026

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HOUSE COMMITTEE ON
NATURAL RESOURCES
CHAIRMAN BRUCE WESTERMAN

To: Subcommittee on Federal Lands Republican Members
From: Subcommittee on Federal Lands; Aniela Butler and William Kelleher
(Aniela@mail.house.gov and William.Kelleher@mail.house.gov; x6-7736)
Date: Monday, June 9, 2025
Subject: Legislative Hearing on 4 Bills

The Subcommittee on Federal Lands will hold a legislative hearing on 4 bills: H.R. 1045 (Rep. Kennedy), "*Utah Wildfire Research Institute Act of 2025*"; H.R. 1655 (Rep. Bentz), "*Wildfire Communications Resiliency Act*"; H.R. 3187 (Rep. Hill), To require the Secretary of Agriculture to convey a parcel of property of the Forest Service to Perry County, Arkansas, and for other purposes; and H.R. 3444 (Rep. Huffman), "*Tribal Self-Determination and Co-Management in Forestry Act of 2025*."

The hearing will take place on **Tuesday, June 10, 2025, at 10:15 a.m.** in room 1324 Longworth House Office Building.

Member offices are requested to notify Will Rodriguez (Will.Rodriguez@mail.house.gov) by 4:30 p.m. on Monday, June 9, 2025, if their Member intends to participate in the hearing.

I. KEY MESSAGES

- The pieces of legislation featured in this hearing offer targeted solutions to improve land and forest management, collaborate with non-federal partners to inform science-based management practices, and reduce bureaucratic processes post-natural disaster.
- This hearing helps advance President Trump's agenda and recent executive actions, including the executive orders on "Immediate Expansion of American Timber Production" and "Restoring Common Sense to Federal Office Space Management."¹
- House Committee on Natural Resources Republicans are committed to strengthening Tribal stewardship of fire-prone landscapes and fostering meaningful partnerships between Tribes and the federal government. This hearing complements a prior hearing on related draft legislation, the "Fostering Opportunities to Restore Ecosystems through Sound Tribal Stewardship (FORESTS) Act."²

II. WITNESSES

Panel I (Members of Congress):

- **To Be Announced**

Panel II (Administration Witnesses):

- **Mr. John Crockett**, Deputy Chief of State, Private and Tribal Forestry, U.S. Forest Service, Washington, D.C. [*All bills*]

Panel III (Outside Experts):

- **The Honorable Larry Blackmon**, Judge, Perry County, Perryville, AR [H.R. 3187]
- **Ms. Larissa Yocom**, Director, Utah Forest Restoration Institute, Logan, UT [H.R. 1045]
- **Mr. Greg Andreas**, General Manager, Go Ponderosa, O'Neals, CA [H.R. 1655]
- **Mr. Bill Tripp**, Director of Natural Resources and Environmental Policy, Karuk Tribe Department of Natural Resources, Orleans, CA [H.R. 3444] [Minority Witness]

III. BACKGROUND**H.R. 1045 (Rep. Kennedy), “Utah Wildfire Research Institute Act of 2025”**

The “Southwest Forest Health and Wildfire Prevention Act of 2004” authorized the creation of wildfire research centers in Arizona, Colorado, and New Mexico “to promote the use of adaptive ecosystem management to reduce the risk of wildfires, and restore the health of forest and woodland ecosystems, in the interior West.”³ These centers, collectively known as the Southwest Ecological Restoration Institutes (SWERI), now operate at Colorado State University, New Mexico Highlands University, and Northern Arizona University.⁴ Today, these centers conduct cutting-edge research on wildfires and forest management⁵ and collaborate with land managers to ensure the implementation of science-based forest management decisions. As part of this work, SWERI must produce annual, peer-reviewed, scientific reports and develop work plans with the Secretary of Agriculture to ensure accountability.

Despite a long track record of being at the forefront of responsible resource management and forestry research, Utah is currently the only Four Corners State without a SWERI center. To address this disparity, H.R. 1045 would amend the “Southwest Forest Health and Wildfire Prevention Act of 2004” to create one additional SWERI center in the State of Utah.⁶ This legislation would provide Utah with additional resources to conduct research and collaborate on wildfire mitigation, forest management, and watershed restoration projects. Further, this legislation allows the State of Utah to leverage academic resources to collaborate with federal, state, and local stakeholders; develop adaptive forest management techniques; and implement fuel reduction strategies.⁷ A similar version of this legislation passed the Senate unanimously in the 118th Congress, and a companion bill has been introduced this Congress by Senate Energy and Natural Resources Chairman Mike Lee (R-UT).⁸

H.R. 1655 (Rep. Bentz), “Wildfire Communications Resiliency Act”**Table 1: Historical wildfire statistics for the US.**

Year	Number of Fires	Acres Burned (Millions)	Transceivers within Wildfire Perimeters	Transceivers per Millions of Acres Burned
2018	58,083	8.767	3,099	353
2017	71,499	10.026	2,726	272
2016	67,743	5.509	987	179
2015	68,151	10.125	565	56
2014	63,312	3.595	453	126
2013	47,579	4.319	517	120
2012	67,774	9.326	553	59
2011	74,126	8.711	1,422	163
2010	71,971	3.422	181	53
2009	78,792	5.921	664	112
2008	78,979	5.292	2,068	391
2007	85,705	9.328	4,978	534
2006	96,385	9.873	1,025	104
2005	66,753	8.689	956	110
2004	65,461	8.097	528	65
2003	63,629	3.960	4,421	1,116
2002	73,457	7.184	894	124
2001	84,079	3.570	466	130
2000	92,250	7.393	811	110

Statistical data for wildfire threats to cell transceivers across the United States. Source: Anderson et al., 2020.

Increasingly dangerous and severe wildfires are a growing threat to critical infrastructure, including communications facilities. According to recent studies, “hundreds to thousands of cell transceivers are within wildfire perimeters each year,” causing blackouts, loss of connectivity, and damage or destruction of communications infrastructure.⁹ This issue impacts millions of people annually, as researchers have found that there are more than 57,500 cell transceivers in high-fire risk areas that serve populations over 1.5 million people.¹⁰ Most recently, the Eaton Fire in Los Angeles threatened the antenna farm and broadcasting transmitters at Mount Wilson, causing temporary limits to “the broadcasting capabilities of Los Angeles’ major TV and radio stations.”¹¹

If a communications facility is damaged or destroyed during a wildfire on federal lands, developers must go through a lengthy and burdensome permitting process to rebuild this infrastructure. This process is not only duplicative, since environmental and historic preservation reviews would already have been conducted during the facility’s initial permitting process, but it also significantly delays the ability to bring critical wireless and communications capabilities back online post-fire. To address this problem, H.R. 1655 would remove the need to complete duplicative National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) and National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA) reviews for certain communications facilities already permitted that need to be rebuilt or repaired due to wildfire damage.¹² The bill applies only to areas where the President, the governor of a state, or a Tribal chief executive have declared a major disaster or emergency. Projects must occur within five years of the declaration, occur entirely within the impacted area, and focus on replacing damaged facilities or upgrading infrastructure to reduce future risk.



The Airport Fire in California threatening communications facilities.

Source: Alert California/UCSD, 2024.

The bill addresses a critical gap in post-disaster recovery efforts: the timely restoration of essential communications systems. Lengthy and duplicative environmental and historic preservation reviews often delay construction projects that are critical to restoring services and public safety. H.R. 1655 offers a narrow, targeted solution designed to expedite recovery without broadly waiving the need to complete environmental or cultural resources reviews on the initial construction of a communications facility. Through this tailored approach, this legislation helps ensure rapid response capacity and resilient infrastructure in wildfire-prone regions.

H.R. 3187 (Rep. Hill), To require the Secretary of Agriculture to convey a parcel of property of the Forest Service to Perry County, Arkansas, and for other purposes.

This legislation removes a burden from the American taxpayer by disposing of a vacant federal building, consistent with President Trump’s Executive Order on “Restoring Common Sense to Federal Office Space Management.”¹³



The vacant USFS building in Perryville, Arkansas, that would be transferred to Perry County under H.R. 3187. **Source:** THV11, 2025.

Perry County, Arkansas, is a rural area northwest of Little Rock with roughly 10,000 residents.¹⁴ The U.S. Forest Service (USFS) manages approximately 119,171 acres of forested land and administrative buildings in Perry County.¹⁵ One such building, located on approximately 0.81 acres of land in Perryville, Arkansas, is currently vacant, and USFS has no future plans for its use. Perry County has long sought to acquire this property to meet growing needs in education, conservation, and youth services, but has been unsuccessful in doing so for more than a decade.¹⁶

H.R. 3187 directs the Secretary of Agriculture to convey this building and its surrounding land to Perry County. Perry County intends to renovate and repurpose the site to support the University of Arkansas Extension Program, the Perry County Conservation District, and youth development programs such as 4-H.¹⁷ This is a smart use of public resources that would serve a compelling public purpose, particularly in a rural county with limited financial resources. Creating a permanent space for the University of Arkansas Extension Program and 4-H Youth Development Program would enhance their coordination and allow them to expand outreach to more Perry County youth. H.R. 3187 provides a cost-effective solution that leverages existing infrastructure for community use and empowers local efforts to support economic development, natural resource stewardship, and youth engagement.

H.R. 3444 (Rep. Huffman), “Tribal Self-Determination and Co-Management in Forestry Act of 2025”

H.R. 3444 seeks to enhance the role of Tribal governments in the management of federal lands by formally authorizing new and existing co-management plans between Tribes and federal land management agencies. Section 2 of the bill directs the Bureau of Land Management (BLM), U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS), National Park Service (NPS), and Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) to develop a “Tribal Co-Management Plan” in consultation with the Department of the Interior’s (DOI) Tribal Advisory Committee. These plans would cover forest and grassland planning and management activities, research and development, restoration activities, and recreational services on federal lands. Section 3 directs DOI to ensure that employees involved in the formulation of these plans undergo training on working with Tribes on the development and execution of such plans. Finally, Section 4 directs USFS to enter into at least five agreements over a four-year period to carry out forest management, research, recreation, or restoration activities. This section stipulates that USFS cannot delegate any nondelegable functions to Tribes and lays out a process for Tribes to request to enter into agreements with USFS. Finally, this section authorizes \$50 million in appropriations for five years.

The Federal Lands Subcommittee recently held a legislative hearing on a discussion draft of Tribal forestry legislation led by Indian and Insular Affairs Subcommittee Chairman Jeff Hurd (R-CO-03) entitled the “Fostering Opportunities

to Restore Ecosystems through Sound Tribal Stewardship (FORESTS) Act.” Information about that legislation can be found at link below:

https://naturalresources.house.gov/uploadedfiles/hearing_memo__sub_on_fl_leg_hrg_on_forests_act_05.20.25.pdf

Both the FORESTS Act and H.R. 3444 illustrate that there is room for bipartisan agreement on some crucial forest management issues. As USFS testified in the legislative hearing on the FORESTS Act, encouraging more Tribal co-stewardship of overgrown, fire-prone federal lands is also consistent with President Trump’s Executive Order on “Immediate Expansion of Timber Production.”¹⁸

Outstanding questions remain regarding H.R. 3444. For example, Sections 2 and 3 of the legislation exclude USFS, a critical agency for co-stewardship in forestry, and are ambiguous about how Tribal Co-Management Plans and associated training will interact with existing land use or resource management plans. Further, it is unclear what portion of these plans actually delegates co-management authority to Tribes. There are also questions about how Section 4 interacts with existing authorities, primarily the Tribal Forest Protection Act of 2004 and Good Neighbor Authority.¹⁹ Further, the un-offset authorization of appropriations does not comply with Republican floor protocols.

IV. MAJOR PROVISIONS & SECTION-BY-SECTION

H.R. 1045 (Rep. Kennedy), “Utah Wildfire Research Institute Act of 2025”

Section 2. Additional Institute.

- Amends the “Southwest Forest Health and Wildfire Prevention Act of 2004” to add Utah as a fourth location for a SWERI center, joining Arizona, New Mexico, and Colorado.

H.R. 1655 (Rep. Bentz), “Wildfire Communications Resiliency Act”

Section 2. Application of NEPA and NHPA to Covered Communications Projects.

- Exempts certain covered communications projects from NEPA and NHPA reviews.²⁰ In order to qualify, a covered communications project must be:
 - Carried out entirely in an area where the President, a Governor, or Indian Tribe has declared a major disaster or emergency related to wildfire;
 - Carried out within five years of such declaration; and
 - Designed to replace or make improvements to a communications facility necessary to recover from, mitigate, or prevent a wildfire.

H.R. 3187 (Rep. Hill), To require the Secretary of Agriculture to convey a parcel of property of the Forest Service to Perry County, Arkansas, and for other purposes.

Section 1. Conveyance of Specified Forest Service Property to Perry County, Arkansas.

- Requires the Secretary of Agriculture to convey approximately 0.81 acres of USFS land to Perry County, Arkansas within 180 days of the bill’s enactment if the county submits a written request for the conveyance.
- Specifies that the conveyance will be made subject to valid and existing rights, without consideration, and that the exact property to be conveyed will be determined based on the results of a mutually satisfactory survey.
- Requires Perry County to pay all costs associated with the conveyance.
- Specifies that the Secretary of Agriculture shall not have to provide a covenant or warranty for the property under the “Comprehensive Environmental Response, Compensation, and Liability Act (CERCLA) of 1980.”²¹

H.R. 3444 (Rep. Huffman), “Tribal Self-Determination and Co-Management in Forestry Act of 2025”

Section 2. Tribal Co-Management Plans of the Department of the Interior.

- Requires BLM, NPS, FWS, and BIA to develop a “Tribal Co-Management Plan” within one year of the bill’s enactment, or, if a substantially similar plan already exists, to adopt and update it within 120 days of the bill’s enactment. These plans must be developed in consultation with the Secretary of

the Interior and the Secretary's Tribal Advisory Committee (chartered on November 11, 2021).

- Specifies that the plans must identify any activity, service, or function to be carried out on federally administered lands that the Secretary of the Interior determines need such action; are consistent with existing land management plans; have historical, cultural, or geographical significance to an Indian Tribe; and comply with applicable environmental laws and regulations. Actions also included in this identification are forest and grassland planning and management, research and development, restoration, and recreational service activities.

Section 3. Tribal Co-Management Training.

- Requires all DOI employees involved in developing and carrying out a Tribal Co-Management Plan to complete a training on Indigenous knowledge, the Tribal history of the areas in which they work, as well as the federal government's trust responsibility to Indian Tribes.
- Allows the Secretary of the Interior to consult with Indian Tribes.

Section 4. Authority to Enter into Agreements with Indian Tribes and Tribal Organizations to Carry Out Certain Forest Service Activities.

- Requires the Secretary of Agriculture, acting through the Chief of the Forest Service, to enter, within four years, into at least five co-management agreements with Indian Tribes or Tribal organizations under this bill or existing authorities (such as the Indian Self-Determination and Education Assistance Program or the Agriculture Improvement Act of 2018).²² Such agreements can cover forest and grassland planning and management, research and development, restoration, and recreational service activities, as well as activities of the Heritage Program.
- Specifies that co-management agreements must be carried out on National Forest System (NFS) lands, consistent with the applicable forest plan and applicable laws, and relevant to an applicable Indian Tribe. Co-management agreements cannot include activities that are nondelegable, conflict with existing stewardship contracts, or require Tribal reliance on a state government for necessary resources.
- Stipulates that Tribes must submit a formal proposal to request an agreement, including a description of proposed activities and identification of the relevant NFS lands.
- Sets up considerations for the Secretary of Agriculture to evaluate proposals from Tribes and requirements for denying Tribal requests. In particular, the Secretary of Agriculture is permitted to evaluate proposals on a best-value basis and give special consideration to factors such as historical Tribal ties to the land, landscape characteristics, prior collaboration with USFS, access needs, as well as Indigenous knowledge and skills.
- Sets terms and conditions for payments to Tribes under co-management agreements and sets parameters to reduce paperwork requirements on Tribes that receive payments.
- Requires the Secretary of Agriculture to review agreements every five years, offering modifications or termination if appropriate, and allows for earlier review at the request of Tribes following a natural disaster.
- Requires the publication of a non-exhaustive list of activities in the Federal Register that are eligible for co-management agreements every three years.
- Requires a report to Congress every three years of the accomplishments made using this authority.
- Requires the Secretary of Agriculture to consult with Indian Tribes on Indigenous knowledge and data sovereignty.
- Allows Tribes to be considered USFS employees under the Federal Tort Claims Act.²³
- Exempts activities under this section from the requirements of the Federal Acquisition Regulation.
- Specifies that nothing in this section affects the current or future rights of any Indian Tribe or their authority to enter into agreements, provides for the

exclusive use of NFS lands, or limits the Secretary of Agriculture from entering into other agreements.

- Authorizes \$50 million in funding from fiscal year (FY) 2026 through FY 2030 to carry out this section.

V. COST

A formal cost estimate from the Congressional Budget Office (CBO) is not yet available for any of the bills.

VI. ADMINISTRATION POSITION

The Trump administration's position is unknown at this time.

VII. EFFECT ON CURRENT LAW (RAMSEYER)

H.R. 1045

https://naturalresources.house.gov/uploadedfiles/bill-to-law__119hr1045ih.pdf

¹ A Presidential Document by the Executive Office of the President, "Immediate Expansion of American Timber Production," Executive Order 14225, March 1, 2025, <https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2025/03/06/2025-03695/immediate-expansion-of-american-timber-production>. A

Presidential Document by the Executive Office of the President, "Restoring Common Sense to Federal Office Space Management," Executive Order 14274, April 15, 2025, <https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2025/04/18/2025-06838/restoring-common-sense-to-federal-office-space-management>.

² More information on the legislative hearing on the FORESTS Act can be found here: <https://naturalresources.house.gov/calendar/eventsingle.aspx?EventID=417109>.

³ 16 U.S.C. § 6704.

⁴ SWERI, "Southwest Ecological Restoration Institutes (SWERI)," <https://sweri.org/>.

⁵ *Id.*

⁶ *Id.*

⁷ *Id.*

⁸ S. 457, 119th Congress, <https://www.congress.gov/bills/119/senate/457>.

⁹ Anderson, et al., "Five Alarms: Assessing the Vulnerability of US Cellular Communication Infrastructure to Wildfires," 2020, https://pages.cs.wisc.edu/~pb/wildfires_final.pdf.

¹⁰ *Id.*

¹¹ Schneider, Michael, "Fire Threatens Mt. Wilson Broadcast Transmitters as L.A. TV and Radio Stations on Alert,

Observatory Evacuated," Variety, January 9, 2025, <https://variety.com/2025/tv/news/mt-wilson-broadcast-antennas-fire-tv-radio-stations-observatory-1236271080/>.

¹² See 42 U.S.C. § 4332(2)(C); 54 U.S.C. § 300320.

¹³ *Id.*

¹⁴ United States Census Bureau, Perry County, Arkansas, <https://data.census.gov/tables/profile/Perry-County-Arkansas?g=050-XX001805105>.

¹⁵ Hill, J. French, "USFS Land Conveyance to Perry County, Arkansas: H.R. 3187 One-Pager," 5 May 2025, https://hill.house.gov/uploadedfiles/h.r._3187_one-pager.pdf.

¹⁶ THV11, "Hill working to get old Forest Service building conveyed to Perry Co.," May 9, 2025, <https://www.kvom.com/news-sports-headlines/hill-working-to-get-old-forest-service-building-conveyed-to-perry-co>.

¹⁷ Hill, French, "Rep. Hill Introduces Bill to Transfer U.S. Forest Service Building to Perry County," U.S. House of Representatives, May 14, 2024, <https://hill.house.gov/news/documentsingle.aspx?DocumentID=9456>.

¹⁸ *Id.*

¹⁹ P.L. 108-278. 16 U.S.C. § 2113a.

²⁰ *Id.*

²¹ 42 U.S.C. § 9620(h)(3)(A).

²² 25 U.S.C. § 5304 et seq. 25 U.S.C. § 3115b.

²³ 28 U.S.C. §§ 2671-2680.

**LEGISLATIVE HEARING ON H.R. 1045, UTAH
WILDFIRE RESEARCH INSTITUTE ACT OF
2025; H.R. 1655, WILDFIRE COMMUNICA-
TIONS RESILIENCY ACT; H.R. 3187, TO RE-
QUIRE THE SECRETARY OF AGRICULTURE
TO CONVEY A PARCEL OF PROPERTY OF
THE FOREST SERVICE TO PERRY COUNTY,
ARKANSAS, AND FOR OTHER PURPOSES;
AND H.R. 3444, TRIBAL SELF-DETERMINA-
TION AND CO-MANAGEMENT IN FORESTRY
ACT OF 2025**

**Tuesday, June 10, 2025
House of Representatives
Subcommittee on Federal Lands
Committee on Natural Resources
Washington, D.C.**

The Subcommittee met, pursuant to notice, at 10:15 a.m. in Room 1324, Longworth House Office Building, Hon. Tom Tiffany [Chairman of the Subcommittee] presiding.

Present: Representatives Tiffany, Fulcher, Stauber, Bentz, Amodei, Maloy, Kennedy; Neguse, Leger Fernández, and Huffman.

Also present: Representatives Hill; and Hoyle.

Mr. TIFFANY. The Subcommittee on Federal Lands will come to order.

Without objection, the Chair is authorized to declare a recess of the Subcommittee at any time.

The Subcommittee is meeting today to consider four bills: H.R. 1045 by Representative Kennedy, Utah Wildlife—Wildfire Research Institute Act of 2025; H.R. 1655, sponsored by Representative Bentz, the Wildfire Communications Resiliency Act; H.R. 3187, Representative Hill; H.R. 3444, by Ranking Member Huffman, the Tribal Self-Determination and Co-Management in Forestry Act of 2025.

I ask unanimous consent that the following members be allowed to participate in today's hearing from the dais: the gentlelady from Oregon, Ms. Hoyle.

Without objection, so ordered.

Under Committee rule 4(f), any oral opening statements at hearings are limited to the Chairman and the Ranking Minority Member. I therefore ask unanimous consent that all other members' opening statements be made part of the hearing record if they are submitted in accordance with Committee rule 3(o).

Without objection, so ordered.

I will now recognize myself for an opening statement.

**STATEMENT OF THE HON. TOM TIFFANY, A REPRESENTATIVE
IN CONGRESS FROM THE STATE OF WISCONSIN**

Mr. TIFFANY. Today the Subcommittee on Federal Lands meets to consider four pieces of legislation that will address our Nation's forest health and wildfire crisis. Across the United States more than 1.2 million acres have already burned this year. As we enter the height of wildland fire activity over the next few months, it is critical we advance solutions that will restore forest health, cut red tape, and prevent catastrophic wildfires.

We simply cannot afford to wait. That is why the House passed the Fix Our Forests Act earlier this year on a bipartisan basis. The Senate Agriculture Committee has already held two hearings on FOFA, and I look forward to continuing to work with my bipartisan Senate counterparts to send this bill to the President's desk soon.

We cannot truly address the wildfire crisis unless we have the right data. Representative Kennedy's Utah Wildfire Research Institute Act of 2025 would create a new Southwest Ecological Restoration Institute to help advance cutting-edge research that can be applied on the ground to achieve true results. In Utah more than 190,000 people live in areas considered to be at high risk of fire. Despite this, Utah is the only four-corner State without a Southwest Ecological Restoration Institute. Representative Kennedy's legislation resolves this issue, keeping Utahns safe and ensuring the State remains at the forefront of wildland fire research.

I would also like to highlight Representative Bentz's Wildfire Communications Resiliency Act. Across the country there are tens of thousands of communications facilities at risk of wildland fire. When those facilities are damaged or destroyed on Federal lands, companies must undergo a lengthy permitting process for these facilities to be repaired or rebuilt. For the millions of Americans that rely on fast, accessible communications infrastructure, these long wait times are unacceptable.

Representative Bentz's legislation is a common-sense solution to this problem, and would allow facilities damaged by wildfires to be rebuilt quickly without undergoing duplicative environmental reviews. This is not an exemption from any type of environmental review. In fact, in order to be built in the first place these facilities must undergo extensive environmental analysis. The mere fact that communications facilities are damaged during wildfires should not mean that they are forced to undertake the same duplicative processes that have already been completed.

In addition to this legislation, we will also consider legislation from Representative Hill to convey a vacant Forest Service building in Perryville, Arkansas to the local community so they can better utilize it as an education and community outreach center. This thoughtful legislation is a win-win, as it reduces the burden on the Federal taxpayer and helps advance President Trump's recent executive order on restoring common sense to Federal office space management.

Finally, the Federal Lands Subcommittee will continue its important work today elevating Tribes as full partners in managing overgrown, fire-prone forests. In our last hearing we heard testimony on Representative Hurd's FORESTS Act, which

provides several new tools to the Forest Service and Department of the Interior to expand tribal stewardship of Federal forests. I look forward to continuing that important discussion today.

I would like to thank each of the sponsors of today's legislation for bringing forward these thoughtful proposals. I also want to thank all the witnesses for being here today, and I look forward to the insights that each of you will bring to this important discussion.

Mr. TIFFANY. With that I will yield back and recognize the Ranking Member, Mr. Neguse, for his opening statement.

**STATEMENT OF THE HON. JOE NEGUSE, A REPRESENTATIVE
IN CONGRESS FROM THE STATE OF COLORADO**

Mr. NEGUSE. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and thank you to all of our colleagues for joining us today for the hearing and, of course, our witnesses.

We are here to consider, as the Chairman referenced, four very different bills focused on wildfire research, communications infrastructure, tribal self-determination, and a land conveyance. Any meaningful response to the wildfire crisis, which I agree is certainly a crisis, demands science-driven solutions, strong interagency coordination, and respect for Indigenous knowledge. The bills that we are considering today offer some useful innovations in that regard, and so I look forward to digging into the details.

Starting with H.R. 1045, the Utah Wildfire Research Institute Act, I want to thank Representative Kennedy for his effort to expand wildfire research capacity by including Utah in the Southwest Ecological Restoration Institutes network. As I am sure Mr. Kennedy is aware, the institute at Colorado State University is in my district, and I have certainly seen firsthand how these collaborative programs in Fort Collins have supported forest health and wildfire preparedness, and so grateful to my colleague for introducing this bill to add our neighbor to the west to the network.

I do want to say, you know, for the record, that I am very concerned, remain deeply concerned about the Forest Service's proposed 55 percent funding cut to the Southwest Ecological Restoration Institute's network programs for Fiscal Year 2025. That threatens the institute programs, including in Fort Collins and any other programs that might be added in other States and the viability, I would think, of a new Utah institute. And so I think that is important contextually for us to be considering.

It is troubling to me that the Administration has proposed completely eradicating the Forest Service's research budget. Research is a fundamental pillar of our response to the wildfire crisis that keeps our communities safe, promotes forest health, and enhances resilience to climate change. This requires sustained funding and investment in order to be successful, and so I hope that that is an issue that we can address in a bipartisan manner as we look into the possibility of adding a new institute in Utah.

With respect to H.R. 1655, introduced by Representative Bentz, this bill I understand he is very passionate about with respect to rebuilding communication systems after wildfires, and I certainly

agree that rebuilding those systems after natural disasters or wildfires is a real and urgent need. But I have some concerns with respect to the legislation he has proposed, and so I look forward to asking some questions of the witnesses to further unpack that particular bill.

Next we are discussing H.R. 3187 from Representative Hill. This bill proposes transferring a small parcel of Forest Service land to Perry County, Arkansas. I want to thank the Chairman and my colleagues for bringing the bill to our Subcommittee through the regular order process. This is an example of how a bill like this ought to be considered, and so I look forward to hearing more about the transfer and considering that bill.

Lastly, but certainly not least, we will be discussing H.R. 3444, the Tribal Self-Determination and Co-Management and Forestry Act, introduced by, of course, the Ranking Member of our full Committee, Mr. Huffman. I am proud to be an original co-sponsor of this bill and to support the legislation which I think is thoughtful and insightful and forward-thinking. The bill creates new tools for true partnerships between tribal nations and Federal agencies, moving us beyond consultation toward shared governance. It centers tribal voices in forest planning and resource protection, reduces barriers that might limit tribal co-management. Tribal co-management, of course, is not new, but Congress can do a whole lot more to fulfill our treaty and our trust responsibilities to tribal nations.

Mr. NEGUSE. So again, I am looking forward to considering all of these bills today, and I will yield back the balance of my time.

Mr. TIFFANY. Thank you to the Ranking Member.

And now I would like to recognize the Ranking Member of the full Committee, Mr. Huffman, for your opening statement.

STATEMENT OF THE HON. JARED HUFFMAN, A REPRESENTATIVE IN CONGRESS FROM THE STATE OF CALIFORNIA

Mr. HUFFMAN. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and good morning.

Folks, I am pleased to see a really productive agenda for us today. There are a number of bills here reflecting issues where we ought to be able to do some things together on a bipartisan basis, productive, common-sense, problem-solving things. Some of these are easier than others, but it is a good, productive agenda.

And Mr. Chair, I just want to say, as we continue to try to advance work like this in this Committee, we have to also talk about the disconnect going on right now because we can say that we care about wildfire research, which I think we all do, we can express a desire to get communications back up online after wildfires and natural disasters. We can talk about these, you know, rather routine land transfer issues that come up from time to time. Those are important, too. I have had bills that do that. And certainly, we can and we need to work together on tribal co-management. But all of those things are a lot harder to do when you are slashing budgets in a reckless way and hollowing out this agency, and dismantling its ability to do all of the things that I just mentioned and that these bills all represent.

And unfortunately, there has just been too much silence across the aisle in the face of some blatant disregarding of the law and

total chaos from these budget cuts and these actions of DOGE, including at the Forest Service where funds for everything from hazardous fuel management to research on wildfire risk to recreation, all of it, was halted earlier last year and the agency is still reeling from that disruption. Now, I am relieved to see that some of the funds are starting to be unfrozen. Some of it is starting to move again. But I am concerned about the President's recently-released budget proposal which would decimate the Forest Service, an agency that Congress has actually under-invested in for too long.

You know, House Democrats, a couple of Congresses ago prioritized investment in this agency through the Inflation Reduction Act, the Great American Outdoors Act, and the infrastructure law. But those investments and the future of the agency are at risk right now, and we need to be talking about that.

The President's recently-released budget cuts the agency's budget by more than 75 percent, reduces salaries and expenses for Forest Service employees by \$342 million, eliminates the Forest Service's research arm. Wildfire research is hard to do when you are eliminating the agency's research arm. And it zeroes out funding for the State, private, and tribal forestry program. Now, that is going to be obviously an important program if we are serious about tribal co-management.

State, Private, and Tribal Forestry is the office, thankfully, that we have represented here today. So I look forward to hearing from Deputy Chief Crockett about how this critical aspect of the Forest Service will function without any funding. Maybe he has some magical solution to that dilemma, but I hope that he will call it the way it is. I don't think that office and that program works without funding, and we ought to be able to talk frankly about that. This is particularly relevant as the Committee discusses bills like mine to enhance tribal co-management and self-determination. New authorities and programs simply cannot function without staff and without resources to back them up.

Mr. HUFFMAN. So thank you, Mr. Chairman, and I yield back.

Mr. TIFFANY. Thank you, Ranking Member Huffman. We are going to now move on to our first panel, which consists of members who are sponsoring today's legislation. And Mr. Huffman, you are on a roll. You get another 5 minutes with H.R. 3444 to be able to explain your bill.

Mr. HUFFMAN. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Give me a chance to catch my breath. But now I get to talk about my bill. I want to thank the majority for including it in this hearing. This is, of course, my Tribal Self-Determination and Co-Management in Forestry Act.

Just a few weeks ago the Subcommittee brought together a distinguished panel of witnesses who were leaders in tribal forestry. And each of them I have had the privilege of working with and developing my legislation. Every one of them importantly emphasized that tribal forestry should be a bipartisan issue for this Committee, and I am certainly committed to making that so.

I look forward to hearing from Mr. Tripp today. He has years of experience working with the Karuk Tribe's Natural Resources Department. Mr. Tripp knows that in my district the Karuk Tribe

and others have been leaders in forest management, the integration of cultural burns, use of Indigenous knowledge on lands with generations of history that remain deeply tied to them. I hope my Republican colleagues and Chair Westerman will continue to work with us and with Tribes and tribal organizations, all of whom share the goal of bringing Tribes into the decision-making process when it comes to managing our Federal lands.

Tribal nations have played a key role in land management since time immemorial, and it is past time for the Federal land management agencies to start working with them as equal partners, to take a step towards fulfilling our trust and treaty obligations to tribal nations. That is what my legislation is all about. My bill ensures that Tribes not only have a seat at the table, but a meaningful stake in decisions affecting their communities.

The legislation provides that the Forest Service will have additional standalone authority to enter into co-management agreements with Tribes to carry out critical wildfire prevention work and other forest management activities on our national forest lands. It gives Tribes more authority to build on the work that they have already been doing through the National Forest System to improve water quality, preserve culturally significant species and places, and manage invasives and sustain natural resources.

These are broadly-supported policy goals, but we are all well aware on this Committee that work that is needed in our national forest is often halted by devastating wildfires and other natural disasters. This legislation provides more flexibility to adjust co-management plans in the event of that kind of disruption, and also allows Tribes to request review from the Forest Service to keep things on track.

I am glad to see the Forest Service here today, as this legislation builds on critical tribal consultation that USDA and the Forest Service have conducted to expand and advance self-determination in forestry. Many of the ideas proposed during that consultation are reflected in my legislation.

To help Congress address the wildfire crisis, USDA worked with the Department of the Interior, with Homeland Security, and FEMA to establish the Wildland Fire Mitigation and Management Commission, and that commission developed comprehensive recommendations for improving wildfire response. One key recommendation was for the USDA to have standalone authorities to enter into co-management agreements with tribal nations. That is exactly what my bill does.

The bill would also enhance tribal stewardship at Interior by directing each land management agency to collaboratively develop tribal co-management plans with the Secretary's Tribal Advisory Committee. So the focus of the bill clearly is forestry and the Forest Service, but we think that the tribal co-management policies there will become models for all public land agencies, and we want to get the Interior agencies moving forward with their own planning and tribal co-management activities as well.

All Department of the Interior employees would be involved in developing or implementing tribal co-management plans. They would also be required to receive culturally appropriate training,

including education on the trust relationship between the Federal Government and tribal nations.

So I hope my colleagues share our commitment to delivering for Tribes and their forestry goals. I urge them to work with us on this legislation to ensure that the Administration's actions do not irreparably harm Indian Country.

Mr. HUFFMAN. And I yield back.

Mr. TIFFANY. Yes, thank you to the Ranking Member. And I would now like to recognize the gentleman from Oregon, Mr. Bentz, for his statement in regards to H.R. 1655.

**STATEMENT OF THE HON. CLIFF BENTZ, A REPRESENTATIVE
IN CONGRESS FROM THE STATE OF OREGON**

Mr. BENTZ. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member, and members of the Committee. Thank you for the opportunity to present my bill, H.R. 1655, the Wildfire Communications Resiliency Act. This legislation was crafted as a direct response to the devastating wildfire seasons we have seen in the West, and in Oregon in particular.

In 2024, just last year, nearly 2 million acres burned in Oregon, and approximately 900,000 of those acres are in my district alone sadly, setting new records. Many of these fires struck rural communities where communication infrastructure is already limited, and the loss of even a single tower or line can strand entire counties from emergency resources during these disasters. My district includes 20 such counties.

In too many cases the process of rebuilding or upgrading communication systems has been delayed not due to technical difficulty, but because of bureaucratic rules and regulations. Federal environmental reviews under NEPA and the National Historic Preservation Act often take months or sometimes years to complete, even when the project simply seeks to replace or harden equipment destroyed in a federally declared disaster area. This is not just inefficient, it is dangerous and absolutely makes no sense.

H.R. 1655 provides a targeted exemption from these reviews for communication infrastructure projects located within the footprint of a declared wildfire disaster. It applies only to facilities that are replacing damaged structures or upgrading systems for greater fire resilience. This bill is not about circumventing environmental protection; it is about enabling our communities to recover and prepare without unnecessary and duplicative hurdles that cost time, money, and, in some cases, lives.

This bill represents a common-sense approach to disaster recovery, which is grounded in the reality that our communities are facing growing threats from increasingly severe wildfires. In times of emergency people need reliable, necessary, and essential communication networks that are up and operational to coordinate rescue efforts, receive emergency alerts, and maintain contact with loved ones. Bureaucratic permitting delays and lengthy environmental assessments should not hinder this urgent and necessary restoration process.

Thank you. I look forward to your questions, and I yield back.

Mr. TIFFANY. Thank you, Representative Bentz. I now recognize Representative Kennedy for 5 minutes on H.R. 1045.

**STATEMENT OF THE HON. MIKE KENNEDY, A
REPRESENTATIVE IN CONGRESS FROM THE STATE OF UTAH**

Dr. KENNEDY. Thank you, Mr. Chair, and to the Ranking Member Neguse, as well as my fellow Committee members. I am grateful to be here to present my bill, which is a simple bill.

As an oversight to the 2004 Southwest Forest Health and Wildfire Prevention Act, Utah was not included in the Four Corners States—Arizona, New Mexico, and Colorado were included in—the opportunity to have a Southwest Ecological Restoration Institute, or SWERI Institute, and this bill amends that Act with inclusion of Utah as a State that has one of these institutes.

And I am actually pleased to report that in 2024 the State legislature actually authorized the formation of an institute housed at Utah State University, and also provided start-up funding already for that institute. And my witness later on, Dr. Yocom, will testify to the fact that the State of Utah is ready to stand up that institute.

Utah has a unique geographic boundary that reflects important interests as to fire prevention, and this Southwest Ecological Restoration Institute will provide the research that would allow us to prevent these devastating wildfires that plague not only the West generally, but Utah specifically.

We are looking forward to collaborating with partners to improve forest management and wildfire prevention efforts, and there is a long history of successful and innovative resource management and planning programs in Utah that add value to wildfire prevention and restoration efforts across the West.

So, Mr. Chair, thank you for allowing this bill to be heard in this Committee, and I look forward to the support of not only my friends on one side of the aisle, but bipartisan-wise, wildfires are not a partisan issue and I am grateful for the opportunity to sponsor this problem-solving legislation that can help us move forward.

Thank you, Mr. Chair, and with that I yield back.

Mr. TIFFANY. Yes, thank you, Representative Kennedy. We are going to move on to our second panel now.

Let me remind the witness that under Committee rules you must limit your oral statement to 5 minutes, but your entire statement will appear in the hearing record.

To begin your testimony please press the on button.

We use timing lights. When you begin the light will turn green. At the end of 5 minutes the light will turn red, and we will ask you to complete your statement. You are a veteran at this.

I would now like to introduce Mr. John Crockett, Deputy Chief of State, Private, and Tribal Forestry at the United States Forest Service.

Deputy Chief Crockett, welcome, and you are recognized for 5 minutes.

**STATEMENT OF JOHN CROCKETT, DEPUTY CHIEF OF STATE,
PRIVATE, AND TRIBAL FORESTRY, UNITED STATES FOREST
SERVICE, WASHINGTON, D.C.**

Mr. CROCKETT. Good morning, and thank you, Chair Tiffany, Ranking Member Neguse, members of Committee. Thank you for

the opportunity to appear before you today to speak about the four public land bills with Forest Service equities under consideration today. My name is John Crockett, and I have been a career employee with the U.S. Forest Service for over 28 years, and I currently serve as the Deputy Chief of State, Private, and Tribal Forestry, as well as the Acting Deputy Chief for the National Forest System.

The Forest Service manages over 193 million acres of Federal lands for a variety of uses that support sound management of lands held in other ownerships, works at the forefront of science to improve the health of our Nation's forests. And today I look forward to discussing a range of bills that touch on the agency's work. While our interest varies across the bills, our testimony expresses a willingness to work with the Committee on the ideas put forward.

H.R. 3187 requires the Secretary of Agriculture to convey a small parcel of Forest Service land on the Ouachita National Forest to Perry County, Arkansas. The Forest Service supports this conveyance and the local benefits it will generate, and looks forward to working with the Committee to ensure the parcel's prompt conveyance.

H.R. 1655, the Wildfire Communications Resiliency Act, would ensure the construction and repair of communication facilities following major disasters such as wildfires, and they are not subject to certain reviews under the National Environmental Policy Act and the National Historic Preservation Act. We support this bill and the goal to expedite approvals to rebuild communication infrastructure following natural disasters, and welcome the opportunity to share feedback on small technical matters.

H.R. 1045, the Utah Wildfire Research Institute Act of 2025, would amend the Southwest Forest Health and Wildfire Prevention Act of 2004 to require the establishment of an additional Southwest Ecological Research Institute, or SWERI, in the State of Utah. The Forest Service supports this bill, this bill's goal to work closely with State universities on research that helps to address the challenges faced in the Great Basin and the Interior West.

H.R. 3444, the Tribal Self-Determination and Co-Management in Forestry Act of 2025, would authorize the Secretary of Agriculture to enter into agreements with Indian Self-Determination and Education Assistance Act title 1 contracts with Indian Tribes, tribal organizations to perform certain activities, services, or functions, including management decisions on National Forest System lands that are historically, culturally, or geographically relevant to Tribes. The Forest Service supports shared stewardship with tribal nations, where overlapping interests with the National Forest System lands exist, including work to reduce wildfire risk, restore landscapes following natural disasters, and preserve cultural heritage.

We also strongly support the bill's proposed extension of the Federal Tort Claims Act to tribal employees carrying out activities under these contracts or agreements. However, there are components of the bill we hope to discuss further with the Committee.

First, we respectfully note that title 1 of the Indian Self-Determination and Education Assistance Act applies to programs that are operated for Tribes at the Bureau of Indian Affairs and Indian Health Services. The statutes are not a funding vehicle. Rather, it transfers the administration of the qualifying programs that are operated to the benefit of the Tribe from the Federal agency to the Tribe. Since the Forest Service does not provide direct services to Tribes, we hope to discuss the compatibility of this statute with the agency's work.

Second, we hope to work with the Committee to further understand what is meant by the term "management decisions" in order to ensure the language meets congressional intent.

And lastly, we hope to further discuss the potential of this bill's positioning the Forest Service as the arbiter of competing interests with Tribes within the same landscape, a role that could be difficult for the agency to fulfill.

This concludes my testimony, and thank you for the opportunity to share the Forest Service views, and I look forward to answering any questions.

[The prepared statement of Mr. Crockett follows:]

PREPARED STATEMENT OF JOHN CROCKETT, DEPUTY CHIEF, STATE, PRIVATE AND TRIBAL FORESTRY

Chairman Tiffany, Ranking Member Neguse, and Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for inviting the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Forest Service to provide testimony on four bills: H.R. 1045—"Utah Wildfire Research Institute Act of 2025", H.R. 1655—"Wildfire Communications Resiliency Act", H.R. 3187—"To require the Secretary of Agriculture to convey a parcel of property of the Forest Service to Perry County, Arkansas, and for other purposes", and H.R. 3444—"Tribal Self-Determination and Co-Management in Forestry Act of 2025."

H.R. 1045, Utah Wildfire Research Institute Act of 2025

H.R. 1045, the "Utah Wildfire Research Institute Act of 2025," would amend the Southwest Forest Health and Wildfire Prevention Act of 2004 to require the establishment of an additional research institute in the state of Utah. This would be in addition to three existing institutes in Colorado, Arizona, and New Mexico that are collectively known as the Southwest Ecological Restoration Institutes (SWERIs).

The Forest Service understands the Committee's interest in pursuing additional research in the Great Basin and Interior West, including on the spread of invasive plants and associated fire danger, with the goal of increasing knowledge and dissemination of challenges and successes in regional forest and rangeland management.

While the Forest Service supports the goal of working closely with state universities to address challenges facing the Great Basin and Interior West, the FY 2026 Budget does not include resources to provide financial assistance to the SWERIs.

H.R. 1655, Wildfire Communications Resiliency Act

H.R. 1655, the "Wildfire Communications Resiliency Act," would provide that construction, rebuilding, or hardening of communications facilities following a major disaster or wildfire-related emergency are not subject to certain reviews under the National Environmental Policy Act and National Historic Preservation Act.

The Forest Service recognizes the serious impacts that utility interruptions have on the health and welfare of communities and individuals and prioritizes post-disaster restoration of communications and other critical services on National Forest System lands. The agency supports an expedited approval process for rebuilding communications facilities that have been damaged or destroyed by a major disaster or emergency event and supports the opportunity presented in H.R. 1655 to efficiently address facility repairs. Specifically, the Forest Service strongly supports the exclusion of communications facilities damaged by a wildfire disaster or emergency from being considered a "major Federal action," and therefore not subject to requirements to prepare certain environmental reviews or be considered an under-

taking under 54 U.S.C. 300320. We welcome further discussion with the Committee on some small technical concerns to ensure that the proposed legislation can accelerate agency efforts.

H.R. 3187, To require the Secretary of Agriculture to convey a parcel of property of the Forest Service to Perry County, Arkansas, and for other purposes

H.R. 3187 requires the Secretary of Agriculture to convey a parcel of Forest Service land on the Ouachita National Forest to Perry County, Arkansas.

The Forest Service recognizes the potential local benefits this conveyance could provide and supports the conveyance of the Perryville office building and 0.81-acre parcel to Perry County. The Forest Service has engaged Perry County in direct sale conversations since 2022 and would like to work with the Committee to ensure the prompt conveyance of this parcel.

H.R. 3444, Tribal Self-Determination and Co-Management in Forestry Act of 2025

H.R. 3444, the “Tribal Self-Determination and Co-Management in Forestry Act of 2025,” would direct the Secretary of the Interior to develop a Tribal Co-Management Plan for Bureaus within the Department and would require related training for staff. It would also authorize the Secretary of Agriculture to enter into agreements and contracts with Indian Tribes and Tribal organizations to perform certain activities, services, or functions, including management decisions, on National Forest System lands that are consistent with applicable land management plans and carried out on land that is historically, culturally, or geographically related to the relevant Tribe. Activities could include forest and grassland planning and management, restoration, recreational services, Forest Service Heritage Program activities, and research and development activities.

The Forest Service supports robust shared stewardship with Tribal Nations where overlapping interests exist. We work closely with Tribal Nations on forest management, wildfire mitigation, resource restoration, risk reduction, and cultural preservation efforts. We actively engage in shared stewardship through a dozen existing authorities, including the Tribal Forest Protection Act and Good Neighbor Authority.

We defer to the Department of the Interior on Sections 2 and 3 of the bill, which direct the development of a Tribal Co-Management Plan and related staff training for the Bureau of Land Management, Fish and Wildlife Service, National Park Service, and Bureau of Indian Affairs.

Section 4 authorizes the Forest Service to enter into agreements or Indian Self-Determination and Education Assistance Act Title I contracts with Tribes and Tribal organizations to carry out activities, services, or functions—including permissive activities and management decisions—on Forest Service lands that are identified as historically, culturally, or geographically related to relevant Indian Tribes. The bill requires the Secretary to publish in the Federal Register, every three years, a non-exhaustive list of activities eligible for inclusion in those agreements, in consultation with Tribes. The bill sets forth time frames and factors that the Forest Service must consider before entering into the agreements, such as valid existing rights of other parties, and identifies special factors for consideration, such as Tribal citizen access and indigenous knowledge. The bill allows a Tribe to amend its agreement to undertake additional activities in response to a natural disaster. The bill also extends the Federal Tort Claims Act coverage to Tribes carrying out the agreements or contracts.

The Forest Service supports the inclusion of formal consultation, the incorporation of Indigenous Knowledge, and the extension of the Federal Tort Claims Act to Tribal employees carrying out activities under the agreements.

The Forest Service welcomes a discussion with the sponsors to address certain legal and implementation matters related to Section 4 to ensure that Congressional intent is effectuated. More clarity on which management decisions are eligible for contracting would be beneficial, particularly since the agreements must be consistent with federal law and non-delegation principles.

As the sponsors may know, Title I of the Indian Self-Determination and Education Assistance Act is not a funding vehicle, but rather a statutory mechanism that transfers Bureau of Indian Affairs and Indian Health Service programs operated for Tribes over to Tribal control. We welcome a discussion on the applicability of that statute’s terms for the Forest Service context and its interplay with the annual funding provisions from the Self-Governance Act in the bill. We also welcome a discussion concerning the Forest Service’s authority to protect Tribal data sovereignty in order to carry out the goals contained in the bill.

Lastly, Section 4 of the bill requires that activities carried out on Forest Service land be historically, culturally, or geographically related to the Tribe without requiring a temporal nexus to the landscape. When there are overlapping Tribal interests with complicated histories over the same landscape this provision places the Forest Service in a position as arbiter of those interests. We welcome a discussion with the sponsors on this issue. We defer to the Department of the Interior if any portions of Section 4 that may affect its bureaus and agencies.

Conclusion

That concludes the Forest Service's testimony. Thank you again Chairman Tiffany, Ranking Member Neguse, and members of the Subcommittee for the opportunity to present USDA's views on this proposed legislation.

Mr. TIFFANY. Thank you, Deputy Chief Crockett. I am now going to recognize members for 5 minutes of questioning, and we will start with the gentleman from Minnesota, Mr. Stauber.

Mr. STAUBER. Thank you very much, Chairman Tiffany.

Deputy Chief Crockett, thank you for joining us today. Can you expand upon the challenges the Forest Service faces in conducting proper forest management after a wildfire or another disaster?

And how long does it typically take for the Forest Service to rebuild infrastructure on land that has been affected?

Mr. CROCKETT. So thank you for the question. How long does it take to rebuild infrastructure? It depends on the nature of the damage, the type of facility that was in place, and so I will give you a general bookmark of time frames. So on the minimum side, a couple of months if everything is pretty simple and everything works out with it.

On the other side of that bookend would be anywhere—

Mr. STAUBER. Deputy Chief Crockett, when you say, "everything works out", define "works out."

Mr. CROCKETT. Sure. So if it is—

Mr. STAUBER. You know where I am going with that.

Mr. CROCKETT. Yes. So I am trying to basically give you the simplest answer on it because it is complicated.

So when I say, "works out," if the alignment of the people capacity in the Forest Service is there, if the proposal itself is pretty straightforward, meaning there is not any back and forth that we need to do with the entity, so that is what I mean, if it works out.

Mr. STAUBER. So if it doesn't work out, what is the longest time frame you have seen?

Mr. CROCKETT. We are required by the Mobile Now Act to have everything either approved or denied within 270 days. So that is the maximum extent of it.

Mr. STAUBER. And during your career with the Forest Service, have these timelines increased or decreased to rebuild infrastructure after a wildfire?

Mr. CROCKETT. I would say they vary. There are some infrastructure facilities that we are able to expedite, and there are other ones that take an extended amount of time for some of the reasons that I just named.

Mr. STAUBER. And before I yield my time to Chairman Tiffany, I just wanted to double check. I think I know this answer. Wildfires don't adhere to NEPA, do they?

Mr. CROCKETT. No, they don't.

Mr. STAUBER. Deputy Chief Crockett, thanks for your testimony. I am going to yield the balance of my time to Chairman Tiffany.

Mr. CROCKETT. Thank you.

Mr. TIFFANY. Thank you to the gentleman from Minnesota.

To the question that he was doing there you said it is complicated. Give us a little bit more about why this is complicated, that it takes so much time.

Mr. CROCKETT. Yes, so the complicating factors is depending on what level of staffing we have on hand to be able to accept the proposal and run it through our review process. So the people side of it, the complexity of the actual proposal itself, like I said earlier, if it is pretty straightforward, should be able to move forward without any delays. But if there are unforeseen matters that either the proposal didn't plan for, then that could adjust the time frames.

Mr. TIFFANY. How could Congress help uncomplicate it?

Mr. CROCKETT. I think what you named around, because in your opening statement you mentioned that the analysis has been done already if a communication site is in place. And so why duplicate that effort of having to do the additional analysis?

As long as a check to make sure there is not a changed condition with it, I think the proposal that you put in place will help expedite the decision-making process.

Mr. TIFFANY. More generally speaking, not just on this specific proposal by, I think we are referring to Representative Bentz, how could Congress help uncomplicate your work?

Mr. CROCKETT. So I would say timelines are definitely helpful. And if—obviously, it is our goal to expedite anything that comes in. But if we had timelines that we had to adhere to, that would be helpful. Obviously, having the right resources of staff capacity and funding.

Mr. TIFFANY. So in other words, tightening timelines might be a good thing?

Mr. CROCKETT. Sure.

Mr. TIFFANY. That is all the questions I have. Representative Stauber, do you have any? I will yield back to you. It is your time if you have any further follow-up.

Mr. STAUBER. No, I think that if you had a structure on Forest Service land that you had to rebuild, same structure, same footprint, would you have to do a NEPA review?

Mr. CROCKETT. We would do I would say a proficiency check on it to make sure that there are not any changed conditions from when that facility was originally put in place to now. So that is what I would name—

Mr. STAUBER. So no changes, no NEPA review?

Mr. CROCKETT. No changes, no additional analysis.

Mr. STAUBER. Right. Like a categorical exclusion?

Mr. CROCKETT. So a CATEX on the small end, yes, we should be able to run it through, and get public comment and perspectives on it, and move it forward.

Mr. STAUBER. Thank you, Deputy Chief Crockett.

I yield back.

Mr. TIFFANY. The gentleman yields. I now recognize the Ranking Member of the Subcommittee, Mr. Neguse.

Mr. NEGUSE. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Thank you, Deputy Chief Crockett, for your testimony, for being here again before us. And I want to preface my comments and my questions with a statement, which is to say that I am very grateful for your service to the agency and to our country, and I hope you consider my questions in that light because I know you are a career official and doing your part to serve within the Forest Service. But as you can probably imagine, there are many of us here on the dais who have deep concerns about the political leadership of the Department of the Interior and the Forest Service and the Department of Agriculture. And as a result, given that you are—testifying in front of us today, I want to be sure that we have an opportunity to ask you some questions in that regard.

So my colleague, my Republican colleague, Mr. Tiffany, mentioned uncomplicating your work, I think, was the phrase that he used. And your response was something to the effect of having more resources for, you know, the folks on your team to do their jobs would be helpful. You are aware that President Trump has submitted his Fiscal Year 2026 skinny budget, and you have reviewed that. Is that fair?

Mr. CROCKETT. Yes, I am aware of it.

Mr. NEGUSE. OK. You are aware that his budget calls for the elimination of the State, Private, and Tribal Forestry branch of the United States Forest Service.

Mr. CROCKETT. Yes, I am aware of it.

Mr. NEGUSE. What is your title?

Mr. CROCKETT. I am the Deputy Chief for State, Private, and Tribal Forestry.

Mr. NEGUSE. So the President, President Trump, proposes to eliminate the branch of the Forest Service that you lead.

Mr. CROCKETT. That is correct.

Mr. NEGUSE. Yes. I think that it is patently unfair for the Trump administration to ask you to come testify in front of this Committee on behalf of a budget that eliminates the very branch of the agency that you lead. And I am not the only one who feels that way.

A variety of State leaders from across the country, Republicans and Democrats, have condemned the proposed cuts that this budget would make to wildfire programs, to the work that is being done by the hard-working people at the Forest Service, including in the branch that you lead, the hard-working civil servants who do their jobs every day. I know you are aware of this, Deputy Chief, but I think it is important for my colleagues to understand this, particularly those of us who serve on this Committee who also serve on the Appropriations Committee, because they are going to have a chance in the markups to potentially change this.

You are aware of the State and volunteer fire capacity programs in your division, of course.

Mr. CROCKETT. That is correct.

Mr. NEGUSE. You are aware that that is being eliminated by the Trump administration, proposed to be eliminated in the budget?

Mr. CROCKETT. I am aware of that, yes.

Mr. NEGUSE. You are familiar with the Forest Stewardship Program?

Mr. CROCKETT. Yes, sir, right.

Mr. NEGUSE. That is another program that President Trump has proposed to eliminate entirely.

Mr. CROCKETT. Yes.

Mr. NEGUSE. You are familiar with the Joint Fire Science Program?

Mr. CROCKETT. I am.

Mr. NEGUSE. This funds wildfire research in response to the needs of land managers in Nevada and Utah and Colorado and Idaho. You are aware of that?

Mr. CROCKETT. Yes.

Mr. NEGUSE. And you are aware that President Trump is proposing eliminating it?

Mr. CROCKETT. That is correct.

Mr. NEGUSE. OK. So Mr. Chairman, one way to uncomplicate the Deputy Chief's job may be to ask President Trump not to propose eliminating the sub-agency that he leads and all of the various fire programs that I just mentioned, the impacts of which, by the way, will be most pronounced in the States that are represented by the members on this Committee, including my own in Colorado. I don't think that is an unfair request, and I say this in good faith.

I mean, again, there are members of this Committee who serve on the Appropriations Committee. This is a live item. It is up for debate right now, right? House Republicans could reject some of these cuts and save these programs, they could save the division that you lead. We only need two or three.

I am very supportive of Utah's effort to expand the SWERIs programs, the institutes that exist in Fort Collins, and to add Utah to it. But Deputy Chief, you have said in your testimony here the Fiscal Year 2026 budget does not include resources to provide financial assistance to these institutes. Right?

Mr. CROCKETT. That is correct.

Mr. NEGUSE. So I am trying to understand. My colleagues from Utah are proposing to add an institute while simultaneously this Congress is going to defund all of the institutes.

And I guess what I would just ask of Mr. Kennedy because, again, I am very supportive, and I would just ask for your partnership. Let's get your legislation across the finish line, but let's also make sure that your institute and that Colorado's institute and Arizona's, that they are funded. Otherwise, what is the point of adding new institutes if we are going to defund them? That is my request, I should say.

And I yield back. Thank you for the Chairman's indulgence.

Mr. TIFFANY. The gentleman yields. I now would like to recognize Ms. Maloy for her 5 minutes of questioning.

Ms. MALOY. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. Crockett, thank you for being here. I only have a couple of questions for you, and they should be really easy. They are things you probably already know really well.

As my colleague mentioned, my colleague from Utah sitting here to my right has introduced a bill to create a wildfire research institute in Utah. There are three that already exist in the Four Corners area. Can you speak to the value of those wildfire research institutes to the Forest Service, and improving management

practices, and especially any way that they have helped the Forest Service localize management practices and make them specific?

Mr. CROCKETT. Yes, so thank you for the question. And yes, we do value our relationships with the existing SWERIs, and know that the Utah SWERI would provide a benefit from the research perspective, particularly around collaboration and helping our land managers upstream of the fire risk do the analysis that is needed to determine how to mitigate that fire risk. And that happens at the local level within the existing SWERIs, and I would assume that same level of collaboration would happen with the Utah SWERI.

Ms. MALOY. Are there any examples where having local research from a SWERI has allowed Forest Service to improve management and localize it, instead of just having Federal, national, country-wide policies?

Mr. CROCKETT. I think the examples in both Colorado from the Ranking Member as well as in Arizona, where the research institutions work hand in hand with the local forest leaders, either the forest supervisors or forest fire managers, to get the localized perspective on the research that is happening and impacting that State or that forest. And I have seen examples on the ground firsthand, particularly around Flagstaff, Arizona, on where that has benefited the local forest.

Ms. MALOY. OK, thank you. I look forward to seeing that happening in Utah.

And Mr. Bentz's bill that speeds up rebuilding communications infrastructure after a wildfire, I am excited to see that in here. I represent a State that has wildfires and is majority of the land managed by the Federal Government. Can you talk about the challenges your agency faces in permitting rebuilding critical infrastructure, particularly utilities, after a wildfire?

Mr. CROCKETT. Yes, so some of those challenges I did name earlier, but what I would say is the bottom line for us is faster approval of permitting processes allows communication sites to get back up and be utilized for their intended purposes.

Ms. MALOY. I have also gone through this process before after wildfires in Utah, where we have utility infrastructure that has been damaged and we are just trying to rebuild it the same way, in the same path, and the process itself becomes a prohibition to getting things done. And I am excited that we are looking at ways to improve that and work together.

With that, Mr. Chairman, I yield back.

Mr. TIFFANY. The gentlelady yields. I now recognize Ms. Leger Fernández for 5 minutes.

Ms. LEGER FERNÁNDEZ. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and thank you so much for joining us here today.

I need to tell you my heart goes out to you. It really does, because you are trying to do your job knowing that there is a starvation budget that has been proposed by Trump that is yet to be opposed by the Republicans, which basically will make it impossible for you to do your job.

And, you know, Mr. Kennedy, I joined with my Ranking Member in welcoming a research center in Utah. We have one in New Mexico.

And, you know, Representative Maloy, you are absolutely right. These research centers are so key, especially as we try to recover from wildfires. We have a horrific wildfire in New Mexico. We have, luckily, a research center right in the middle of where that fire was, and so I welcome it. And I hope you do join us in supporting funding, because it doesn't do us any good to authorize something and then take away the funding for it.

There was a bipartisan letter on May 16, 2025. We did get some Republicans to support it. Hopefully you will, as well, because that called for robust funding for these facilities. So I know the letter already went out, and I know we asked the Utah delegation to join us, but hopefully you will because it doesn't do us any good to authorize these programs if we don't fund them.

You know, Deputy Chief Crockett, it takes boots on the ground to actually fight the fires and do the work you have been asked to do. Is that correct?

Mr. CROCKETT. That is correct.

Ms. LEGER FERNÁNDEZ. Yes, it takes boots in the forest to actually manage those forests. Is that correct?

Mr. CROCKETT. That is correct.

Ms. LEGER FERNÁNDEZ. And it takes dollars to fund the people who wear those boots. Is that correct?

Mr. CROCKETT. That is correct.

Ms. LEGER FERNÁNDEZ. And, you know, I am looking at the testimony that you provided to this Committee, I think it was 2 years ago, approximately 2 years ago. And it is such a contrast with the testimony that you have provided today. Because if we look at that testimony, Tiffany was Chair. You came here telling us all the great work you were able to do. In fact, you pointed out that for the tribal programs that we are talking about today, you had testimony precisely about this kind of bill. Do you recall that testimony?

Mr. CROCKETT. I do recall that testimony.

Ms. LEGER FERNÁNDEZ. Yes, and you pointed out that you were able to triple the number of agreements from 19.8 million to \$68 million, right? What did it feel like to be able to do that kind of work, to get the money to actually do those kinds of agreements?

Mr. CROCKETT. It was exciting to work with the Tribes and see that they had not only the ability to do the work, but it was funded. So yes, that was exciting.

Ms. LEGER FERNÁNDEZ. So what are you going to do if the starvation budget is what actually gets passed into law when you have now potentially four institutes and no money? How will you decide, like, which child goes hungry?

Mr. CROCKETT. I don't know if I have an answer for you on that question, ma'am.

Ms. LEGER FERNÁNDEZ. Will you be able to fund the four institutes, if we become four institutes, with the money that is in the proposed budget?

Mr. CROCKETT. As it is currently proposed in the budget, the funding system that funds the institutes would be transferred to the Department of the Interior because it is our hazardous fuel budget line item that funds the institute, and the President's

budget does propose moving that funding structure to the Department of the Interior.

Ms. LEGER FERNÁNDEZ. But there isn't enough money, regardless of where it is. There isn't enough money to do the research. There isn't enough money to actually carry out these programs. I think that is part of the problem.

I mean, in contrast to your testimony 2 years ago, where you were excited, talking about these new things that were happening, and I need to tell you. Coming from, you know, the rural district that I represent, and it has those beautiful lands that are in Utah, that are in Montana, that are in Colorado, that are in all of these Western States, in fact, many of these Western States are represented by Republicans, but they seem ready to cut off, you know, cut it off at the knees so those boots won't be on the ground to be able to conduct the work that they need to do. And I just don't know how we are going to do this. We are running out of time.

But I will point out that that earlier funding increases, they were bipartisan. It included the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law. And these bipartisan efforts are being defunded now at a rate that is alarming, given the wildfires that we are going to be seeing raging across the beautiful forests that I call home.

With that, Mr. Chairman, I yield back.

Mr. FULCHER [presiding]. The gentlelady's time is expired. The Chair recognizes Mr. Kennedy for 5 minutes.

Dr. KENNEDY. Thank you, Mr. Chair.

And Deputy Chief, thank you very much for being with us today. We appreciate your work on a daily basis, as well as you coming up here to visit with us.

So the SWERI institutes were created by Congress to support science-based forest restoration. How does the U.S. Forest Service coordinate with these institutes to align Federal forest management priorities with academic research and on-the-ground capacity?

Mr. CROCKETT. Yes, thank you for the question. And as I mentioned earlier, well, as an extension of what I mentioned earlier, research institutions are an extension of our ability to do work within the Forest Service. So obviously, we have a research wing within the agency, but the universities provide an extended perspective around wildfire research, one that we find valuable to the local resource.

Dr. KENNEDY. Can you give me any examples of research that has been useful to you in your 28-year career? I think you said 28 years.

Mr. CROCKETT. Yes.

Dr. KENNEDY. So over the years, what sort of research have the SWERI institutes given to the Forest Service that has helped you in doing the job that you do?

Mr. CROCKETT. Yes. So the SWERIs and the one in Arizona that I mentioned earlier, particularly around ponderosa pine, a species that is fire-dependent, they have provided research to help us better understand what management activities would look like to help reduce risk and severity from the ponderosa pine ecosystem.

Dr. KENNEDY. And you did mention, I think earlier, that—permitting reform is an important part of something that would

help the institutes help with policy formulation that would actually help us in Washington, D.C. help you do your job.

Mr. CROCKETT. I would say that the short answer is yes, but most of the work that they are doing is at the local level, helping those local managers make better decisions, which obviously helps us at the national level because they have policy in place that allows them to do their job better.

Dr. KENNEDY. Thank you very much.

And with that, I yield back, Mr. Chair.

Mr. FULCHER. Thank you, Mr. Kennedy.

So the commentary on the other side is complete, so I want to just take a minute here before we close, Mr. Crockett, and ask you, first of all, thank you for your testimony. And after this exchange, what goes through your mind that we missed that needs to be brought up?

I will focus on the solution side, but what have we missed? What do you recommend? Last-minute air time.

Mr. CROCKETT. Sure, thank you for the question and the opportunity to provide a perspective.

I think the Committee has named a dynamic tension between the authorizers and the appropriators, and I have a role in being in the middle of that, of having to make some tough decisions around our budget and our resources, and to fund or not to fund SWERIs, or to do the work or not to do the work. For me, I think that is the key point that has been named, that tension between the authorizers and the appropriators, and the differences in the branches of government between legislative and executive.

Mr. FULCHER. Mr. Crockett, thank you very much.

Mr. CROCKETT. Thank you.

Mr. FULCHER. OK. With that, if there are no further questions, we will now move on to our third panel.

I would like to thank the witness for his valuable testimony, and you are dismissed.

While the clerk resets our witness table, I will remind the witnesses that under Committee rules they must limit their oral statements to 5 minutes, but their entire statement will appear in the hearing record.

I would also like to remind our witnesses of the timing lights, which will turn red at the end of your 5-minute statement, and to please remember to turn on your microphone.

As with the second panel, I will allow all witnesses to testify before member questioning.

OK, first I would like to introduce The Honorable Larry Blackmon, Judge of Perry County, Arkansas.

Judge Blackmon, you are recognized for 5 minutes.

STATEMENT OF THE HON. LARRY BLACKMON, JUDGE, PERRY COUNTY, PERRYVILLE, ARKANSAS

Judge BLACKMON. Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member Neguse, and members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to testify today. I appreciate the chance to speak in support of my Congressman representing French Hill's legislation, H.R. 3087, to require the Secretary of Agriculture to convey a parcel of property

of the Forest Service in Perry County, Arkansas, and for other purposes.

Perry County is a small rural county located in central Arkansas with approximately 10,000 residents. Perry County is the fourth smallest county in Arkansas, and the third by total land area. Roughly 16 percent of the residents in Perry County live in poverty. The county is 77 percent forested, resulting in limited economic opportunities. As a result, we have limited budget to invest in our community, which means we must find ways to maximize the value of every dollar.

For years, Perry County has sought to purchase the U.S. Forest Service property located at 1069 Fourche Avenue in Perryville, Arkansas. Unfortunately, we have been unsuccessful in this effort. As mentioned earlier, Perry County has limited resources and a high poverty rate, and the Forest Service building in the small county has been unable to purchase it outright.

Trying to purchase the U.S. Forest Service building has been a lengthy process. After Perry County requested an appraisal, the U.S. Forest Service took over a year to complete the assessment of the building. During that year's time frame, the U.S. Forest Service had a new roof installed. Unfortunately, the roof soon began leaking due to faulty insulation by the contractor. Once Perry County received the appraisal value, we were no longer able to afford to purchase the building and make the necessary repairs to make it usable.

The necessary improvements for the U.S. Forest Service will include installing a new roof, repairing all the exterior wood facing that has been damaged by the leaking roof. The water damage from the leaking roof includes ceiling damage on the interior of the building, repairs to the trusses, and most of the flooring will need to be replaced. While the U.S. Forest Service building will require repairs and updates, the county does have funding to make the necessary substantial repairs from the water damage. However, Perry County cannot make these improvements and purchase the building outright.

Once Perry County restores the U.S. Forest Service building, it will support key programs. Specifically, the building will house local organizations currently struggling with limited space and inadequate resources which restrained them from serving the community effectively. If Perry County is able to acquire the Forest Service Building, we can move the County Extension Office, Conservation Office, and 4-H into the building. Currently, none of these organizations have sufficient space to conduct the necessary activities to fully serve the people of Perry County.

In addition, these organizations do not have access to meeting rooms or kitchen facilities for cooking classes, which includes classes about healthy eating habits. One of the most significant benefits to Perry County is that the 4-H would have a permanent home. Currently, 4-H is forced to meet wherever they can find a suitable location.

Local support for Perry County acquiring this building is strong, which includes but is not limited to the City of Perryville, Perryville Mayor John Rowland, the Perry County Chamber of

Commerce, Perry County Fair Association, State Representative Mary Bentley, and State Senator Terry Rice.

In conclusion, H.R. 3187 will help Perry County create lasting benefits for our community. H.R. 3187 will enable numerous organizations to serve Perry County in a greater capacity than they currently can due to a lack of office space, meeting rooms, and storage areas for equipment that they need to assist the citizens of Perry County.

Mr. Chairman, that concludes my testimony. I would be happy to answer any questions you or the other members may have. Thank you.

[The prepared statement of Judge Blackmon follows:]

PREPARED STATEMENT OF JUDGE LARRY BLACKMON

Chairman Tiffany, Ranking Member Neguse, and members of the subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to testify today. I appreciate the chance to speak in support of my Congressman, Rep. French Hill's legislation, H.R. 3187. To require the Secretary of Agriculture to convey a parcel of property of the Forest Service to Perry County, Arkansas, and for other purposes.

Perry County is a small, rural county located in central Arkansas, with approximately 10,000 residents. Perry County is the fourth smallest county in Arkansas and the third-smallest by total land area. Roughly 16 percent of residents in Perry County live in poverty. The county is 77 percent forested, resulting in limited economic opportunities. As a result, we have a limited budget to invest in our community, which means we must find ways to maximize the value of every dollar.

For years, Perry County has sought to purchase the U.S. Forest Service property located at 1069 Fourche Avenue in Perryville, Arkansas. Unfortunately, we have been unsuccessful in this effort. As mentioned earlier, Perry County has limited resources and a high poverty rate, and the small county has been unable to purchase it outright. Trying to purchase the U.S. Forest Service building has been a lengthy process. After Perry County requested an appraisal, the U.S. Forest Service took over a year to complete the assessment of the building. During that year's timeframe, the U.S. Forest Service had a new roof installed. Unfortunately, the roof soon began leaking due to faulty installation of the new roof by a contractor. Once Perry County received the appraisal value, we could no longer afford to purchase the U.S. Forest Service building and make the necessary repairs to make it usable.

The necessary improvements for the U.S. Forest Service Building include installing a new roof and repairing all the exterior wood facing that has been damaged by the leaking roof. The water damage from the leaking roof includes ceiling damage on the interior of the building, repairs to the trusses, and most of the flooring will need to be replaced. While the U.S. Forest Service building will require repairs and updates, our county does have the funding to make the necessary substantial repairs from the water damage. However, Perry County cannot make these improvements in addition to purchasing the U.S. Forest Service building outright.

Once Perry County restores the U.S. Forest Service building, it will support key programs. Specifically, the building will house local organizations currently struggling with limited space and inadequate resources, which restrain them from serving the community effectively. If Perry County is able to acquire the U.S. Forest Service building, we can move the county Extension Office, Conservation Office, and 4H into the building. Currently, none of these organizations has sufficient space to conduct the necessary activities to fully serve the people of Perry County. In addition, these organizations do not have access to meeting rooms or kitchen facilities for cooking classes, including classes about healthy eating habits. One of the most significant benefits to Perry County is that 4H would have a permanent home. Currently, 4H is forced to meet wherever they can find a suitable location.

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In conclusion, H.R. 3187 will help Perry County and create lasting benefits for our community. H.R. 3187 will enable numerous organizations to serve Perry County in a greater capacity than they currently can due to a lack of office space,

meeting rooms, and storage areas for equipment needed to assist the citizens of Perry County.

Chairman Tiffany, that concludes my testimony. I would be happy to answer any questions you or other members of the subcommittee may have.

Mr. FULCHER. Thank you, Judge Blackmon. I now recognize the gentleman from Utah, Mr. Kennedy, for 1 minute to introduce our next witness.

Dr. KENNEDY. Thank you, Mr. Chair Pro Tem. I am grateful to be here to talk more about my Utah Wildfire Research Institute Act of 2025 and to introduce Dr. Yocom, who is the director of the Utah Forest Restoration Institute and an Associate Professor in the Wildland Resources Department at Utah State University.

Dr. Yocom has contributed to numerous peer-reviewed journal articles on wildfire and forest management, and has been invited across Utah and the country, as well as the world, to give presentations on her work. As a subject matter expert, she currently serves on the board of the Southern Rockies Fire Science Network, a committee member of the Association for Fire Ecology Education Committee, and an advisory committee member for the Great Basin Fire Science Exchange.

I thank Dr. Yocom for joining us here today, and I look forward to your testimony later.

Thank you, Mr. Chair, I yield back.

Mr. FULCHER. Thank you, Mr. Kennedy. I now recognize Ms. Larissa Yocom, Director of the Utah Forest Restoration Institute. Ms. Yocom, you have 5 minutes.

STATEMENT OF LARISSA YOCOM, DIRECTOR, UTAH FOREST RESTORATION INSTITUTE, LOGAN, UTAH

Dr. YOCOM. Thank you for the opportunity to be here. I am Larissa Yocom, the Director of the Utah Forest Restoration Institute and an Associate Professor of Forest Fire Ecology and Management at Utah State University. I am excited about the opportunity to discuss the Utah Wildfire Research Institute Act of 2025, a bill introduced by Representative Kennedy, with a companion bill, S. 457, introduced by Senator Lee.

This bill would amend the Southwest Forest Health and Wildfire Prevention Act of 2004 to require the establishment of an additional Southwest Ecological Restoration Institute under the Act in the State of Utah. Currently, three institutes exist in Arizona, New Mexico, and Colorado.

Fire plays an essential role in keeping diverse Western forests healthy and has wide-ranging benefits. For example, aspen trees thrive after fire, and wildlife often seek out recently burned areas. However, early settlers viewed fire as a destructive force that resulted in the waste of valuable timber. For decades forest managers were remarkably successful in preventing and suppressing fire, while communities expanded into fire-prone areas. About 25 years ago, large and destructive megafires started to become a regular occurrence. At present we are experiencing more destructive fire, spending more resources on fighting fire, and dealing with other cascading effects such as fire-induced damage to

water supplies and rising homeowner insurance costs. Everyone is looking for answers.

How can we better manage our forests, keep communities safe, and reduce the risks for millions of Americans who depend on forests for services such as timber, clean air, recreation, hunting, grazing, and water supply?

In 2004 Congress created the Southwest Ecological Restoration Institutes, or SWERI, to serve as the critical connector of science and practice to restore forest health and reduce the risk of catastrophic wildfire. Hosted at universities to stay on the cutting edge of research, the SWERI work side by side with managers, policymakers, and communities to ensure that locally relevant science and technology reaches the people who need it most. The SWERI have worked for 20 years to demonstrate that adaptive and active management is an effective tool for improving outcomes.

Although there is still plenty of work to do, we have learned a great deal in the last two decades about how to reduce fuels through mechanical thinning of trees and prescribed fire, as well as developed science-based fire response strategies that are safer and more effective. We have learned more about how to engage residents to garner support for active forest management. We have learned about how to support collaboration across boundaries so that important fire prevention work does not get hung up in the courts. We have learned about how to manage areas that have recently burned to restore vegetation and prevent erosion into waterways.

Much of this learning has been developed and applied on the ground under the leadership of the SWERI, through their place-based monitoring and timely and nimble production of actionable ecological and social science. The work of the SWERI is so distinct and impactful that Utah wants a SWERI of their own. In 2024 the Utah State Legislature authorized the formation of an institute housed at Utah State University, provided start-up funding, and named it the Utah Forest Restoration Institute. I was named the Director in January of this year.

Initial responses in Utah to the formation of the institute have been universally positive from partners including the State of Utah, the U.S. Department of Agriculture Forest Service, the Department of the Interior Bureau of Land Management, tribal representatives, non-profits, and policy-makers.

Everyone acknowledges that we have a fire problem, and we need focused attention on solutions. Utah's mix of forests and woodlands are unique. We will have different fire patterns from our neighboring States, and our solutions will need to be unique, too. Frankly, we are behind many of our neighbors in determining which management tools work best for Utah's forests and woodlands, and how to engage residents and decision-makers. Establishing a SWERI in Utah is critical to help us get ahead of the curve before it is too late. The benefits of establishing a SWERI in Utah include healthier forests, safer communities, a stronger workforce, and a more informed public.

We have been collaborating closely with the other SWERI to ensure that we are additive and complementary to the SWERI program, and will enhance their work across the Intermountain

West. Federal designation of a SWERI in Utah will need to be followed by sufficient appropriations for the new Utah Institute and sustained appropriations for the existing SWERI. Sustained Federal funding allows the SWERI to reliably and swiftly respond to the substantial and increasing need for science-based solutions, for reducing the risk of catastrophic wildfire, and sustaining the health and vitality of our forests in the Intermountain West, in alignment with the broader intent of the Southwest Forest Health and Wildfire Prevention Act of 2004.

Thank you for the opportunity to address the Subcommittee. I would be happy to answer any questions you might have.

[The prepared statement of Dr. Yocom follows:]

PREPARED STATEMENT OF LARISSA YOCOM, DIRECTOR, UTAH FOREST RESTORATION INSTITUTE & ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR, DEPARTMENT OF WILDLAND RESOURCES, UTAH STATE UNIVERSITY

Chairman Tiffany, Ranking Member Neguse, and all members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to speak today. I am Larissa Yocom, the Director of the Utah Forest Restoration Institute and an Associate Professor of Forest Fire Ecology & Management at Utah State University. I am excited about the opportunity to discuss the “Utah Wildfire Research Institute Act of 2025” bill, introduced by Representative Kennedy with a companion bill S. 457 introduced by Senator Lee. This bill would amend the Southwest Forest Health and Wildfire Prevention Act of 2004 to require the establishment of an additional Southwest Ecological Restoration Institute under the Act in the state of Utah. Currently three institutes exist in Arizona, New Mexico, and Colorado. Passing this bill into law is an important initial step to benefit the people of Utah, as well as our neighboring states, by adding to an existing program with proven results accelerating science-based forest management and reducing wildfire risk.

Fire plays an essential ecological role in keeping diverse Western forests healthy and has wide-ranging benefits. For example, aspen trees thrive after fire, and wildlife often seek out recently burned areas. However, early settlers viewed fire as a destructive force that resulted in the waste of valuable timber. For decades, forest managers were remarkably successful in preventing and suppressing fire, while communities expanded into fire-prone areas. Then, about twenty-five years ago, large and destructive megafires suddenly started to become a regular occurrence. At present, we are experiencing more destructive fire, spending more resources on fighting fire, and dealing with other cascading effects such as fire-induced damage to water supplies and rising homeowner insurance costs. Everyone is looking for answers. How can we better manage our forests, keep communities safe, and reduce the risks for millions of Americans who depend on forests for services such as timber, clean air, recreation, hunting, grazing, and water supply?

In 2004 Congress created the Southwest Ecological Restoration Institutes, or SWERI, to serve as the critical connector of science and practice to restore forest health and reduce the risk of catastrophic wildfire. Hosted at universities to stay on the cutting edge of research, the SWERI work side by side with managers, policymakers, and communities to ensure that locally relevant science and technology reaches the people who need it most. The SWERI have worked for 20 years to demonstrate that adaptive and active management is an effective tool for improving outcomes. Although there is still plenty of work to do, we have learned a great deal in the last two decades about how to reduce fuels through mechanical thinning of trees and prescribed fire, as well as developed science-based fire response strategies that are safer and more effective. We have learned more about how to engage residents to garner support for active forest management. We have learned about how to support collaboration across boundaries, so that important fire prevention work does not get hung up in the courts. We have learned about how to manage areas that have recently burned, to restore vegetation and prevent erosion into waterways. Much of this learning has been developed and applied on the ground under the leadership of the SWERI, through their place-based monitoring and timely and nimble production of actionable ecological and social science.

The work of the SWERI is so distinct and impactful that Utah wants a SWERI of their own. In 2024, the Utah state legislature authorized the formation of an institute housed at Utah State University, provided start-up funding, and named it the Utah Forest Restoration Institute. I was named the Director in January of this

year. Initial responses in Utah to the formation of the institute have been universally positive, from partners including the state of Utah, the U.S. Department of Agriculture Forest Service, the Department of Interior Bureau of Land Management, tribal representatives, non-profits, and policymakers. Everyone acknowledges that we have a fire and forest resilience problem, and we need focused attention on solutions. Utah's mix of forest and woodlands are unique. We have different fire patterns from our neighboring states and our solutions will need to be unique too. Frankly, we are behind many of our neighbors in determining which management tools work best for Utah's forests and woodlands, and how to engage residents and decision makers. Establishing a SWERI in Utah is critical to help us get ahead of the curve before it is too late.

The benefits of establishing a SWERI in Utah include healthier forests, safer communities, a stronger workforce, and a more informed public. We have been collaborating closely with the other SWERI to ensure that we are additive and complementary to the SWERI program and will enhance their work across the Intermountain West. Federal designation of a SWERI in Utah will need to be followed by sufficient appropriations for the new Utah institute and sustained appropriations for the existing SWERI. Sustained federal funding allows the SWERI to reliably and swiftly respond to the substantial and increasing need for science-based solutions for reducing the risk of catastrophic wildfire and sustaining the health and vitality of our forests in the Intermountain West, in alignment with the broader intent of the Southwest Forest Health and Wildfire Prevention Act of 2004.

Thank you for the opportunity to address this Subcommittee. I would be happy to answer any questions you may have.

Mr. TIFFANY [presiding]. Thank you, Ms. Yocom. I now recognize Mr. Bill Tripp, Director of Natural Resources and Environmental Policy for the Karuk Tribe Department of Natural Resources.

Mr. Tripp, welcome back. You have 5 minutes.

STATEMENT OF BILL TRIPP, DIRECTOR OF NATURAL RESOURCES AND ENVIRONMENTAL POLICY, KARUK TRIBE DEPARTMENT OF NATURAL RESOURCES, ORLEANS, CALIFORNIA

Mr. TRIPP. [Speaking Native language.] My name is Bill Tripp, and I am the Director of Natural Resources and Environmental Policy for the Karuk Tribe, located along the Klamath River in far northern California.

Ninety-eight percent of Karuk original territory is collocated with National Forest System lands. I have been working in the field of natural resources and environmental policy for 32 years. I offer this testimony in my capacity as the Karuk tribal delegate to the Intertribal Timber Council, and more specifically, my role as Chair of the ITC Fire Subcommittee. I have been asked to speak to the Tribal Self-Determination and Co-Management in Forestry Act.

As with any such topic, there is nuance to be addressed and a duty of care to be observed to avoid harm, such as a potential diminishment of tribal sovereignty or perceived extinguishments of any reserved, retained, or other tribal rights. Given this, I will convey why it is so important that we get this right.

I have been using fire for traditional and cultural purposes since I was 4 years old. My great-grandmother gave me a task. And when I saw the inherent problems and accomplished it as instructed, she agreed to tell me our stories of creation. These stories speak to our relationship to the natural world, and our responsibility to do the things inherent to Karuk culture. One of these things is our world renewal ceremonies on Offield Mountain.

Following the big burn of 1910, as the Weeks Act was being discussed in Congress, the Western governors conditioned their support with a call for an authority for governments to coordinate in regard to carrying out wildland fire management programs. Meanwhile, in Karuk territory, the ceremonial burning of Offield Mountain happened for the last time due to the results of this suppression mindset.

In recent years the State of California has passed a suite of laws that accommodate and enable Indigenous fire use as something that is conducted under the inherent sovereign authority of Indian Tribes. The same authority founded in the Weeks Act and that was originally used to stamp out our Indigenous fire use practices can and should be used to enable Federal deference to such laws at the State and tribal level. This is where the agreement structure offered in the Tribal Co-Management and Self-Determination in Forestry Act becomes key to its success.

Both this bill and the FOREST Act, if done well, would solidify existing opportunities, reinforce congressional intent, clarify the fact that Forest Service should be sharing decision-making authority more broadly, and provide specific connections to the Indian Self-Determination and Education Assistance Act to promote efficient program delivery while respecting and preserving tribal sovereignty. But all too often, agencies and bureaus are reluctant to share management and decision-making with Tribes based on their own narrow readings of statutory authority.

Federal officials regularly rely on oversimplified interpretation, and avoid engaging in co-creating new models of shared management. An example of this is explicit in the Indian Self-Determination and Education Assistance Act, where Congress found that the parental and community control of the educational process is of crucial importance to Indian people. The ceremonial burning of Offield Mountain is supposed to be burned by 3 young men that might not even be 18 years old, but already have a career's worth of burning under their belt through our Indigenous education systems. The Federal agencies demand, however, that the National Wildfire Coordinating Group training standards are followed before a person can burn.

It is critical that legislation does not extinguish unceded rights of Indian people and acknowledge tribal sovereign authority over inherent tribal activities.

Some Tribes are interested in taking over implementation of Federal program services, functions, and activities. Other Tribes are most interested in the exercise of their Indigenous knowledge, practices, and belief systems without burdensome process. We at the Karuk Tribe are pursuing a combination of the two.

In closing, I thank you all for inviting me to testify here today. I look forward to working to help ensure this dialog progresses in an appropriate way that fosters bipartisan support and enables proactive stewardship that truly moves the needle in addressing the wildfire crisis.

[Speaking Native language.] Thank you.

[The prepared statement of Mr. Tripp follows:]

PREPARED STATEMENT OF BILL TRIPP ON THE TRIBAL SELF DETERMINATION AND CO-MANAGEMENT IN FORESTRY ACT OF 2025 HOUSE SUBCOMMITTEE ON FEDERAL LANDS

Ayukii—My name is Bill Tripp and I am the Director of Natural Resources and Environmental Policy for the Karuk Tribe's Department of Natural Resources. The Karuk Tribe is located along the Klamath River in far Northern California and our Aboriginal Territory is over a million acres, which stretch into Oregon. 98% of Karuk Aboriginal Territory is co-located with National Forest System lands. I have been working in the field of Natural Resources and Environmental Policy for 32 years, and using fire as a management tool for the last 47 years. I now serve as the Intertribal Timber Council (ITC) Fire Subcommittee Chair, the ITC principal to the Wildland Fire Leadership Council (WFLC) leadership team for the WFLC Western Region, and was the Tribal Government Representative appointed to the bipartisan Wildland Fire Mitigation and Management Commission. I offer this testimony in my capacity as the Karuk Tribal delegate to the Intertribal Timber Council (ITC) and more specifically my role as Chair of the ITC Fire Subcommittee.

I have been asked to speak to the Tribal Self Determination and Co-Management in Forestry Act, introduced by Rep. Jared Huffman, who represents part of the Aboriginal Territory of the Karuk Tribe. This bill is based on the unanimous recommendations (number 29 and 30) of the Wildland Fire Mitigation and Management Commission,¹ which urged Congress to provide the Forest Service with authority to enter into agreements to share or transfer decision-making authority with a Tribe or defer to the decisionmaking authority of a Tribe. Specifically, this bill authorizes the Secretary of Agriculture to enter into agreements with Indian Tribes and Tribal organizations for the performance of certain activities of the Forest Service. It also recognizes the authority to the Forest Services to defer to Tribal decisions in their exercise of reserved, retained, and other similar rights. I would urge this Committee to take a bipartisan approach to this topic, as there has also been a related and complementary bill (Fostering Opportunities to Restore Ecosystems using Sound Tribal Stewardship Act, or the FORESTS Act, sponsored by Rep. Hurd). I know there is great interest on both sides of the aisle in working to overcome some of the adversity Tribes have faced in our tribal homelands for generations, while we enable proactive stewardship, restore sense of purpose in our tribal communities, and protect homes, lives and the environment from catastrophic wildfire.

As with any such topic, there is nuance to be addressed and a duty of care to be observed to avoid harm, such as a potential diminishment of tribal sovereignty or perceived extinguishment of any reserved, retained, or other Tribal rights.² Given this, I will convey why it is so important that we get this right, provide some historical context, call out some specific distinctions critical to success, and offer help in working to refine this and other bills aimed at enabling tribal co-management of federal lands moving forward.

I have been using fire for traditional and cultural uses and purposes since I was 4 years old. I built a fire in the woodstove one morning so it would be warm when my great grandma woke up. When she heard me, she came out and told me if I was going to be playing with fire, I was going to do something good with it. At that point, she (my great grandmother) took me outside, gave me a task and went back inside. When I solved its inherent problems and accomplished it as instructed, she agreed to tell me the Arrarrahi ipikyav, or our stories of creation. These stories speak to our relationship to the natural world, and our responsibility to do the things inherent to Karuk culture. One of these things is our World Renewal Ceremonies, part of which take place on Offield Mountain. By the time I was 8 years old I had completed all the lessons. She asked me: now that you have been given this knowledge, what are you going to do with it? I responded in saying that I was going to use my life to help bring fire back to the people, as that would be the one thing that we would have to do if we were to live in a survivable homeland in the future.

Following the Big Burn of 1910, as the Weeks Act was being discussed in Congress, the Western Governors conditioned their support of the bill with a call for the authority for state and federal governments to coordinate in regard to carrying out Wildland Fire Management Programs. The Federal and State governments retained their distinctions as constitutional government entities in

¹ On Fire: A Report of the Wildland Fire Mitigation and Management Commission (September 2023), Recommendation 30.

² Additional information on these topics can be found in Good Fire II, available here: <https://karuktribeclimatchangeprojects.wordpress.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/good-fire-ii-march-2024.pdf>.

doing so, but disregarded the sovereignty and rights of Tribes. As a result of Tribes not being at the table, the misguided singular focus on suppression spread across both the state and federal land management agencies. Meanwhile, in Karuk territory, the ceremonial burning of Offield mountain happened for the last time due to results of this suppression mindset. I have spent the last 32 years of my life trying to build relationships so we can restore conditions conducive of revitalizing this essential ceremonial burning practice. In addition to having direct impacts on our religious freedoms and ability to practice our ceremony, the importance of enabling cultural burning cannot be overstated. There is currently no plan for maintaining all of the acres that we are diligently working with our federal partners to restore, and cultural burning is the answer. It is the only way we can sustainably and reliably make our landscapes safer in the face of wildfire, and prevent the loss of lives, property, and timber resources among other things.

In recent years, in an attempt to address the “wildfire problem,” the State of California has passed a suite of laws that accommodate and enable Indigenous fire use as something that is conducted under the inherent sovereign authority of Indian Tribes.³ These laws give deference to Tribal law in the conduct of inherently tribal activities such as cultural burning. It would be game-changing to see similar authorities at the federal level. In fact, the same authority founded in the Weeks Act that was originally used to stamp out our Indigenous fire use practices, can and should be used to enable federal deference to such laws at the state and Tribal level. This is where the agreement structure offered in the Tribal Co-Management and Self Determination in Forestry Act becomes a key to its success. The authority for the Forest Service to enter into an agreement that recognizes the differences between federal actions and those inherently tribal is paramount to our ability to revitalize our cultural identity.

It is clear to me that Congress needs to lead on this issue. Recent Forest Service testimony on the FORESTS Act,⁴ made clear to me that the agency does not understand at all levels that they can and should be working with Tribes in ways unique to their specific situations. They do not seem to understand what kinds of new authorities are needed to make it all work. From my experience, the agreement templates used by the Forest Service are not structured in a manner conducive of a government-to-government relationship, but it should not be difficult to make the appropriate adjustments if properly approached. Conversely, it is important to realize that we have come a long way in our relationship building efforts, and it will be difficult to keep up the pace, let alone increase the scale of our proactive management impact moving forward with continued budget and capacity cuts. Efficiencies are better gained with directional focus that when carried out under an umbrella of fear and confusion.

Both this bill and the FORESTS Act,⁵ if done well, would solidify existing opportunities, reinforce Congressional intent, clarify the fact that the Forest Service should be sharing decisionmaking authority more broadly, and provide specific connections to the Indian Self-Determination and Education Assistance Act (ISDEAA) to promote efficient program delivery while respecting and preserving Tribal Sovereignty. As successful as our co-stewardship partnerships have been in regard to progressing the Forest Service management responsibility in our Karuk homelands, more efficient means are possible with consistent and reliable funding mechanisms like self-governance compacting.

More than two decades ago, the USDA Forest Service recognized that the ISDEAA was indeed a government-wide mandate, but believed that there were no authorities specific to the Forest Service to enable adequate implementation by the agency. This bill’s inclusion of additional 638 mechanisms is another key component. But all too often agencies and bureaus are reluctant to share management and decision-making with Tribes based on their own narrow readings of statutory authority as well as overblown concerns with the sub-delegation doctrine and what constitutes an “inherently federal function.” While those legal doctrines occasionally present legitimate considerations, federal officials regularly rely on them as an over-simplified and ill-considered interpretation and avoid engaging and co-creating new models of shared management. Congress needs to push the agencies to do better.

An example of this is explicit in ISDEAA,⁶ where Congress found that parental and community control of the educational process is of crucial importance to the

³ Senate Bill 310, https://leginfo.ca.gov/faces/billNavClient.xhtml?bill_id=202320240SB310.

⁴ <https://naturalresources.house.gov/calendar/eventsingle.aspx?EventID=417109>.

⁵ <https://naturalresources.house.gov/calendar/eventsingle.aspx?EventID=417109>.

⁶ 46 U.S.C. § 5301(b)(3).

Indian people, and that Tribes will never give up this right. For my Tribe, education is not just what is taught in the classroom, but in the intergenerational transfer of knowledge about our management systems and the places where we are from. Much of Karuk Aboriginal Territory now falls within the jurisdiction of both the Forest Service and the Tribe, including a sacred mountain called Offield Mountain. The ceremonial burning of Offield Mountain or Ikkariyatuuuyship, meaning the spirit people's mountain, is supposed to be burned by three young men that might not even be 18 years old, but already have a careers' worth of burning under their belt through our Indigenous education systems. Because of Forest Service policies, I have been denied this part of my Indigenous education, but it is still my inherent responsibility to ensure others are not.

The federal agencies demand, however, that National Wildfire Coordinating Group training standards are followed before a person can be part of any burning on federally administered lands, meaning that their experiential learning cannot even begin until they are at least 18 years old. This constitutes an extinguishment of our right to religious freedoms and is in direct conflict with the findings in ISDEAA. Conversely, an Agency cannot extinguish a right, nor can a State. It is critical that legislation involving co-management or co-decision-making does not extinguish the unceded rights of Indian people, and acknowledges pathways whereby Agencies can defer to tribal sovereign authority over inherently tribal activities. This bill reinforces this in communicating the premise that the Forest Service can already accommodate and enable our access to conduct our Indigenous fire use practices either as part of, or completely separate from the delivery of federal programs.

Any effective co-management legislation must recognize that Tribes are asking to undertake at least two different kinds of activities on lands administered by federal agencies. Some Tribes are interested in taking over the implementation of federal programs, services, functions, and activities. In doing so, they will generally follow federal policies (such as the National Wildfire Coordinating Group qualifications), but also have access to federal benefits (such as tort coverage and federal dollars). But other Tribes are most interested in mechanisms whereby the federal government can accommodate the exercise of their Indigenous knowledge, practice, and belief systems without burdensome processes. Cultural burning is one of these practices: it should not be assumed to be prescribed fire, or required to be completed in the context of federal program delivery. We at the Karuk Tribe are pursuing a complementary combination of the two, and view this bill as an important means for enabling this.

These two different pathways require two different approaches. Congress should efficiently permit and resource Tribes in undertaking federal programs, services, functions, or activities. And Congress should also empower what should be considered "inherently tribal" activities as well. It also matters whether components involve the significant use of federal funds and are therefore required to be included in an approved land management plan. Who we are and the ceremonial practices of individual Indian people are not required components of such a plan, but perhaps should rather be analyzed as the related actions of a separate sovereign when included in federal land management planning activities.

In closing, I thank you all for inviting me to testify here today. I look forward to working with your staff as requested to help ensure this dialogue progresses in an appropriate way that fosters bipartisan support, and enables proactive stewardship that truly moves the needle in addressing the wildfire crisis. Getting this done right for the long-term is more important than getting this done quickly. I hope each and every one of you work to progress this dialogue in the states you represent so we can utilize the strengths of federal, state, and tribal sovereignty in a way that does not constitute an extinguishment of our rights. The very term "Indigenous" means "natural to place", and in gaining a mutual understanding of what that can and should mean to us all, I look forward to preserving our indigeneity while finding lasting solutions to the wildfire problem.

Yootva (thank you).

Mr. TIFFANY. Thank you, Mr. Tripp. I now recognize Mr. Greg Andreas, General Manager at Ponderosa.

Mr. Andreas, you are recognized for 5 minutes.

**STATEMENT OF GREG ANDREAS, GENERAL MANAGER,
PONDEROSA TELEPHONE, O'NEALS, CALIFORNIA**

Mr. ANDREAS. Chairman Tiffany, Ranking Member Neguse, Vice Chairman Kennedy, and members of the Subcommittee, I thank you for the opportunity to testify today. I am Greg Andreas, General Manager at Ponderosa Telephone in California.

I have over 30 years of executive leadership and operational expertise across large, multi-national corporations and rural telecom providers. My background has provided me with the opportunity to lead several small rural operators and understand firsthand the unique challenges rural communities and their providers face in keeping subscribers connected.

Ponderosa Telephone covers 1,650 square miles, from the foothills of the Central Valley to the spine of the Sierra Nevada mountains, covering Madera and Fresno Counties. Ponderosa is in its sixth generation of family management. We have over 7,200 customers and serve 10 tribal communities. This good work has not been easy, however. We average four homes per mile of network built, navigating through rough terrain that is difficult and costly to serve.

Serving our neighbors, friends, and families is not easy. This work rests atop a unique mix of commitment to our community, an entrepreneurial spirit, and effective government policies and programs that help make and sustain the business case for investing and continuing to operate in rural America.

Of course, there are a number of community-focused local providers like Ponderosa all across the country. We are proud members of NTCA, the rural broadband association which represents about 850 rural, community-based broadband providers that are deploying cutting-edge networks and offering advanced communication services in rural America.

Turning to this important hearing, I have led critical disaster recovery efforts to restore telecommunication infrastructure in remote and underserved areas. I look forward to sharing the many lessons I have learned in managing restoration of communication networks following natural disasters. This includes both my time in the Virgin Islands, dealing with the impacts of Hurricanes Irma and Maria in 2017, and more recently navigating the inefficient, outdated, and/or under-staffed permitting processes in the wake of Ponderosa's efforts to help our community recover from catastrophic wildfires.

On September 4, 2020, the sixth largest wildfire was recorded in California history, and it ravaged our community. The Creek Fire burned nearly 400,000 acres and destroyed over 850 buildings. Our preliminary efforts have put total damages and restoration costs at approximately \$4.1 million.

Given my expertise with natural disasters, their impact on communication networks, and the challenges of restoring those networks, I am pleased to support Representative Bentz's Wildfire Communication Resiliency Act under consideration today. This legislation aims to tackle the significant delays surrounding the restoration of a communication network after a wildfire. Communities across the Nation will benefit from this legislation being signed into law.

I would also encourage this Subcommittee to consider similar legislation to address other natural disasters such as hurricanes and tornadoes. Networks that get destroyed by natural disasters but use the same rights-of-way and permitting processes when first approved should be included in legislation. Expediting NEPA and NHPA procedures in the wake of natural disasters such as wildfires would allow providers to swiftly replace damaged infrastructure, deploy permanent communication solutions, and ensure that affected areas regain access to essential services.

These reviews, while important for environmental and cultural protections, are often lengthy and complex, even for emergency restoration projects of facilities that had previously been in the same area. Streamlined approvals are not just a matter of regulatory efficiency; they are a lifeline for communities trying to rebuild and stay connected.

Thank you again for providing me the opportunity to share these thoughts with the Committee, and I look forward to answering any questions that you may have.

[The prepared statement of Mr. Andreas follows:]

PREPARED STATEMENT OF GREG ANDREAS, GENERAL MANAGER,
PONDEROSA TELEPHONE

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Chairman Tiffany, Ranking Member Neguse, Vice Chairman Kennedy, and members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to testify at this legislative hearing. My testimony today will focus on H.R. 1655, the *Wildfire Communication Resiliency Act*.

I am Greg Andreas, General Manager at Ponderosa Telephone. I have over 30 years of executive leadership and operational expertise across large multinational corporations and rural telecommunications providers. My background has provided me with the opportunity to lead several small rural operators and understand firsthand the unique challenges rural communities and providers face in getting and staying connected.

Ponderosa Telephone covers 1,650 square miles from the foothills to the spine of the Sierra Nevada mountains covering Madera and Fresno Counties. Ponderosa is in its sixth generation of family management, starting in 1908. We have over 7,200 customers and serve 10 tribal communities. This good work has not been easy, however. Ninety-five percent of our Big Creek exchange is situated on federal land and several of our other exchanges also traverse federally managed areas. We average four homes per mile of network build, navigating through rough terrain that is difficult and costly to serve. It has taken extraordinary efforts to serve our neighbors, friends and families—and this work rests atop a unique mix of commitment to our community, an entrepreneurial spirit, and effective governmental policies and programs that help make and sustain the business case for investing and continuing to operate in rural America.

Of course, there are a number of community-based and community-focused local providers like Ponderosa across the country. We are proud members of NTCA—The Rural Broadband Association, which represents about 850 rural, community-based broadband providers that are deploying cutting edge networks and offering advanced communications services in deeply rural communities. These operators collectively serve less than five percent of the population of the United States but nearly thirty percent of its landmass. Much like Ponderosa, these rural providers operate in rural areas left behind decades ago when earlier efforts to build out our nation's communications networks ignored them because they were too sparsely populated.

Even before taking my current role at Ponderosa, I have unfortunately had significant experience in managing responses to and recovery from natural disasters. In 2017, while working for VIYA in the United States Virgin Islands, two Category 5 hurricanes (Irma and Maria) went overhead two weeks apart on September 6th and 20th respectively. With seventy-eight percent of utility poles down, the disaster recovery effort was extensive. It took a year to restore internet and phone services to over ninety-five percent of customers that were down.

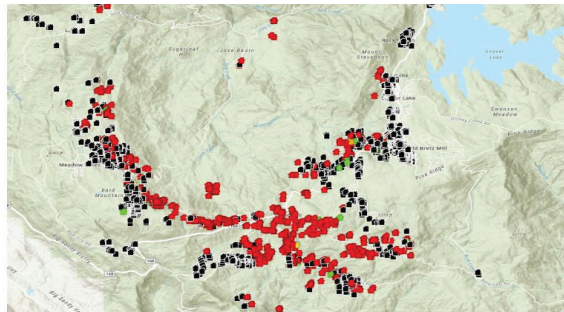
Experiences like these have given me substantial insights into critical disaster recovery efforts to restore telecommunications infrastructure in remote and underserved areas, including the need to work closely with local and federal stakeholders to ensure rapid response, community safety and resilient rebuilding—which brings us to this important hearing. I look forward to sharing “lessons learned” in managing recovery and restoration of communications networks following natural disasters not only on federal lands that are under the purview of this Subcommittee but also along interstate, state, and local roadways, under railroad crossings, on poles, and/or in private rights of way. These lessons have come from both my time in the Virgin Islands dealing with the impacts of hurricanes on networks and more recently navigating inefficient, outdated, and/or understaffed permitting processes in the wake of Ponderosa’s efforts to help our community recover from catastrophic wildfires.

Wildfires pose a serious threat not only to lives and property but also to critical communication infrastructure. As fires spread, they can damage cell towers, fiber optic cables (that provide service directly to residents and businesses as well as serving as backhaul for wireless towers), and power lines—leading to widespread communication outages. These disruptions can hinder emergency response efforts, delay evacuation alerts, and isolate communities, especially the elderly, from vital information. In rural and wildfire-prone areas especially, the loss of connectivity can exacerbate already dangerous situations. I am grateful for the opportunity to highlight how H.R. 1655 will expedite the environmental and historical review processes to ensure that swift and reliable networks are back up and running after a catastrophic wildfire through restoration of critical communications infrastructure.

2020 CREEK FIRE

On September 4, 2020, the sixth largest wildfire recorded in California history ravaged our community. The Creek fire burned nearly 400,000 acres, destroyed over 850 buildings, and took well over four months to contain. Firefighting costs exceeded \$500 million dollars, making it one of the costliest fires in California history.

Ponderosa experienced the loss of several cell towers due to the fire, along with significant damage to our North Fork, Auberry, Shaver Lake, Big Creek, and Wishon service areas. Portions of our buried fiber were damaged, particularly at access points such as hand-holes and pedestals where the fiber transitions above ground. In several instances, damage occurred weeks after the initial fire, as residual heat from smoldering tree stumps traveled through underground root systems and ultimately comprised the network. Preliminary assessments put total damages and restoration costs at approximately \$4,137,000.



Homes damaged or lost in Ponderosa's Auberry, North Fork, and Shaver Lake Exchanges

In the aftermath of the Creek Fire, several challenges emerged. Restoration crews faced restricted access to impacted areas due to a breakdown in interagency coordination among law enforcement, agency officials, emergency management and utility stakeholders, delaying restoration efforts. We installed temporary networks to continue delivering critical communication services to first responders to support emergency operations. Although it is not the topic of today’s hearing specifically, legislation to address interagency coordination to combat these breakdowns may be useful in ensuring expedited restoration. Restoration delays were further compounded by utility companies conducting repairs without submitting 811 locate requests. As a result, underground fiber cables were cut and conduits damaged, exacerbating the scope of the restoration effort and causing unnecessary disruptions to emergency communications for first responders.

Once the immediate emergency concluded, we were required to comply with all applicable federal, state, and tribal permitting regulations. It has now been five years since the wildfire, and we are still navigating the permitting process to rebuild completely in the affected areas.

GENERAL BROADBAND PERMITTING ISSUES

Stepping back, obtaining access to federal lands for broadband facilities installation (including restoration)—or otherwise obtaining a permit when a project is considered a “major federal action” under the National Environmental Policy Act (“NEPA”) and/or a “federal undertaking” pursuant to the National Historic Preservation Act (“NHPA”)—can be a time-consuming, expensive and cumbersome process. Due to the nature of the areas served by many rural providers like Ponderosa, we often have no alternative but to install fiber under roads that cross land owned or managed by federal agencies such as the Bureau of Land Management or the Forest Service. Rerouting even a small segment of a project is frequently infeasible because of long distances, difficult terrain, or the lack of obtainable easements on nearby private land—if any exists at all. Moreover, many smaller rural providers have no choice but to comply with the NEPA and NHPA processes even if they are not installing facilities on federal lands; for example, a project undertaken pursuant to a federal broadband grant will also face the need to adhere to NEPA and NHPA. I am aware that some NTCA members recount delays of up to two years in some cases to apply for and obtain permissions to build. Indeed, even if a project crosses federal land for only a short distance as part of a broader deployment, the entire initiative can be delayed due to the need for federal agencies approvals for that portion. Additional delays may occur when states, even if they exempt providers from certain environmental and historical regulations, use NEPA or NHPA requirements to pause or impede restoration efforts.

While these processes are cumbersome under normal circumstances, in the wake of a wildfire, they can lead to significant delays as companies like Ponderosa work to reconnect their communities to the outside world. In the aftermath of a wildfire, quickly restoring and rebuilding communication infrastructure is essential to reconnect communities, support emergency services, and enable recovery efforts. Thus, any effort to streamline these processes as communities recover from wildfires is essential.

H.R. 1655

I am pleased to support Representative Bentz’s *Wildfire Communication Resiliency Act*, under consideration today—and I thank him for his leadership. This legislation aims to tackle the significant delays surrounding the restoration of a communication facility after a wildfire. Communities across the nation will benefit from this legislation being signed into law. I would also encourage this Subcommittee to consider similar legislation to address other natural disasters such as hurricanes or tornadoes. Expediting NEPA and NHPA procedures in the wake of natural disasters such as wildfires would allow providers to swiftly replace damaged infrastructure, deploy permanent communications solutions, and ensure that affected areas regain access to essential services. As I previously stated, it has been five years since the Creek fire, and we are still navigating the permitting process to restore our networks. These reviews, while important for environmental and cultural projections, are often lengthy and complex—even for restoration projects of facilities that had previously been in the very same area. Streamlined approvals are not just a matter of regulatory efficiency—they are a lifeline for communities trying to rebuild and stay connected.

Closing

By streamlining NEPA and NHPA review processes for communications facilities on federal lands post-wildfire, providers like Ponderosa will be better positioned to engage in the rapid restoration of networks. In an era of increasingly frequent and severe wildfires, ensuring fast, reliable deployment and restoration of communication infrastructure is critical now more than ever. These networks are the backbone of emergency response, public safety, and community resilience.

Thank you again for providing me with the opportunity to share these thoughts with the Committee. I look forward to working with this Subcommittee, other Members of Congress, the federal agencies of jurisdiction, and other stakeholders.

Mr. TIFFANY. Thank you for your testimony, Mr. Andreas, and now I will turn to questions from the Committee.

Mr. Fulcher, you have 5 minutes.

Mr. FULCHER. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and thanks to the panel for your comments and testimony today.

Mr. Andreas, with your testimony it was a prompting reminder. I am going to take the first brief minute here and just do a shameless pitch for one of my bills not on the docket today, but I am going to pitch it anyway. In your testimony you highlighted that even brief crossings of Federal land can stall an entire broadband project for up to 2 years.

My bill, H.R. 2298, Reducing Barriers for Broadband on Federal Lands Act, helps fix that by exempting previously reviewed rights-of-ways on Federal land from NEPA and NHPA reviews and, if enacted, this would alleviate the time-consuming and expensive permitting process. So I wanted to just pitch that out there.

But I am going to go with that to a question to you, Mr. Andreas. I am from the State of Idaho, and many Idaho telecom routes cross not just Federal and State, but also private lands in one single project. And as you know, that triggers many duplicative NEPA and NHPA reviews, and that drives up both time and cost. So from your vantage point, what legislative or administrative solutions can we employ to try to streamline that permitting process?

Mr. ANDREAS. Well, I think that the number-one thing would be to pass Congressman Bentz's bill to eliminate the need for NEPA and NHPA.

In California we do have a significant number of State regulations, as well, and there are times when State agencies will utilize Federal programs like NEPA, and I will give you a quick example. Caltrans, right now, when we are trying to build in currently-used right-of-ways, we are exempted from NEPA. But Caltrans will come along and say, "We require you to follow NEPA," or—and you have to follow it. You don't have a choice. We are exempted from the State programs.

So there is sort of a battle between the State agencies, like you said, and the Federal agencies. I don't know if there is some type of pre-emption that could be done from Federal level, but it is a battle that we fight pretty often.

Mr. FULCHER. Thank you for that, and that is something that we need to definitely take a look at. So thank you for your input there. I am going to come back to you, Mr. Andreas. You also described in your written testimony that it has been 5 years since the 2020 Creek Fire, if I have got this right, the 2020 Creek Fire, and you are still working through the permitting to rebuild buried fiber in cell sites.

North Idaho again, I have to equate this to my own State, but in north Idaho's pay-per-mile cost structure, it is often fewer than four homes in a mile. What economic impact would a 5-year NEPA, NHPA exemption, an exemption, have on small rural telecom providers' ability to reinvest in its network?

Mr. ANDREAS. Well, one of the biggest issues that we deal with when we go through a wildfire situation like the Creek Fire, our insurance will pay us like for like. So if we have copper in the ground and it gets destroyed in a wildfire, or aerial, our insurance company will pay us to replace the copper, but will not pay us to replace it with fiber, which is obviously the direction that we go.

So we end up digging into our own pockets to pay for that upgrade, if you will, to fiber.

So I think that focusing on some of those items would be very helpful for us in situations where we have to dig into our own pockets and have to subsidize that rebuild by ourselves.

Mr. FULCHER. So I have got just 1 minute left. I want to ask you another question that was not planned here that just popped into my head.

Mr. ANDREAS. Sure.

Mr. FULCHER. From your vantage point, is wireless technology starting to progress to the point where it can take the place of some of the fiber and copper that is out there that has to be installed?

Mr. ANDREAS. I would say no, and the reason being is we are also using some fixed wireless in Ponderosa, but all the cell towers that are up there, the cell phones can't connect to other cell phones or other phones without fiber backhaul that takes the data and the phone calls from the cell phone towers into the network.

So in short, no, it could not replace it in total.

Mr. FULCHER. OK. Thank you, Mr. Andreas.

Mr. Chairman, I yield back.

Mr. TIFFANY. The gentleman yields. I now recognize the gentleman from Minnesota, Mr. Stauber, for 5 minutes.

Mr. STAUBER. Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Andreas, as you shared in your testimony, when communities face natural disasters like wildfires, not only are they negatively impacted by the disaster itself, but they are also negatively impacted by the mountains of red tape that unfortunately follows. These communities aren't only hurt in the days or weeks when the disaster occurs, but they are also hurt by the bureaucracy they are forced to deal with in the aftermath.

Could you explain, please explain—or, correction—expand upon the long-term impacts of the rebuilding process?

And how do these delays and rebuilding impact these communities?

Mr. ANDREAS. I will just use an example from the Creek Fire. We have areas within the wildfire area that haven't even begun to rebuild yet. We have to go through permitting to get communications to these areas.

Mr. STAUBER. Five years later?

Mr. ANDREAS. Five years later we are still trying to rebuild. People have not rebuilt their homes, and they don't want to rebuild their homes because there is no communication to those homes. There is power that hasn't been laid down to these homes up in the, you know, higher parts of the Sierra Nevada.

Mr. STAUBER. You were saying something about NEPA, and I interrupted you. Finish up.

Mr. ANDREAS. Well, just the fact that, in terms of if we didn't have to go through NEPA approval or the historical preservation approvals, that would speed things up, OK, and, obviously, the sooner that we get things restored, the sooner that we are generating revenue for ourselves and for our company, and that we can put back into the network to upgrade and rebuild the community.

Mr. STAUBER. So you are saying that if you didn't have to go in NEPA to replace the same fiber line into these neighborhoods, if you didn't have to, today, quite conceivably, the neighborhoods could be rebuilt and people would want to come back. It is because they are not connected. Is that correct?

Mr. ANDREAS. Conceivably, yes. It may or may not be because they are not connected. There are many other factors that build into it. Some people do not have fire insurance in areas of California.

Mr. STAUBER. Yes.

Mr. ANDREAS. So when their house burns down, they have nothing to rebuild it with. So it is not as simple as, well, they don't have land lines or they don't have data capabilities. It is one aspect of it, though.

Mr. STAUBER. OK. Would you say it is common to see individuals move from their homes or businesses out of the communities simply because they now lack the infrastructure needed for the everyday activities that make up their daily lives and help their businesses become successful? Have you seen that?

Mr. ANDREAS. They have to move somewhere. A lot of times it is very close to where they had a home before, they had family. You know, people have lived in the areas that they are for hundreds of years. They have families. Our ownership goes back over 100 years. So they don't typically move too far.

Mr. STAUBER. I appreciate your experience, and I appreciate all of the testimony today. I think it is really important that, after a natural disaster, that we are able to rebuild in a timely fashion without the redundancy and the red tape that is stopping our communities to get back on their feet.

And with the remainder of my time I am going to yield to Chairman Tiffany for 1 minute and 20 seconds.

Mr. TIFFANY. Yes, thank you.

I would like to follow up on what Mr. Stauber was asking here, Mr. Andreas. Sum up what you think are a few changes that should be made in Federal policy that could make your life easier, could allow you to expand to a greater extent your business. What are those things that you would like to see changed?

Mr. ANDREAS. Are you asking from an overall Federal policy standpoint?

Mr. TIFFANY. Yes.

Mr. ANDREAS. In telecommunications? Well, one of the first issues that we deal with is the Universal Service Fund, as I am sure everybody here is aware of. If Universal Service Fund goes away, it puts rural telephone companies like ours with 7,200 subscribers in a very difficult situation. Federal obligations, requirements, reporting requirements, things like that put a lot of stress on a small company like ours.

Mr. TIFFANY. Is that the reporting requirement that has to do with the Securities and Exchange Commission?

Mr. ANDREAS. No, really FCC reporting requirements, reporting requirements associated with reconnect or USDA loans.

Mr. TIFFANY. OK.

Mr. ANDREAS. Things like that, where we have to provide subscriber counts, performance measures, things like that. We only

have 86 employees in our company. We can't dedicate a whole bunch of people to it. Bigger companies can spread that requirement across a couple different people. If they have 700,000 subscribers, that is an easier way for them to spread that cost.

Mr. TIFFANY. And you would include NEPA in this list, I am assuming?

Mr. ANDREAS. Absolutely, yes.

Mr. TIFFANY. And I am assuming you would include controlling wildfire in rural areas in America.

Mr. ANDREAS. Yes, I would absolutely include those.

Mr. TIFFANY. I yield back.

Mr. STAUBER. Mr. Chair, I yield back to you. Thank you.

Mr. TIFFANY. The gentleman yields. I now recognize Mr. Kennedy from Utah for 5 minutes.

Dr. KENNEDY. Thank you, Mr. Chair, yet again for the opportunity to speak.

And Dr. Yocom, I would like to address a few questions to you. Similar legislation to mine, H.R. 1045, passed the Senate last Congress. And if we can get this bill signed into law with the support of the Utah delegation, my colleagues around the dais as well as on the floor, what would it mean for Utah State University in the State's capacity to advance cutting-edge research when it comes to wildfire management?

Dr. YOCOM. Thank you for the question.

I think it would increase our capacity to focus on wildfire research by a huge amount. There are very few people overall working in Utah on wildfire research, and so having an institute dedicated specifically to that, as well as to practical management solutions, I think would be really impactful for Utah.

As I mentioned, there is a little bit of a gap in Utah in terms of understanding exactly which management actions work in which forests and why. And so I think it is past time for Utah to focus resources on these questions.

Dr. KENNEDY. You did mention Utah does require scientific research focused on that specific geography. Could you expand on the details associated with that that would allow this SWERI institute to do a better job not only for Utah, but throughout the West and the country generally?

Dr. YOCOM. Sure. Yes, a lot of what we know comes from dry, ponderosa pine-based forests. We have a lot of information about how to reduce wildfire risk in those types of forests. Utah has a unique mix. We don't have very much ponderosa pine. We have pinyon juniper woodlands, for example, that a lot of people live near, as well as mixed conifer forests with a little bit of ponderosa but other tree types.

And there is a lot of questions still just on the ecological side about what, you know, what role fire plays in those forests, and exactly how we could use management activities to reduce fire risk in the most efficient and effective way.

Dr. KENNEDY. Thank you very much. In Utah State University, their current collaboration with the SWERIs that are throughout the West, what does that collaborative work look like at this point?

Dr. YOCOM. The existing SWERIs have been really collaborative, and so have we. We have been working closely with them in

determining the best way to join them as a new SWERI. They each focus mostly on their own States, but they also work together on larger regional projects. And I think adding a SWERI in Utah would not only help Utah, but also contribute to that region-wide understanding of fire risk and how to reduce it.

Dr. KENNEDY. Very good. Thank you very much.

And Judge Blackmon, I thank you, and all the witnesses for being here. Judge Blackmon, I was interested in the building that was poorly roofed, subsequent damage that came to that building. I would like you to render an opinion.

By the way, your representative that is sponsoring this bill is an outstanding representative here. I have, as a freshman, great admiration for Congressman Hill and the great work that he does.

But so tell me. If the locals had done the contract with the roofer versus Washington, D.C. doing the contract with the roofer, do you have an opinion of whether or not that roof might have been done correctly? And especially if there was an investment, if you owned that building and you were the ones that were contracting to make sure the roof got on the correct way so the building wasn't damaged, might that building have actually been roofed properly and potentially saved not only the taxpayers but your local community a lot of money associated with this? Can you give me an opinion about that?

Judge BLACKMON. Yes, sir. Basically, what happened is the Forestry Service contracted having a new roof put on by a contractor that I am unaware of who the contractor was. And then I have friends that work for the Forest Service that told me that, not long after the new roof was installed, it started leaking.

By this time, the process of the Forestry Service getting rid of the building in some capacity had already started. So instead of having the contractor come back that installed the roof originally make repairs, they just said, well, there is no need because we are going to get rid of the building.

Dr. KENNEDY. Right.

Judge BLACKMON. So I have been trying to push this process along as quickly as possible, because every time it rains there is more damage that happens to the building.

Dr. KENNEDY. Well, I appreciate what you are doing and what your Representative Hill is doing, as well.

The reality is local control versus distant control. We can see that with who cares about this building. Well, it is a taxpayer-funded, federally taxpayer-funded building right now. And now what are we talking, \$10,000, tens of thousands, hundreds of thousands of dollars to repair the damage associated with shoddy work?

Judge BLACKMON. I am guessing somewhere around \$75,000 by the time we put a new roof on it and make the repairs. And the unknown is, until we start the repairs, we don't know how extensive the damage is.

Dr. KENNEDY. Yes. Right, of course. I am very excited to see local control hold sway, and especially for the 4-H to have a place to—

Judge BLACKMON. Yes.

Dr. KENNEDY [continuing]. To actually have their outstanding services. So thank you for promoting this. I am certainly promoting it, as well.

Mr. Chair, I yield back.

Mr. TIFFANY. The gentleman yields. I am going to take my 5 minutes for questioning. I want to follow up on what Representative Kennedy was just talking about, Judge Blackmon. I am sorry I was not here during your testimony.

So I take it this building is no longer used by the Forest Service. Is that right?

Judge BLACKMON. Yes, sir.

Mr. TIFFANY. How long has that been the case, Judge Blackmon?

Judge BLACKMON. They downsized to just two or three employees a few years ago. And then last summer the last employee moved out, and they moved over into Garland County, to another county where they worked out of that center. So the building has been sitting empty almost a year.

Mr. TIFFANY. Has that building been put up for sale by the Federal Government?

Judge BLACKMON. No, sir, they have not. They had an appraisal done of \$200,000 on the building, and they offered it to Perry County for that sale price. But when we looked at the repairs that are going to be necessary to the building, the county at that point realized that we could not afford to purchase the building and then make the necessary repairs with the limited funding that we have to work with.

Mr. TIFFANY. So that building was in significant disrepair, is that correct?

Judge BLACKMON. Yes, sir. And like I said, it is currently leaking right now. The roof has not been repaired. We had a major flood about 6 weeks ago, and more of the roof was blown off and damaged at that point. So right now, every time it rains the damage is increasing to the building.

Mr. TIFFANY. So down in Perryville, when it rains it pours.

Judge BLACKMON. Yes, sir.

Mr. TIFFANY. I think this is just a great example of how this effort to purchase more land and encumber more land by the Federal Government is really wrongheaded. We should first be maintaining the facilities that we have.

Judge BLACKMON. Yes.

Mr. TIFFANY. I don't know if you care to comment on that, Judge Blackmon, but it just seems to me that rather than buying more land, buying more facilities, we need to maintain what we have with the hundreds of thousands of acres, well, the millions of acres that the Federal Government owns and operates.

Judge BLACKMON. Yes. They have the same challenge that I have in the county. They have limited resources also. And so, you know, they basically consolidated into another building, and so this building is sitting there empty.

So I am sure that, in their opinion, they can't justify spending money on this building when they have the other buildings to maintain. And then they have the hundreds, if not thousands of miles there in the national forest to maintain also.

Mr. TIFFANY. Yes. So I would just share this comment, and you don't have to reply to it, any of you on the panel. But we hear consistently about how the only way that we can go is to purchase more land, to put more facilities up on Federal land, that we

shouldn't reconsider, hey, decades have passed, maybe things have changed, maybe we could do things differently.

I think this is a good example of how we should be doing things differently. And this notion that we can't transfer some land perhaps to States, to locals, and whatever I think is so wrongheaded because times do change, and there are better ways in which we can steward the natural resources of the United States of America than simply having Federal ownership and Federal control.

The other thing that I would say in closing here, I did not get a chance to ask questions of Deputy Chief Crockett, but everyone was led to believe here today that the Bureau of State, Private, and Local Forestry is going to be shut down, and land is not going to be managed anymore, and people are not going to be worked with if there are changes. I think this is a very good parallel.

Because the current Administration wants to make some changes in how we structure an agency doesn't mean that the work isn't going to be done. And if we are going to do an effective job here at the Natural Resources Committee and the Federal Government in managing our natural resources, in particular in the West, and if we are going to end wildfire or at least have it in much greater control, there is a few things that need to happen.

One, we need to hire more foresters within the Forest Service. I remember talking to my friends in northern Wisconsin years ago who said, we have enough ologists. They referred to them as ologists. We need more foresters that are going to mark trees and manage our forest land.

Second of all, we need to expedite NEPA, as we saw in regard to the telecom issue, including things like broader and bigger categorical exclusions. We need to do those things if we are going to manage properly.

And the final thing is we need to bring industry back, and we see it with the whole tariffs discussion and all the rest. We have to bring industry back to America, and we need to build mills. I think about the gentleman from California when I was out to Yosemite a few years ago, and they talked about, what, a couple hundred mills have shut down over the last three or four decades in the wood-consuming mills out in the Sierras. There is no wonder that we have a wildfire problem when you do not have the infrastructure, in particular the mills that can take that wood and turn it into two-by-fours and lots of other good stuff that we can rebuild America with.

It is time. It is time that we make changes to how we do our natural resource management here in America in order to build things, employ people in building those things, and making sure that the permitting processes are not so onerous that we can no longer build things. Because if we turn those things around by having better permitting processes, by building the infrastructure here in America, we will restore American greatness and make things in America once again, and I can't wait for that day to come. And I sure hope the Natural Resources Committee is one of the lynchpins in making that happen here at the Federal level.

With that I want to thank all of you for attending today. And as so often is the case, you folks come from the Western States and you have a long ways to travel. We appreciate it more than you

know, that you would take the time out of your day and week to come here and provide your testimony.

The members of the Subcommittee may have some additional questions for you, and we will ask that you respond to those in writing. Under Committee rule 3, members of the Subcommittee must submit questions to the Subcommittee clerk by 5 p.m. on Friday, June 13, 2025. The hearing record will be held open for 10 business days for your responses.

If there is no further business, without objection, the Subcommittee on Federal Lands stands adjourned.

[Whereupon, at 11:50 a.m., the subcommittee was adjourned.]

[ADDITIONAL MATERIALS SUBMITTED FOR THE RECORD]

PREPARED STATEMENT OF THE HON. FRENCH HILL, A REPRESENTATIVE IN CONGRESS
FROM THE STATE OF ARKANSAS

Chairman Tiffany, Ranking Member Neguse, and members of the subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to testify today. I appreciate the chance to testify in support of my legislation, H.R. 3187, to require the Secretary of Agriculture to convey a parcel of property owned by the Forest Service to Perry County, Arkansas, and for other purposes.

This bill seeks to transfer ownership of a vacant federal building owned by the U.S. Forest Service, and 0.81 acres of land located at 1069 Fourche Avenue in Perryville, Arkansas, to Perry County. The property is no longer in use by the Forest Service and there are no plans for its future utilization.

Perry County is a small, rural community with a population of around 10,000. Approximately 16% of residents live below the poverty line. About 77% of the county is forested, with 72% of that land privately owned. The U.S. Forest Service is the largest public landowner in the county, managing 119,171 acres as part of the Ouachita National Forest.

For several years, Perry County has sought to acquire this property. However, due to limited resources and a high poverty rate, the small county has been unable to purchase it outright. My legislation would enable the federal government to convey the property at no cost to the county.

While the building will require repairs and updates, Perry County has the funds to make the necessary improvements. Once restored, the facility will support vital local programs. Specifically, it will house the permanent operations of the University of Arkansas Extension Program, the Perry County Conservation District, and serve as a meeting space for the 4-H Youth Development Program. These organizations are currently struggling with limited space, which hampers their ability to serve the community effectively.

The University of Arkansas Extension Office provides critical, research-based information to local families, youth, and farmers. It hosts educational workshops focused on agriculture, health, and nutrition. This is particularly important, as 40% of youth and 64% of adults in Perry County are classified as overweight or obese. A larger space will enable the Extension Program to better promote healthy eating habits and teach residents how to grow and prepare nutritious meals, empowering them to make long-term improvements in their health and well-being.

There is strong local support for this conveyance. Those who have expressed their support include:

1. Larry Blackmon, Perry County Judge
2. Kevin Lawson, County Extension Agent—Agriculture, Faulkner County
3. Tammy Farnam, Administrative Assistant III, Perry County Extension Office
4. Jacob Farnam, Board President, Perryville School District
5. Kallem Hill, President, Perry County Farm Bureau Board of Directors
6. Nicole Strecker, 4-H Leader, Perryville High School
7. Donnie Crain, President/CEO, Perry County Chamber of Commerce
8. Amy Branch, Chair of the Board, Perry County Conservation Board
9. David “Butch” Hoyt, Vice President, Perry County Cattlemen’s Association

10. Chairperson, Perry County Conservation District
11. Rose Gunther, Former 4-H Member, Perry County
12. Ettamarie Belden, 4-H Leader and Volunteer, Perry County
13. John Roland, Mayor, Perryville

In conclusion, H.R. 3187 will provide Perry County with a much-needed facility to expand youth development, agricultural education, and community health initiatives. The conveyance of this unused federal property will create lasting benefits for the people of Perry County.

Chairman Tiffany, that concludes my testimony. I would be happy to answer any questions you, or other members of the subcommittee may have.

