

TO REVIEW H.R. 471, THE FIX OUR FORESTS
ACT, AND OPTIONS TO REDUCE CATA-
STROPHIC WILDFIRE

HEARING
BEFORE THE
SUBCOMMITTEE ON
CONSERVATION, FORESTRY, NATURAL RESOURCES,
AND BIOTECHNOLOGY
OF THE
COMMITTEE ON AGRICULTURE,
NUTRITION, AND FORESTRY
UNITED STATES SENATE
ONE HUNDRED NINETEENTH CONGRESS
FIRST SESSION

March 6, 2025

Printed for the use of the
Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry



Available on <http://www.govinfo.gov/>

U.S. GOVERNMENT PUBLISHING OFFICE

WASHINGTON : 2025

COMMITTEE ON AGRICULTURE, NUTRITION, AND FORESTRY

JOHN BOOZMAN, Arkansas, *Chairman*

MITCH McCONNELL, Kentucky	AMY KLOBUCHAR, Minnesota
JOHN HOEVEN, North Dakota	MICHAEL F. BENNET, Colorado
JONI ERNST, Iowa	TINA SMITH, Minnesota
CINDY HYDE-SMITH, Mississippi	RICHARD J. DURBIN, Illinois
ROGER MARSHALL, Kansas	CORY BOOKER, New Jersey
TOMMY TUBERVILLE, Alabama	BEN RAY LUJÁN, New Mexico
JAMES C. JUSTICE, West Virginia	RAPHAEL WARNOCK, Georgia
CHARLES GRASSLEY, Iowa	PETER WELCH, Vermont
JOHN THUNE, South Dakota	JOHN FETTERMAN, Pennsylvania
DEB FISCHER, Nebraska	ADAM SCHIFF, California
JERRY MORAN, Kansas	ELISSA SLOTKIN, Michigan

FITZHUGH ELDER IV, Majority Staff Director

CALEB CROSSWHITE, Majority Chief Counsel

JESSICA L. WILLIAMS, Chief Clerk

LAUREN SANTABAR, Minority Staff Director

CHU-YUAN HWANG, Minority Chief Counsel

SUBCOMMITTEE ON CONSERVATION, FORESTRY, NATURAL RESOURCES, AND BIOTECHNOLOGY

ROGER MARSHALL, Kansas, *Chair*

JIM JUSTICE, West Virginia	MICHAEL BENNET, Colorado, <i>Ranking Member</i>
JOHN HOEVEN, North Dakota	
JOHN THUNE, South Dakota	BEN RAY LUJÁN, New Mexico
JONI ERNST, Iowa	RAPHAEL WARNOCK, Georgia
CINDY HYDE-SMITH, Mississippi	PETER WELCH, Vermont
	ADAM SCHIFF, California

C O N T E N T S

Thursday, March 6, 2025

	Page
SUBCOMMITTEE HEARING:	
To Review H.R. 471, The Fix Our Forests Act, and Options To Reduce Catastrophic Wildfire	1

STATEMENTS PRESENTED BY SENATORS

Marshall, Hon. Roger, U.S. Senator from the State of Kansas	1
Bennet, Hon. Michael F., U.S. Senator from the State of Colorado	3

WITNESSES

Weiner, Matt, Chief Executive Officer, Megafire Action	6
Beum, Frank R., Retired Regional Forester, Rocky Mountain Region, Member of Board of Directors, National Association of Forest Service Retirees	8
Vredenburg, Tim, Director, Department of Forest Management, Cow Creek Band of Umpqua Tribe of Indians	10
Houck, Hon. Jonathan, County Commissioner, Board of County Commis- sioners, Gunnison County, CO	11
Gordon, Robert, Senior Vice President, Policy, Research and International, American Property Casualty Insurance Association	13

APPENDIX

PREPARED STATEMENTS:	
Weiner, Matt	34
Beum, Frank	44
Vredenburg, Tim	47
Houck, Jonathan	51
Gordon, Robert	62
DOCUMENT(S) SUBMITTED FOR THE RECORD:	
Marshall, Hon. Roger:	
Association of Firetech Innovation, letter for the Record	80
Coalition, letter for the Record	83
Congressional Sportsmen's Foundation, letter for the Record	85
Family Farm Alliance, letter for the Record	88
Federation of American Scientists, letter for the Record	98
National Association of State Foresters, letter for the Record	100
National Cattlemen's Beef Association, letter for the Record	102
Outdoor Alliance, letter for the Record	105
Tree Care Industry Association, letter for the Record	111
United States Forest Service, letter for the Record	114
Bennet, Hon. Michael:	
Karuk Tribe, letter for the Record	118
Wilderness Watch, letter for the Record	120
Schiff, Hon. Adam:	
Lomakatsi Restoration Project, letter for the Record	125
Lujan, Hon. Ben:	
National Young Farmers Coalition, letter for the Record	127

IV

QUESTION AND ANSWER:	Page
Weiner, Matt:	
Written response to questions from Hon. Michael Bennet	132
Written response to questions from Hon. Adam Schiff	135
Beum, Frank:	
Written response to questions from Hon. Michael Bennet	139
Written response to questions from Hon. Amy Klobuchar	140
Written response to questions from Hon. Adam Schiff	141
Vredenburg, Tim:	
Written response to questions from Hon. Michael Bennet	142
Written response to questions from Hon. Amy Klobuchar	144
Houck, Jonathan:	
Written response to questions from Hon. Michael Bennet	145
Written response to questions from Hon. Amy Klobuchar	146
Written response to questions from Hon. Peter Welch	147
Written response to questions from Hon. Adam Schiff	149
Gordon, Robert:	
Written response to questions from Hon. Michael Bennet	152
Written response to questions from Hon. Adam Schiff	154

TO REVIEW H.R. 471, THE FIX OUR FORESTS ACT, AND OPTIONS TO REDUCE CATA- STROPHIC WILDFIRE

THURSDAY, MARCH 6, 2025

U.S. SENATE

Subcommittee on Conservation, Forestry, Natural Resources, and
Biotechnology

COMMITTEE ON AGRICULTURE, NUTRITION, AND FORESTRY

Washington, DC.

The Subcommittee met, pursuant to notice, at 11:12 a.m., in Room 328A, Russell Senate Office Building, Hon. Roger Marshall presiding.

Present: Senators Marshall [presiding], Boozman, Justice, Hoeven, Bennet, Klobuchar, Booker, Luján, Warnock, and Schiff.

STATEMENT OF HON. ROGER MARSHALL, U.S. SENATOR FROM THE STATE OF KANSAS

Chairman MARSHALL. Well, good morning and welcome, everybody. It is my privilege to call this hearing to order. I would like to thank our witnesses for taking time out of their busy schedules to come share their expertise and perspectives on the Fix Our Forests Acts, H.R. 471, which the House passed for the second time by an overwhelming vote of 279 to 141 in January 2025, just a month or so ago.

We know wildfires are indifferent to Federal, State, Tribal, and private property jurisdictions, and we have all seen the destruction catastrophic wildfire can cause on our rural and urban communities. Just this week, we are witnessing fires threatening lives and property in the Carolinas, and unfortunately, recent history is replete with incidents illustrating the devastating impacts fires have on our communities, from the 2018 Camp Fire in Paradise, California, to the 2023 Lahaina fires in Maui, Hawaii, to the 2025 Southern California fires as well.

In order to treat an issue, first, we must identify the symptoms, diagnose the root cause of the problem, and implement scientifically sound treatments. The loss of human life and property from these fires are an acute and painful symptom of a disease that is not working. The cause of these fires is rooted in misguided policies that go all the way back to the Forest Service 1930's so-called 10 AM policy, which requires all fires to be extinguished by 10 a.m. the day after they are discovered. These causes have been compounded by the Federal Government's inability or unwillingness to

treat the right acres at the right time at the right scale over numerous administrations.

Treating this problem comes in the form of an all-of-the-above approach to modernizing the Federal technological toolbox for assessing and identifying wildfire risk, facilitating early response and suppression, and updating the public-private partnership model for Federal, State, Tribal, county, and private landowners who address fire risk rather than jurisdictional or political subdivision boundaries.

Every fire is unique. My dad was the Chief of a Fire Department for years before becoming Chief of Police, and indeed, he would tell me, every fire was very unique. The most catastrophic fires all have similarities. Proper management of our Nation's forestlands can help prevent a small spark from turning into a raging fire with devastating consequences.

My own State of Kansas is not immune to wildfire. In 2021, strong winds and dry air combined to create ideal conditions for wildfires in the grasslands of Kansas and central Kansas in the Ford County Fire. That fire was clocked at over 180 miles an hour at the top of wind turbines sailing through those prairies. Not all management methods for the grasslands of Kansas mirror what the science tells us should be conducted on forested acres, but the important role of proper management on our landscapes ring true for both.

The Fix Our Forests Act, which we will call FOFA for the rest of the hearing, is a rare bipartisan opportunity for Congress to provide the United States Forest Service, the Department of the Interior, States, Tribes, counties, and private partners with a modernized and streamlined toolbox to fight fire. Regardless of one another's views on the appropriate use of Federal lands and resources, we all need to help mitigate the frequency and intensity of catastrophic wildfires while ensuring the scientifically sound and sustainable stewardship of our Federal lands.

The Fix Our Forests Act provides agencies with critically needed and appropriately calibrated increases in the acreage limitations for categorical exclusions to forest managers, increases which agency analyses have been shown will help provide the flexibility to better address forest management. To be clear, categorical exclusions are not a free pass for an agency to go in and clearcut forests, as some are led to believe. They are one way for Federal agencies to comply with the NEPA based upon extensive uses of prior environmental assessments that showed no significant effect and are still subject to the scoping before moving forward.

FOFA instructs the Federal Government to identify at the fireshed scale the top 20 percent of firesheds that are at risk for fire exposure over the next five years in order to better focus limited resources. FOFA permanently fixes in statute the disastrous Ninth Circuit's Cottonwood decision, which the Obama Administration petitioned the Supreme Court to overturn. It has led to delays in management projects through unnecessary and duplicative scoping in an attempt to avoid frivolous litigation. FOFA also adopts litigation reforms used by past Republican and Democratic Administrations in statute to limit litigation delays to essential projects. FOFA strengthens Good Neighbor Authority, a critical

and overwhelmingly successful program that has allowed local and State partners the ability to supplement the work the Forest Service is not able to do on their own lands.

I am honored to recognize the Ranking Member, Senator Michael Bennet, for his comments.

**STATEMENT OF HON. MICHAEL BENNET, U.S. SENATOR FROM
THE STATE OF COLORADO**

Senator BENNET. Thank you, Chairman. Chairman Boozman, I do not know if you would like to go before me. I would be happy—are you sure? All right. Thank you. Well, thank you for being here. Chairman Marshall, thank you so much for your partnership and for coming to Colorado last year to have a hearing. I hope we can repay the visit. I would like to thank you for your leadership in organizing today's hearing, and thank you to all the witnesses for joining us today.

My message is simple, and it is if we are committed to the health of our forests and our watersheds, the Federal Government must be a more reliable partner for communities and local governments. In Colorado, our national forests underpin our economy and our way of life. Our forests and watersheds protect our water supplies, support agriculture, drive outdoor recreation and sustain diverse wildlife habitats.

Today, they are facing unprecedented threats. Drought and wildfire, of course, are at the top of the list. In the West, wildfire season is no longer a season, but a year-round reality for all our communities. These wildfires do not just burn trees. They endanger lives, they devastate communities, and they destroy critical infrastructure.

The effects of western wildfires are not just felt in Colorado but across the entire country. Colorado's national forests and their watersheds supply water to 19 States and parts of Mexico. They are the source of water for tens of millions of people. Farmers and ranchers from the Mississippi Delta to California, water is our lifeblood in the West, and our national forests are the source of their supply. Without that water, there is not a single town or city in my State that would exist. There is not a county that would exist. There is not a farm or a ranch that would exist. The health of our watersheds and the health of our forests are exactly the same thing. You cannot have one without the other.

We need to be thoughtful about our approach to managing our forests. A one-size-fits-all approach will not work. Top-down management without the input of local communities and forestry experts risk harming our economy, our sensitive habitats, and the water supply that we are trying to protect in the West.

As we will discuss today, Colorado has a long track record of successful collaborative forest management projects that bring together local and Federal partners, including the timber industry, local government, scientists, tribes, and conservationists. As wildfire risk increases across the West, the Federal Government should empower those types of partnerships and make their work easier, not harder.

Unfortunately, taking a chainsaw to the Forest Service workforce and funding makes life harder for Coloradans, makes it harder for

citizens in the West, and it does nothing to advance local forest management and partnership. Axing the dedicated public servants who manage our national forests is not just short-sighted, it is downright dangerous.

Much of Colorado is already in drought, months before summer has even started. Right now, snowpack is below average in all but one of our major watersheds, and temperatures have hit record highs over the weekend, reaching 10 to 15 degrees above the historical average.

Whether it is the Fix Our Forests Act or any other piece of legislation, it will not matter what we do here in Congress if the administration is simultaneously undermining our Land Management Agencies and withholding the resources they need to do their job. I appreciate the goals of the Fix Our Forests Act, which we will discuss more today. I really do. If done thoughtfully, reducing wildfire risk through active management is an important goal. By the way, we are running out of time. I worry that the bill, as it is currently written, places an unreasonable burden on communities and ties the hands of local governments, potentially undermining the collaborative approach needed to move forest management projects forward.

I recognize that the wildfire crisis affects us all, and we have a responsibility to find a bipartisan solution. I am ready to work with my colleagues on both sides of the aisle to advance legislation that includes the forest policy challenges and investments that are needed to reduce wildfire risk and improve the Federal Government's work with States, Local, and Tribal partners. After all, they are called national forests for a reason.

Over the last decade, we have spent \$6 billion on wildfire risk reduction work, and \$38 billion, six times that much, on wildfire response and recovery. It just makes sense, Mr. Chairman. It takes \$50,000 an acre to fight a fire. It is a lot cheaper to be able to do it on the front end than that. If we do not invest now in wildfire mitigation and watershed restoration and the Federal workforce tasked with doing that work, it will cost us hundreds of billions of dollars a year in firefighting and recovery costs in the coming decade, to say nothing of the damage to our infrastructure, to our way of life.

I have told Chuck Schumer over and over and over again, Mr. Chairman, these national forests are more important to us from an infrastructure perspective than the Lincoln Tunnel is to New York. He does not necessarily agree with that, but it is true. Do not tell him I said that.

We have to get serious about this. No level of government can tackle this alone. I am very grateful, Mr. Chairman, for this hearing today, and I look forward to hearing from our excellent witnesses and working with my colleagues of both parties to protect our forests, our communities, and our future. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Chairman MARSHALL. Well, thank you, Senator Bennet. Unfortunately, we are not able to have a representative from USDA here to testify on the Fix Our Forests Act. However, the Committee has received written testimony from the USDA detailing the Forest Service's views of the legislative proposal, as well as additional let-

ters of support. I request unanimous consent to submit this testimony and these letters for the record as part of my opening statement. Without objection, so ordered.

[The letters can be found on page 80-124 in the appendix.]

Chairman MARSHALL. We will turn to our introductions now. Senator Schiff is not here, so I am going to introduce Mr. Matt Weiner. Matt Weiner is the CEO and Founder of Megafire Action, the first nonprofit organization focused solely on advancing policy solutions to the megafire crisis. He has held senior roles in the U.S. Congress and California State Legislature, most recently as the Executive Director of California's Democratic Congressional Delegation in the House of Representatives, where he was responsible for advancing the delegation's statewide policy priorities.

Next, I believe the Ranking Member is going to introduce two of his constituents from Colorado.

Senator BENNET. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. It is my pleasure to introduce the two witnesses that I invited to testify at today's hearing. Both witnesses are incredibly knowledgeable and understand the importance of forest management and the work that goes into stewarding our public lands. I have invited them to be here today to speak about their experience in wildfire mitigation and share their perspectives on the importance of investing in land management projects and agencies.

Our first witness, Commissioner Jonathan Houck, is currently serving as Gunnison County Commissioner, a position he has held since 2013. He is a lifelong public servant. Well, actually it says longtime public servant, but I also know he is a lifelong public servant, first serving on the City Planning and Zoning Commission, then for two terms on the Gunnison City Council, which included serving as Mayor. I have known Commissioner Houck for over a decade, and he has been kind enough to invite me to his county over and over again to hike, camp, and fish numerous times.

One of the first things you notice about when you visit Gunnison County, which is, by the way, about 1½ times the size of the State of Delaware, is that its national forests are foundational to its economy and core to the identity of the people who live there. Forests in Gunnison County supply timber to the last remaining timber whip mill on the Western Slope. It attracts visitors from around the world with over 1,000 miles of trails and produces oil and gas and coal. I cannot think of anybody better here to talk about the value of forests to rural western communities.

I thank also Frank Beum, who is here as well. Mr. Beum formerly served as the Regional Forestry for the Rocky Mountain region, where I had the pleasure of working with him. He is now a member of the Board of Directors for the National Association of Forest Service Retirees. Mr. Beum has worked at every level of the Forest Service, starting his first role as a seasonal forestry technician in the Rio Grande National Forest and later serving as a Legislative Specialist in the Washington office. Notwithstanding that experience, he was willing to come here and testify. These are just two examples among the many other roles that have given him the unique perspective to understand the deep importance of the work done at all levels of the Forest Service. We are delighted that he is here today.

Mr. Chairman, I will turn it back over to you.

Chairman MARSHALL. All right. Thank you, Senator Bennet.

I am going to next introduce Mr. Tim Vredenburg, originally from southwest Oregon, for the last 20 years, he has assisted private landowners and Indian tribes manage forestlands while navigating challenging issues like wildfire, endangered species, and an ever changing regulatory landscape. Since 2012, he served as the Cow Creek Band of Umpqua Tribe of Indians as their Director of Forest Management. In his current capacities, he is working to develop an expanded timberland base that will provide for the cultural and economic well-being of the tribe for many generations to come.

Next, I would like to introduce Mr. Robert Gordon. Mr. Gordon is the Senior Vice President, Policy, Research and International for the American Property Casualty Insurance Association. He is responsible for working with the association's members to develop and frame public policy positions on the opportunities and challenges facing the property casualty insurance industry at the State, Federal, and international levels. Previously, Mr. Gordon was the Parliamentarian, Senior Counsel, and Ethics Compliance Officer for the Committee on Financial Services in the U.S. House of Representatives.

Now, we will turn to our witness testimony. Again, thank you to all the witnesses for being here and the time preparing.

Mr. Weiner, you are now recognized for your statement.

**STATEMENT OF MATT WEINER, CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER,
MEGAFIRE ACTION**

Mr. WEINER. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Chairman Marshall, Ranking Member Bennet, and distinguished Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to testify today. My name is Matt Weiner, and I am the Founder and CEO of Megafire Action, a nonprofit organization founded on a simple premise, megafire is solvable, and therefore, policymakers have an obligation to do more to solve it.

As we saw in January, the megafire crisis is continuing to accelerate, and our systems are continuing to be overwhelmed year after year. This is a nonpartisan emergency that requires a bipartisan response, and the Fix Our Forests Act is an excellent place to start.

Before I dive into the support for the bill, I want to make one thing clear. We cannot fix our forests if we have nobody to fix our forests. For decades, we have completely failed our workforce, especially our wildland firefighters, who have been asked to do too much with too little for far too long. The current firings and freezing are only making things worse, but this is a longstanding problem. It is appalling that we are continuing to put our firefighters in this position, and a permanent, well-resourced Federal wildfire workforce remains an urgent need, and Congress should step in to stop the bleeding.

On the bill, there is a lot to like about the Fix Our Forests Act, but we see it largely as focused on two challenges: permitting reform and technology adoption, both essential to scaling up effective wildfire mitigation.

Let me start with permitting reform. We know selective thinning and prescribed fire can restore ecosystem balance and reduce risk, yet we are nowhere near meeting the scale that is needed. Last year, the Forest Service treated 800,000 acres of the highest-risk landscapes, which was a record high, but is still far short of the millions of acres a year needed to reach our targets.

We know that treatment saves money. Senators, I have before you a slide deck from our friends at Vibrant Planet that underscores the value of mitigation investments. A recent analysis by them found that \$76 million in projects protected \$2.1 billion in structures. The ROI is undeniable.

One major barrier to this is the slow and costly permitting process. The Forest Service estimates that planning and assessments consume 40 percent of direct work and can frequently lead to years of delays in getting projects off the ground.

I do want to note that there are legitimate reasons to be concerned about changes to NEPA. Lessons forged in the timber wars will not and should not be easily forgotten, but the facts on the ground have changed, and our policies need to adapt. We have seen that cutting red tape can get results. The 10,000 acre categorical exclusions for fuels reduction in the Lake Tahoe Basin sped up treatment, helping stop the Caldor Fire before it reached South Lake Tahoe. After losing 20 percent of the world's giant sequoias to wildfires, the Forest Service expedited NEPA review in 2022, enabling the Giant Sequoia Lands Coalition to treat 54 percent of growth within just a few years.

Just last week, President Trump and Gavin Newsom both took emergency action to remove regulatory hurdles and accelerate fuels treatment on public lands. The people in charge of managing risk understand that they need to get at this problem, and the Fix Our Forests Act compliments these emergency declarations by codifying in statute a process to ensure that these efforts are targeted and successful.

The bill expands limits on CEs from 3,000 to 10,000 acres, providing land managers with flexibility to move beyond small random acts of mitigation and toward strategic landscape-level projects needed to move the needle in a serious way. By focusing on the highest risk landscapes and the most impactful treatments identified through the fireshed assessments, the reforms in this bill target the most critical work on the ground.

Over the last few years, we have seen an explosion of technology companies offering solutions at every phase of fire. This is not a hypothetical where we need to go, but the scalable technology already exists to make taxpayer-funded programs more effective and help us reach our goals faster, cheaper, and better. Yet these tools remain fragmented across more than 50 Federal programs with strained budgets, leaving the government unable to effectively deploy tech for those who need it most when they need it most.

The Fix Our Forests Act addresses this by creating a Fireshed Center to improve wildfire decision-making across prevention, suppression, and recovery. There is currently no single entity responsible for evaluating, understanding, and acting on risk across jurisdictions and landscapes in the United States. Like a combat support agency at DoD, this center will integrate real-time intel-

ligence, predictive modeling, and risk assessments to support firefighters, land managers, and communities, and we need to ensure that the agency is built to move fast.

Beyond the center, we strongly support the Wildfire Technology Testbed Program in the bill to spur private sector innovation. Scaling these solutions quickly is absolutely critical. To maximize impact, Congress should consider expanding this provision to include deployment and authorize existing funds for wildfire technology acquisition.

In conclusion, the Fix Our Forests Act will move the Federal Government toward a more proactive, science-driven approach to wildfire management. The bipartisan effort, led by Chairman Westerman and Representative Peters, has produced a solid product, and I look forward to working with the Committee to strengthen and refine this bill to maximize its impact.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak today, and I look forward to your questions.

[The prepared statement of Mr. Weiner can be found on pages 34-43 in the appendix.]

Chairman MARSHALL. Thank you so much.

Mr. Beum, you are recognized.

STATEMENT OF FRANK R. BEUM, RETIRED REGIONAL FORESTER, ROCKY MOUNTAIN REGION, MEMBER OF BOARD OF DIRECTORS, NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF FOREST SERVICE RETIREES

Mr. BEUM. Thank you. Chairman Boozman, Ranking Member Klobuchar, Chairman Marshall, Ranking Member Bennet, and Members of the Committee, thank you for inviting me to testify today. I am Frank Beum, and I serve on the Board of Directors of the National Association of Forest Service Retirees. We are a non-partisan, professional, and science-based organization comprising over 900 Forest Service Retirees and associates dedicated to adapting to the challenges of today and tomorrow.

Our members understand the importance of fiscal responsibility, efficiency, and cost reductions, but we are gravely concerned about the impacts to essential services caused by recent actions to cut the Forest Service field-going workforce. Steeper cuts to staff and programs are expected, which will significantly impede the ability of the agency to deliver critical goods and services to the American people. This includes the work outlined in the Fix Our Forests Act.

I retired from the Forest Service in May 2024, 43 years after my first day as a seasonal forestry technician. I worked in the woods, thinning tree stands with a chainsaw, marking timber sales, and taking care of wilderness and recreation areas before I moved into leadership roles, as Senator Bennet mentioned.

Turning to the act, in January 2024, NAFSR and 36 other organizations representing millions of outdoor enthusiasts sent a letter to Speaker of the House Mike Johnson and Minority Leader Hakeem Jeffries supporting the Fix Our Forests Act. This legislation would provide land managers with tools desperately needed to strengthen the role of States, Tribes, local government, collaborative groups, and other partners in forest management. It will

help the Forest Service staff plan and implement more projects to reduce the threat of the wildfire crisis.

However, recent cuts imposed by the Department of Government Efficiency will make it very difficult to deliver on the promise of the legislation. These indiscriminate reductions, along with nearly 1,000 staff who took deferred resignations, are hollowing out the agency and jeopardizing the future of America's forests. Ranchers, miners, loggers, campers, hikers, skiers, hunters, anglers, and people who just simply value clean drinking water will feel the impacts.

Over 180 million people in more than 68,000 communities rely on national forests for the drinking water. Spending by visitors to national forests and grasslands contributes about \$10.3 billion annually to the U.S. economy and sustains more than 140,000 family wage jobs that are the foundation of many rural communities. All of this is at risk due to sweeping, random staffing cuts that threaten the future of our public land heritage.

I have several examples to share. Approximately 3,400 Forest Service employees with less than one year of service in their positions, mostly field-going forestry technicians, were designated for firing simply because they were easy targets. Many of those fired were military veterans, hired through special authorities as a recognition of their service to our country. More than 75 percent of those dismissed employees had wildland fire qualifications, including on-the-ground firefighting, not just support roles, but on-the-ground, boots-on-the-ground firefighting.

A couple other quick examples, six of seven members of a timber strike team in the Rocky Mountain region were fired, and several individuals hired to work on Hurricane Helene recovery in North Carolina and Georgia were also fired. Now, some of these employees that were hastily fired are being brought back to do important work, but please do not underestimate that this uncertainty has damaged morale and slowed work in wildland fire prevention, timber management, and fire and storm recovery. As a result, thousands of communities will face greater wildfire risks as planned fuel reduction projects will go uncompleted. Businesses reliant on forest-related goods and services will suffer, and the agency will struggle to meet the administration's goal of wood independence.

The Forest Service, of course, works for the executive branch, and the Forest Service has always adjusted to priorities of incoming administration. Some of these cuts will make it difficult to do so. If the Forest Service continues to be hollowed out and can no longer provide essential services, there may be calls to move these lands to States, counties, or private ownership.

President Teddy Roosevelt had it right. Public lands belong to all Americans and should be managed under Federal protection. Public lands held in public trust is a uniquely American ideal, and they are the envy of the world. Forest Service employees are real people, family, friends, and neighbors, dedicated to caring for the land and delivering services to the American people. They are dedicated public servants who protect and conserve these lands. Without them to do their work, our natural heritage will be lost, and the intent of Fix Our Forests Act cannot be delivered.

I want to just leave you with two thoughts. One, we strongly support Fix Our Forests Act, and we are concerned that the Forest Service will not be able to deliver upon that act without critical resources and staff. With that, I thank you again for the opportunity to testify, and I welcome your questions.

[The prepared statement of Mr. Beum can be found on pages 44-46 in the appendix.]

Chairman MARSHALL. Thank you, Mr. Beum.

Mr. Vredenburg, you are recognized for five minutes.

STATEMENT OF TIM VREDENBURG, DIRECTOR, DEPARTMENT OF FOREST MANAGEMENT, COW CREEK BAND OF UMPQUA TRIBE OF INDIANS

Mr. VREDENBURG. Chair Marshall, Ranking Member Bennet, and respected Members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today. My name is Tim Vredenburg, and I serve as the Director of Forest Management for the Cow Creek Umpqua Tribe of Indians located in Roseburg, Oregon. I am here to express the tribe's support for H.R. 471, the Fix Our Forests Act. We believe that this legislation is a critical step in addressing the ever-growing wildfire crisis.

The Cow Creek Umpqua is a tribe of just over 2,000 members. Their lands are nested in a checkerboard of private, State, and mostly Federal lands. Over the last 10 years, catastrophic wildfires have burned nearly 20 percent of their reservation and 1.1 million acres of their ancestral area. The majority of the highest intensity fires have been on the Federal lands in the areas that excluded management. Fires are returning to the same places two, three, even four times, destroying the native ecosystems and replacing them with invasive species.

Our beautiful places, once lush, green forest, clean cold water, places that I spent time with my family hunting, hiking, fishing, they are destroyed. These fires have decimated tribal lands and driven tribal members from their homes again and again. This is why the Cow Creek Tribe is committed to an approach of forest management, not just on their lands, but on the neighboring Federal lands as well.

You see, historic conditions, which were guided by tribal management, supported 35 to 50 trees per acre, with a scattering of open meadows. Today, many areas have over 1,500 trees per acre. This has exceeded the carrying capacity of our forests. It has created unprecedented fuel loads, destabilized above-ground carbon, and limited water resources. Fires that once burned in a beneficial way now explode in catastrophic infernos that burn so hot that they completely sterilize the soil.

We need regulatory certainty. The Cottonwood decision has created uncertainty for our land managers. The Fix Our Forests Act addresses this and presents an opportunity to update woefully out-of-date land management plans. Agencies fail to do plan revisions because it takes too much time and they are too expensive. One of the biggest challenges we face is the lengthy, bureaucratic review process. We need to streamline this process, and we must implement forest restoration projects at a landscape scale. We have hun-

dreds of thousands of acres of land just around the Cow Creek reservation that need treated right now.

We appreciate that the act expands categorical exclusions to allow for projects up to 10,000 acres, that it modifies the Good Neighbor Authority, empowering tribes to reinvest in future forest restoration projects, and that it acknowledges the value of cultural burning. The tribal provisions are a good start, and it is worth exploring new ways to leverage the passion, expertise, and the fervent will of our tribal partners. If asked and activated, tribes can vastly improve and amplify the quality and impact of the Federal Land Managers.

This is not just about our forests; it is about clean water, healthy air, wildlife, recreation, and livable communities. Each catastrophic fire that burns leaves behind degraded soils, damaged fish habitats, hazardous smoke, smoke that fills the lungs of our children.

Approach the crisis with innovation and out-of-the-box thinking. Consider expanding the law to protect even more forests. Specifically, the Forest Service should consider the proximity of tribal lands when designating high-priority fire sheds, not just a structure count.

This has to be a bipartisan effort. Unnecessary controversy surrounding forest management has become the kryptonite of forest health. We need to fundamentally rethink how we manage our Federal forestlands. To save our forests, we must manage them, and we must manage them in their entirety. Tribes have long been stewards of these lands. We must move beyond the short-term fixes and embrace real, large-scale solutions.

I urge the Members of the Committee on both sides of the aisle to pass meaningful legislation that empowers those of us on the ground to act quickly because we can break free of this cycle of catastrophic wildfire. Thank you.

[The prepared statement of Mr. Vredenburg can be found on pages 47-50 in the appendix.]

Chairman MARSHALL. Thank you, Mr. Vredenburg.

Mr. Houck, you are recognized for five minutes.

STATEMENT OF HON. JONATHAN HOUCK, COUNTY COMMISSIONER, BOARD OF COUNTY COMMISSIONERS, GUNNISON COUNTY, COLORADO

Mr. HOUCK. Thank you, Chairman Marshall and Ranking Member Bennet and Members of the Subcommittee, and thank you for the opportunity to testify today, especially at this key moment of crisis for our Federal Land Management Agencies. I am a County Commissioner representing Gunnison County, Colorado, and like most residents of Gunnison County, I am dedicated to the stewardship of our cherished Federal public lands.

Gunnison County comprises 2.1 million acres, 1.7 of which are Federal public lands managed by the Forest Service, the Bureau of Land Management, and the National Park Service. To put that in perspective, as Senator Bennet did, we are 1½ times the size of the State of Delaware and 80 percent are Federal public lands. Gunnison County public lands are home to the State's largest body of water, the largest coal mine, ski area, and source of the marble that was used for the Lincoln Memorial and Tomb of the Unknown

Soldier. Gunnison County is headwaters of the Gunnison River, the second-largest tributary to the Colorado River system.

In Gunnison County, our public lands are everything to us. They are the foundation of our economy, our culture, our values, and our way of life. We take seriously our commitment to working with our Federal partners to support stewardship of these public lands, not only for the residents of Gunnison County, but for all Americans, and not just for today, but for the future as well.

I have submitted written testimony expressing my views on the Fix Our Forests Act, and I appreciate you making that part of the record.

As I explain more fully in my written testimony, the bill is a compilation of a variety of provisions, making technical amendments to a variety of forest laws, codifying existing programs, granting new authorities, fine-tuning directions, and calling for new studies, many of which would be helpful improvements. It also includes a variety of NEPA categorical exclusions, restrictions on judicial review, and limitations on consultations under the ESA that would be harmful to the science-based community collaboration that has been the hallmark of our success in public land decisionmaking in Gunnison County.

We depend on NEPA to guarantee that our community has a seat at the table to work in an informed and cooperative manner with the Forest Service to generate the best alternatives for achieving desired conditions in our forest. We depend on proactive approaches to conserving species so we can avoid listing them. While litigation is an extremely rare occurrence, we know that none of that is possible if the rule of law and the potential for its enforcement by the courts is not respected.

Our situation in Gunnison County is both illustrative and not unusual. As just two examples we have collaboratively developed in recent years, two significant projects to increase forest resilience and provide wood products to the market. The Taylor Park Vegetation Management Plan and a Spruce Beetle and Aspen Decline Project were both designated to be implemented over a decade and cover tens of thousands of acres of national forestland. They were collaboratively developed under NEPA and in accordance with the ESA with a broad group of local stakeholders.

Those laws are not the problem. Forest Service capacity to implement them is the problem. Those who know the Forest Service already knew the agency had a significant staffing crisis. The firing of hundreds of staff in Colorado over the last few weeks has intensified that crisis considerably.

In Gunnison County alone, between probationary firings and the hiring freeze for both open positions and seasonal employees, the Forest Service alone is short more than 50 employees that are critical to carrying out the most basic of operations. This is significant and represents the issues in just one of Colorado's 64 counties. Those fired and those seasonal employees who have had their upcoming contracts rescinded are hardworking Americans that mark timber sales, clear trails, perform fire patrol, issue grazing permits, prepare mineral leases, clean bathrooms, and assist visitors.

We must stop this destruction and repair the substantial damage that has already been done as the first critical priority. If not

stopped, these efforts will destroy our Federal Land Management Agencies, and ultimately, the communities like mine that depend on them to manage our public lands.

In other times, the issues compiled in the Fix Our Forests Act would be of significant interest to Gunnison County, but right now—and I know I can speak for many of my fellow County Commissioners in Colorado and perhaps many across the West—there are critical things we need from Congress regarding our public lands. Here is what we desperately need from Congress for our public lands.

We need leadership to stop the destructive, arbitrary, and inhumane firings of our Federal Land Managers, work with communities to identify areas for increased efficiency and increased capacity. It is worth noting, when seasonal personnel are not hired, that impact actually ripples into the private sector since their other seasonal employment is often tied to other essential needs in our small rural communities. Additionally, do not discount the gut punch to morale to those who have not been eliminated and the increased anxiety created by the current administration's approach to staffing.

Finally, what is happening now with the firings and the upcoming reduction in force actions will have a lasting and chilling effect on the future of those contemplating a career service in our public land agencies. If the true goal is to fix our forests, then please start by fighting for the restoration of the most basic staffing levels, both full-time and seasonal, to do the good work already underway. Existing timber sales, planned vegetation management actions, grazing permit renewals, and other already-approved actions that will contribute to healthier forest, better outcomes, and less wildfire are in jeopardy right now because the workforce that carries out those operations has been decimated.

We cannot fix our forests without a skilled, dedicated, professional workforce, not only at the Forest Service, but also at the BLM and the Park Service. This is the critical work that desperately needs attention. None of this should be controversial or partisan. It is certainly not in Gunnison County.

Thank you again for the opportunity to testify. I would be happy to answer any questions you have.

[The prepared statement of Mr. Houck can be found on pages 51-61 in the appendix.]

Chairman MARSHALL. Thank you, Mr. Houck.

Next, Mr. Gordon, you are recognized for five minutes.

**STATEMENT OF ROBERT GORDON, SENIOR VICE PRESIDENT,
POLICY, RESEARCH AND INTERNATIONAL, AMERICAN PROPERTY CASUALTY INSURANCE ASSOCIATION**

Mr. GORDON. Chairman Marshall and Ranking Member Bennet, thank you for holding today's hearing. I am Robert Gordon, the Senior Vice President of Policy, Research and International for the American Property Casualty Insurance Association. APCIA represents over 2/3 of the United States' home, auto and business property casualty insurance market. APCIA strongly supports the bipartisan Fix Our Forests Act.

The California wildfires earlier this year caused between \$95–275 billion in economic losses, one of the worst wildfire events in history. Insurers have already expedited over \$6.9 billion in payments to help families and businesses recover, and we expect to ultimately provide between \$40–50 billion in relief. That is roughly three times the homeowners’ premiums for the entire State for the entire year, and the regular summer fire season has not yet even begun.

Now, wildfires are endemic in the United States. There is an average of roughly 70,000 wildfires per year over the last four decades, but catastrophic wildfire losses to communities, known as conflagrations, have dramatically escalated. Conflagration losses over the last decade caused five times as much damage as in prior decades. Now, there are a number of reasons those losses are increasing so much. A majority of new homes are being built in areas that are at high fire risk, particularly in the wildland-urban interface next to forests and other natural landscapes. In fact, in just the last year, residential property exposures in the United States at high risk of wildfire losses increased nearly 23 percent in just one year.

Inflation, particularly for building materials and lumber, has skyrocketed. The estimated cost of replacing all the buildings in the United States more than doubled over the last decade. Worsening weather severity is exacerbating precipitation and drought cycles that increase dry brush and fuel loads, so the climate is having a particular impact on wildfires. Legal system abuse is compounding the disaster costs, and we are now seeing 87 percent of wildfires are caused by humans, accidentally or intentionally, with an increasing number of the costliest and deadliest wildfires triggered by utility equipment sparking during severe winds.

Without more proactive mitigation, disaster preparedness, and better coordinated response, these factors are going to continue to drive escalating wildfire losses, damaging ecosystems and the environment, and putting upward pressure on the cost of homeowner’s insurance and the cost of government disaster aid.

Insurers are doing our part to develop solutions. Insurers have invested hundreds of millions of dollars in the Insurance Institute for Business and Home Safety, IBHS. IBHS has developed safety and mitigation standards for properties, including fortified standards to protect against wind and wildfire-prepared home standards to protect against conflagrations. Insurers also participated in the congressionally established Wildland Fire Mitigation and Management Commission, including our APCIA CEO, and they made over 100 recommendations, including support for the IBHS wildfire safety standards.

The Fix Our Forests Act incorporates many of those recommendations, including requiring government coordination for wildfire prediction, response, and recovery; supporting local adoption of fire-resistant building methods, codes, and standards; encouraging better fuel reduction; and supporting more resilient utility infrastructure. Those are all very important.

Last December, Congress provided \$110 billion in disaster assistance, and California just requested another \$40 billion for January’s wildfires. Unless we invest more up front in wildfire mitiga-

tion, as both the Chairman and Ranking Member have underscored, taxpayers are going to keep getting stuck with ever-increasing costs for disaster response and recovery. More people are going to lose their homes and communities, insurance losses are going to skyrocket, and housing will be less affordable.

APCIA and insurers strongly support the bipartisan Fix Our Forests Act to make those upfront investments. The act builds on extensive safety research by insurers, the IBHS, the Wildland Fire Mitigation and Management Commission, and would facilitate implementation of proven safety standards and needed government coordination.

APCIA and insurers look forward to partnering with Members of the Subcommittee to advance this legislation and work on wildfire protections. We thank you for your leadership, and I look forward to your questions.

[The prepared statement of Mr. Gordon can be found on pages 62-78 in the appendix.]

Chairman MARSHALL. Okay. Thank you, Mr. Gordon.

I am going to ask just one question, and then we will turn to the Ranking Member, and then I will come back at the end and ask some questions if they were not picked up.

I want to start by recognizing the great work that Congressman Bruce Westerman from the State of Arkansas has done on this, as well as Congressman Scott Peters from California. Bruce is absolutely a subject expert on this, and he has been a great teacher, and I recognize the Ranking Member's expertise on this subject as well.

I will just have one question to start with, and it is for Mr. Vredenburg. Many people mischaracterize categorical exclusions as an end run around NEPA. Can you explain why larger categorical exclusions are critically needed and will help mitigate future catastrophic fires while still ensuring proper environmental reviews?

Mr. VREDENBURG. Yes. Thank you, Chairman. I will give an example. The Cow Creek Tribe has a cooperative agreement under the Tribal Forest Protection Act, working with the Umpqua National Forest on attempting to restore and reduce the risk of fire to the Cow Creek Umpqua reservation. As we approach that problem, it is a scale of hundreds of thousands of acres that we are trying to treat. What we are practically doing is having to piece together small categorical exclusions because, you know, traditional environmental assessments just take years, years and years to get through. Categorical exclusions are not fast, but they are our most rapid solution to address the problem.

We are looking at a watershed right now that is about 10,000 acres. We would have to try and piece together several different categorical exclusions, trying to make sure they are not interdependent, interrelated, that we are not stacking those, that there is separation, and it really ties our hands. What practically happens is we do not get to treat the areas that need to be treated.

Chairman MARSHALL. Thank you. I will turn to Senator Bennet next.

Senator BENNET. Thanks, Mr. Chairman.

As we were walking in here this morning, there was I think a Federal court ruling some place delaying the firings of the Forest

Service employees that we are talking about at least for 45 days. That is, I suppose, a shred of comfort, but that is going to also add its own levels of uncertainty. I wanted to ask Frank Beum and the Commissioner, if you could tell us a little bit specifically how these staffing shortages, the hiring freezes, the recent round of firings are going to affect fire management on the landscape today. What do we need to worry about in terms of just this coming summer and the work that has to be taken to prepare us for that and to fight the fires that are coming?

Frank, when you talk about this, could you talk a little bit about the importance of red cards and what that means for people as well?

Mr. BEUM. Yes, Senator, thank you. As I mentioned in my testimony, about 75 percent of the probationary employees that were removed have fire qualifications. They are given on a card that is red. That is why it is called red card. You have a red card that lists your qualifications you are trained to do. Most of those folks that were eliminated or dismissed during their probationary period are field-going forestry technicians that typically have some red card qualifications often to do on-the-ground firefighting, not just support. We know primary firefighters with that in the position description were not removed, but collateral-duty firefighters, which is a backbone of the fire suppression effort, as well as prescribed fire, were removed. Those are our red card employees.

That is going to be a massive impact on the ability of the fire—I am going to use the broader Fire Service, which is all the Federal agencies, State agencies, and others to do fire suppression work this year. It is going to have a pretty big impact. Thank you.

Senator BENNET. Commissioner Houck?

Mr. HOUCK. Thank you for the question, Senator. I think, interestingly, the perspective I bring is someone who actually has the ability to, day in and day out, walk into the district rangers' office at the Forest Service or the BLM or the Park Service. The big concern that we see in Gunnison County currently is that there are many already approved projects. These are timber sales, these are habitat restoration projects, this is on-the-ground trail work that is mitigating fire danger that is approved for this upcoming year, and they do not have the staff on the ground to do these projects.

I would like to maybe step back to a point that you made in your introductory comments. It is the partnerships in communities that make a difference. For a good example, our trail crews are funded through State funds, through the Colorado Parks and Wildlife OHV funds, and that money comes to the Forest Service and allows them to do projects which include vegetation management. They cannot hire that trail crew even though the funding comes from a source other than the Federal Government. I am hearing that from the foresters in our district. They will not have the forestry technicians to go out and mark the sales that have already approved, that have been through a NEPA process and are part of these larger projects that I spoke of in my opening comments.

We have a lot of veterans that work on the forests in Gunnison County. A lot of these veterans have lost their jobs. One thing that I am really happy about to see in Colorado is how many veterans come to Colorado, connect to outdoor spaces, and the work that

they do, the soul-satisfying work they do is connected to public lands. Some of them have lost their jobs as well.

When I look at what we have on slate for just this coming summer, I have concerns that now we are going to start backlogging already a place where we are struggling to keep up due to the lack of resources before the firings.

I would make one last comment that the deferred resignations, though, not hugely impactful right in the Gunnison field office, but I think of the neighboring White River National Forest in the route. We had three folks that retired who were senior level that when type one teams need to be deployed for fires and things of that nature, they are the leadership that runs the team. I would say to Frank's comments about red card members, a lot of the folks that have been eliminated recently are red card holders, and they are part of the firefighting process in our community.

Senator BENNET. I would just say to the Chairman and to the Chairman, the Secretary of Agriculture, who is from Texas, has said that she does not think that they have laid off or fired any firefighting personnel. You have heard today that is actually not the case, that Frank Beum described some of the people that have been laid off as the backbone of our firefighting efforts.

I think I would speak for everybody if I can for once, for Colorado, who is a Democrat or a Republican, we got to get these people back on the ground. We do not have 45 days to do the planning that is required. This is an emergency that we are facing today, and we would love your help in trying to at least pause this so that we can get to the other side of it.

By the way—I will stop here—that does nothing to deal with the underlying problems that have existed in our western States for years in terms of paying firefighters what they are due to begin with. We have got to find a way to work together to solve that problem as well.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Chairman MARSHALL. Yes, thank you, Senator Bennet. Chairman Boozman.

Chairman BOOZMAN. Thank you very much. I want to thank you and Senator Bennet for the great job that you are doing with the Subcommittee and your staffs. You really jumped in last year and this year and really are making a difference.

As always, it is great to be with our fearless leader, Amy. We appreciate her and always.

Senator HOEVEN. Are you talking about Marshall or—

Chairman BOOZMAN. Well, I am not talking about you, John.

[Laughter.]

Chairman BOOZMAN. Mr. Gordon, as your testimony mentioned, there are more than 44 million homes in the wildland-urban interface at risk of wildfire. Can you please talk about how the provisions of FOFA, including allowing hazardous tree removal within 150 feet of a utility right-of-way, can help address this problem and make communities safer? I have heard in people discussing the bill, they wonder, why are things like that in there? Why is that important?

Mr. GORDON. It is very important. A lot of the Federal wildfire programs are currently very fragmented and can be very chal-

lenging for all the individuals and communities and governments to navigate and access all of the wildfire resources, and so it is very important to have the FOFA to coordinate all the stakeholders and resources, support land use planning, adoption of building codes, supporting protection of critical watersheds and water delivery infrastructure. The various programs would also coordinate with the State and local agencies, including for grant assistance. We think FOFA is very, very important and look forward to doing anything we can to help you advance it.

Chairman BOOZMAN. Very good. Senator Marshall mentioned the categorical exclusions that are part of NEPA and really ask about increased categorical exclusions, how they effectively help manage our Nation's forests. Does anybody disagree with that on the panel? Go ahead.

Mr. HOUCK. Yes, thank you, Senator. I would not say I would disagree, but in doing my research for the presentation today and in speaking with those at the agency, categorical exclusions are—currently, north of 80 percent of most projects are excluded from—categorical exclusions are used and using those to not have to go through the full NEPA process. You know, from someone on the ground and at a local level, the concern is that moving further and further away for these larger projects from that community involvement, you start to lose the social engagement and the social license from the communities most directly impacted and finding a way to make sure that categorical exclusions are handled in a way that is beneficial but also—and they are a great tool, but I am concerned about the larger projects being—CEs being used to sidestep some of the good public participation that happens through a full NEPA process.

Chairman BOOZMAN. Are you concerned about the process being so cumbersome, though, that for some of these bigger projects, it is almost impossible to get done just because of the bureaucracy involved and the abilities to play the system in a different way?

Mr. HOUCK. Senator, thank you for that. I would respond that, you know, my experience in a rural western public lands county, that participation on the front end has been robust enough that we have seen less litigation. We have seen less kind of playing the system or gaming the system, sir, as maybe you referred to it. I want to acknowledge that I think that is a challenge to overcome. I think my position, and as you will see in my written comments that are much more in depth, the concern would be that by weakening that social license with communities, you will actually potentially see more litigation and more things that hamstringing these projects in the long run by not having that more robust public input up front that NEPA often affords. At least for my community, I have noticed, it has been very beneficial.

Chairman BOOZMAN. Yes, one of the things that I have noticed, and I think anybody that has been around this at all, is how different forests are managed throughout the country. You know, it is great that you have got, you know, a good experience and working hard and, you know, everybody kind of gets along. That is certainly not the case every place, you know, so—thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Chairman MARSHALL. All right. Thank you, Chairman. Senator Klobuchar.

Senator KLOBUCHAR. Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. Thank you, Senator Bennet, for this great and timely hearing. I wish we did not have to focus on it because I wish we did not have this many fires. We are here, and we need to do everything we can. I look at Senator Schiff there with what he and his constituents went through with the fires in California, what we have seen in Colorado. We know that these fires pose the greatest threat in the West, but it is also important to know that these fires have not spared other parts of the country.

I remember flying in a helicopter over the forests of northern Minnesota and seeing the areas burn 90,000 acres, the Pagami Fire, the largest Minnesota wildfire in nearly a century. Wildfires, including the Greenwood Fire once again burned across northern Minnesota. Of course, we, like so many of the Northern States, have our people get the air from Canada from those horrendous fires that burned for months and months and months.

Recent investments by Congress have led to the Forest Service that have been really important, the Collaborative Wildfire Risk Reduction Program funding two projects in the Superior National Forest to reduce hazardous fuels and create strategic fuel breaks, which I am sure you agree it is just the kind of thing we need to be doing. Unfortunately, these projects and others carried out by the Forest Service and its partners have been disrupted due to the widespread funding freeze. I look forward to hearing from all of you today on this, but also on the Fix Our Forests Act and ways we should strengthen the bill to ensure that wildfire responses are directed to the areas most in need, changes to the review process are targeted and allow for community input—Senator Bennet mentioned this—and that the Forest Service has the necessary funding and personnel to perform the additional and important wildfire mitigation.

My first question would be of you, Mr. Houck. Can you discuss the importance of Federal funding to accomplish more restoration work, and how does this assistance help counties and other local units carry out wildfire mitigation?

Mr. HOUCK. Thank you, Senator, and thank you for the question. Indeed, as I said in my opening comments, some of the lack of funding and lack of programs—the programs that are being funded are being well utilized, but there is still a shortage of funding, and there is still a shortage of resources and capacity on the ground. Many communities such as mine have had the ability to get projects into the pipeline. Funding and workforce tend to be the issues that get in the way of those.

You know, the Good Neighbor Authority, I am very happy to see that. I know you have been a long-time champion of the Good Neighbor Authority—

Senator KLOBUCHAR. Exactly.

Mr. HOUCK [continuing]. and thank you.

Senator KLOBUCHAR. You are welcome.

Mr. HOUCK. Section 111—

Senator KLOBUCHAR. It has like the best name of any bill.

[Laughter.]

Mr. HOUCK. It is great to see that in—and I think that is very positive for that. It reinstates and restates with the EXPLORE Act covered, which is counties and tribes have the ability to use the Good Neighbor Authority to its best extent. I would also offer that funding of those kind of programs and expansion of those programs within communities then also allows us—and I think the insurance businesses have seen this—when we can enact higher levels of local regulation around building and wildfire protections, we are leveraging these different inputs in our community for better things that our citizens can take advantage of, and then being able to create fire-wise communities, work in the WUI, and make sure that that work is done quickly and efficiently.

Senator KLOBUCHAR. Mr. Beum, I have long supported permitting reform as long as it is done in the right way. Currently, many Forest Service projects are carried out using expedited permitting authorities, and any additional flexibilities, I would like to see a focus on those facing wildfire risk. Are there targeted improvements to the permitting process this Committee should consider that could lead to more active forest management?

Mr. BEUM. Well, what I would say is that we have been working—when I was still working, we worked closely with Fish and Wildlife Service on ESA compliance and other issues with historic preservation that we really do need to find ways to be more proactive, quicker in that work, and there are some efficiencies I believe we can find. I know the agency was working hard on that, and we could certainly do more with that.

Senator KLOBUCHAR. During your tenure as Regional Forester of the Rocky Mountain region, did you feel like the Forest Service having fewer staff and resources would help it accomplish more work? I know it is a really tough question.

Mr. BEUM. Yes, thanks for the softball. No, ma'am.

[Laughter.]

Mr. BEUM. What I would say additionally is that, if I were chief for a day, I would flip the organization chart upside down and put the districts at the top of our organization. That is where the work is done. That is where we meet people, and these cuts that we have been talking about are just at the wrong place. They are cutting people on the ground that get the work done that we need to have done.

Senator KLOBUCHAR. I get it. If you could look at it, you know, as a manager, you would make them—and if you wanted to make some changes, you would do them in a different way than is being done now?

Mr. BEUM. Certainly would, yes.

Senator KLOBUCHAR. Okay. Thank you.

Mr. BEUM. Thank you.

Chairman MARSHALL. Thank you, Senator Klobuchar. Senator Hoeven.

Senator HOEVEN. Thank you, Mr. Chair. I would like to thank all the witnesses for being here.

Mr. Weiner, in North Dakota, we have national grasslands. We have national grasslands both in the Western part of the State, but also in the Southeast part of the State as well, and we do a lot of grazing out there. Talk to me a little bit about your thoughts in

regard to the dual benefits that livestock grazing can have, both in terms of promoting more fire-resistant, healthy landscapes, and of course, at the same time, really helping our ranchers.

Mr. WEINER. Yes, thank for the question, Senator. I appreciate that. I think one great point that this brings up is that while the bill is called the Fix Our Forests Act, this is really about all types of landscapes impacted by fire. We think about chaparral landscapes that were impacted in the Los Angeles fires recently, and absolutely grazing landscapes like you have in North Dakota. One of the best tools that we have is grazing. We are really thrilled that the Fix Our Forests Act includes provisions to streamline authorities and approvals for targeted grazing projects, allowing cattlemen access to public lands for grazing in fire-prone areas.

I think the other piece of this is the value of the Fireshed Center in helping States like North Dakota that have emergent wildfire risk, understand what their risk profile is on the ground, and act accordingly, right? I think a lot of the great work that has been done in the wildfire technology space in terms of understanding what is happening on the ground is being done at the State and local level with very well-resourced States and local governments. Other smaller States across the West are going to have a lot of catching up to do, and we think this center is going to be really helpful in helping—

Senator HOEVEN. Yes. I mean, when these wildfires get going in the grasslands, I mean, we have had them burn down some small towns, last year, killed several people. It is very serious, and we have to be able to address them. In a lot of cases, you know, we have the ranchers out there themselves, along with volunteer fire departments trying to help, you know, contain these fires. Of course, the State does a lot too with, you know, helicopters and fire suppression and so forth.

Wildfire seasons have turned into wildfire years, and costs have increased 82 percent to address it over the past decade. Talk a little bit about, you know, in this legislation, you know, what can you do in terms of cost savings to really change that?

Mr. WEINER. Yes. Well, I think that, first of all, the fact that we spend so much time with the permitting and planning side would be a problem at the Forest Service, even if it was not going through the crisis that it is going through right now.

Senator HOEVEN. Talk specifically about permitting, how it is really going to work. You know, President Trump issued emergency action right now. How are you going to get permitting improved so it really works and is timely?

Mr. WEINER. Yes—

Senator HOEVEN. Does this bill do it? How does it do it?

Mr. WEINER. I think this bill does do that. I think it does that through bringing a process to the emergency authority that is relevant to what President Trump announced and that Governor Newsom in California announced very recently. Bring—

Senator HOEVEN. Okay. There, good point. Does that mean you can get the bipartisan—you had President Trump do it, and you have also had Governor Newsom do it.

Mr. WEINER. Yes.

Senator HOEVEN. That really speaks to we ought to be able to pass this thing on a bipartisan basis and get this done, right, an actual solution in place, right?

Mr. WEINER. Yes, Senator.

Senator HOEVEN. Okay.

Mr. WEINER. The folks who are responsible for managing risk on landscapes, the executives out there are moving in this direction in a bipartisan basis, and Congress should help put a process in place to make sure that it meets the desired goals.

Senator HOEVEN. Yes, thanks.

Mr. GORDON, I want to ask you about this interface where we have the urban areas encroaching on these forests, right? That is happening all the time. You know, we just saw the dramatic, horrible consequences in California of that, you know, confluence of urban areas, you know, and these forests. Speak to what this bill does to really address that, a critically important and life safety issue.

Mr. GORDON. Yes, it is a growing issue, and to the extent that we are going to continue to build in these risky areas, and now a majority of new homes are being built in areas with wildfire risk, we have to do more wildfire safety, preparedness, and mitigation. This bill makes the upfront investments that we need to do to save people, to make it more affordable long term. It includes things like encouraging hardening existing homes with wildfire-resistant materials, removing hazardous fuels, vegetation management. You talked about grazing, so important to reduce those fuel loads, programs to better coordinate the various Federal programs and Federal and State services. This bill is really important to make the upfront investments to make those buildings insurable and affordable long term.

Senator HOEVEN. Right on and very timely, so thanks to you, Mr. Chairman and the Ranking Member, for this hearing. Thanks to the witnesses.

Chairman MARSHALL. Thanks, Senator Hoeven. Senator Luján is next.

Senator LUJÁN. Mr. Chairman. Thank you very much. I very much appreciate this hearing and to all the panelists who are here today.

Far too many communities in New Mexico and States across the country are terrified about fire season, and it is only getting longer. In 2022 the Hermits Peak/Calf Canyon Fire in New Mexico, which was started by the U.S. Forest Service as a controlled burn, largest fire in the State's history, billion dollars of damages, cost New Mexicans their livelihoods. I was told at the time that prescribed burns do not get out of control, very few, less than a 10th of a percent.

About three months later, we had a second one in New Mexico, burnt another community up, all because folks did not want to use the technology that was available, but just wanted to use their hands and their eyes and see if it was warm or not. We all know what happens when a stump catches on fire and it goes down deep. It stays smoldering. It does not get put out, and all it takes is a little bit of a breeze for it to kick up.

I am proud to have successfully led the New Mexico delegation in securing funding in a specific act because of the liability of the Federal Government. I am still not happy at the pace that funding is flowing to people back home. That is a whole other conversation that we need to have. Once the fires do start, we have to have the people power and wildfire modeling capacity to contain and extinguish the flames.

Mr. Weiner, thank you for calling attention to the bipartisan Regional Leadership and Wildland Fire Research Act that I and Senators Sullivan and Sheehy and Padilla worked on together, and thank you for your work in assisting us to get this done. Can you speak to the importance of developing next-generation fire and vegetation models to support wildland fire management and rehabilitation?

Mr. WEINER. Absolutely. Thank you, Senator, and thank you for your work on that legislation. We think that that piece of legislation is crucial on the wildfire science side of this conversation, and we should think about how to make sure it is coordinating effectively with the Fireshed Center in this bill.

You know, as you mentioned, wildfire behavior is changing rapidly. We are seeing facts on the ground change as the fires are burning, and we have the tools with advanced modeling to get a handle on how things are likely to play out and act accordingly. I think that your legislation and the Fireshed Center in particular can help enable that.

I think it is important to also recognize a lot of the cutting-edge work happening here is happening in the private sector, and they do not have a partner in the Federal Government to work on these issues effectively with right now. I think we do need to think about how we can enable the innovation happening in the private sector on advanced modeling and make sure that we put those tools in the hands of decisionmakers at every level as quickly as possible.

Senator LUJÁN. I appreciate that. I am reminded that, as a country, we spend billions of dollars improving our understanding of hurricanes and tornadoes. It might surprise a lot of people, but in New Mexico, we do not have a lot of hurricanes.

[Laughter.]

Senator LUJÁN. We do not invest at the same level for catastrophic fires. I do not understand this. This is a part of America that has just been left out.

Mr. WEINER. Yes.

Senator LUJÁN. Well, now there are three western Senators on this Committee, and I do not believe that is going to happen anymore.

Mr. Weiner, why is it important that this modeling and technology is developed and targeted for specific regions of the country?

Mr. WEINER. Yes, I think first to your point on hurricanes, you know, historically, hurricanes have been a bigger driver of damage in the United States, and so catastrophic fire, as we recognize it now, has only been around for a couple decades, and our systems have been slow to respond. A single hurricane hunter costs more than a decade of wildfire science research at the Federal level, so we definitely need to catch up in that space.

Senator LUJÁN. I appreciate that.

Mr. WEINER. And——

Senator LUJÁN. Go ahead.

Mr. WEINER. I was just going to say, as regards to different landscapes, I think it is really crucial that we have a regional approach so that we can look at the difference in fire risk in places like Hawaii, in the Great Plains where there is a very different risk, in chaparral-based landscapes in the Southwest, and comparing that to forested landscapes, all of which have different risk profiles, different things to need to look out for and understand if you are a manager. We think it is critical that we take a regional approach to that.

Senator LUJÁN. I appreciate that. Well, while I enjoy both beef and lamb, I will just remind my friends that while cattle graze, sheep mow——

Mr. WEINER. Yes.

Senator LUJÁN [continuing].—so we may need some more of them on these grasslands as well.

Mr. WEINER. Oh, sheep are a big part of it. We are supportive of them.

Senator LUJÁN. Well——

Mr. WEINER. I should have said that earlier.

Senator LUJÁN [continuing].—we should talk about that. Well, I am not going to get into the pricing of the meat.

[Laughter.]

Senator LUJÁN. I appreciate the question that Senator Bennet asked about staffing. You answered that question. It is a problem. I had a constituent from the Southwestern part of New Mexico give me a holler because she was worried that her husband, who is a wildland firefighter, there was a freeze of hiring, and then people that he worked with were terminated. She said, if a fire happens, is he going to come home or not? I think we need to be thinking about that aspect of this.

I would ask my Republican colleagues, look, any of you that hunt or fish, invite President Trump out west. Take him hunting and fishing so he can go into these wooded areas and take a look at them. I think we need to get a good understanding of the Western part of America so that way we can be working on this stuff. This is common sense. It is not Democrat or Republican. This is about the United States. The Western members have been working closely together. I hope that, you know, those of us that do not know each other well yet, I hope to get to know you. We will invite you out. I will take you fishing, I will take you hunting, but you have to be comfortable hunting with the other person I mentioned, so that is up to you all.

[Laughter.]

Senator LUJÁN. There are some other areas as well in recovery, Mr. Chairman, I hope we can talk to at a later time. I will submit them into the record.

Now that we have had these devastating fires, you know, I have been surprised that only New Mexico and Idaho have the ability to be able to produce the seedlings necessary for recovery here. We need to be looking at what we can be doing in this space so that way we are preventing, we have better tools to fight when this hap-

pens, but then we also look at recovery. I hope that we can all talk about that.

Then the last thing I will say is, do not forget about the flooding that happens for five, six, ten years after a fire hits in the West because it is equally devastating. We need to make sure that all the rules are updating themselves or we can help update them so that people are not getting hurt because of that stuff. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Chairman MARSHALL. Thanks, Senator Luján. I will accept your invitation as long as it is flyfishing on a stream.

Senator LUJÁN. Done.

Chairman MARSHALL. Okay. I got to take my dad fishing this Sunday in the Flint Hills for the first time this spring, so it is always a great signal that spring is on the way. You bet.

Chairman MARSHALL. Senator Justice, thanks for your patience. You are recognized.

Senator JUSTICE. I am new to the game in lots of ways—thank you, sir—but I have got a lot of white hair, and I have been around a lot, and I can tell you—and absolutely, please, let me accept the invitation as well because there is nobody in here, nobody that has been in the woods or on the waters more than I, nobody. I get it. I truly get it.

The thing that is absolutely amazing to me is, I would just say, simply just this, whether it be all of our unbelievable farmlands and the contribution of our small family farms, or whether it be our unbelievable forest that we are absolutely seeing right now that we got a real problem, and America needs to react. That is all there is to it. I mean, it is just as simple as just that.

We got all the smarts in the world here to figure it out as to what to do, but we just will not react. We just think it is going to be okay. Well, it is not going to be okay. I mean, these fires absolutely are killing our—and I just wrote down just a couple of points here—our air, our waters, our soil, our nutrients, absolutely our wildlife, and more than anything, our soul, our soul. Then for those of us that have been on a stream with a fly rod in your hand or seen the absolutely majesty of all the stuff of wildlife all around us we are killing our soul, America. That is all there is to it. We have got to wake up. We have got to react. Not only do we have to react, but we got to react within days almost. That is all there is to it when it really boils down to it.

Here is a solution, you know, that I can provide to you very quickly, you know, from the standpoint of West Virginia. You know, we have lost all of our cabinetry, and we have lost all of our furniture business, and we lost it to Vietnam and China and Mexico. It is gone. Well, absolutely, how do we get it back?

I mean, think about this. In West Virginia, we cut 1/3 of our growth. We do not manage our forests in West Virginia any better than the problems in the West. We got to do something. You know, with all that being said, the canopy, we cut 1/3 of our growth. Think about this just a second. What if we created some form of funding, whatever it may be, and said, I will tell you what we are going to do, we are going to rate our States. In this situation, West Virginia would rate really well, but we are going to rate our contribution. Do you know that when we take and cut a tree and it

turns into this right here, the carbon is frozen in this forever. The carbon does not go into the atmosphere, but if it falls down on the ground because we are not cutting but 1/3 of our growth, and we are not managing our forests, and we get any kind of level of forest fire, and in West Virginia, we get 800 a year. They are not bad, but 800 a year.

What happens to this carbon when the fire goes through? Poof, right back into the atmosphere. We all absolutely, our hair on fire about carbon in the atmosphere. Why don't we do something about it? Why don't we say, I will tell you what we are going to do, we are going to create some kind of management funding or whatever, and we are going to apply that toward labor back in States and rate it and scale it and absolutely, then bring our absolute furniture and cabinetry, you know, manufacturing back to the back to us instead of it being in another country.

There are so many things we can be doing. The intelligence is all right here. We need to do it on a bipartisan, you know, matter. Absolutely, without any question, we can do it, and we can do it right now, absolutely. The question is, will America react?

With that being said, I would say I stand ready to work with anybody, anybody. I stand ready to accept that invitation too. You will see that you will see that I am a hunter, I am a fisherman, I am a person that loves the outdoors, and I am a person that wants to absolutely preserve our soul. If we do not watch out, what we are doing, what we are doing right now is ludicrous. Let's figure a way to figure this out, and we need to do it right now.

Thank you so much, Mr. Chairman.

Chairman MARSHALL. Thank you, Senator Justice.

Now it looks like we have a contest to see who the second-best fisherman in the Senate is.

[Laughter.]

Chairman MARSHALL. Senator Schiff, you are next.

Senator SCHIFF. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and thank you to the witnesses for being here.

Matt, I am sorry I missed the chance to introduce you earlier. Matt and I have known each other a long time when he served as the Executive Director of the California Democratic Congressional Delegation and advised our Chair Zoe Lofgren, Speaker Pelosi, as well as 42 Democratic Members of the House on California policy. I appreciate how you brought that expertise to bear in trying to tackle this very difficult problem.

We are seeing in California what Americans are seeing all over the country, that wildfires are now characterized by a longer fire season, by more massive size, by more acres burned every year. The loss of life in Altadena and the Palisades, the loss of homes and businesses was just devastating. With the 100-mile-an-hour winds, it was just an irresistible force to be reckoned with.

I appreciate all of your efforts to try to improve our forest management so that we can reduce the chances of these fires and the work that is being done on a bipartisan basis by my colleague, Scott Peters from California, and Congressman Westerman.

I have concerns about the bill, which I think many Democrats in the House shared when this bill came before the House, that parts of the bill seem more focused on timber harvesting than they do

on wildfire mitigation. They are not concerns that cannot be overcome. There are, I think, good-faith negotiations going on to try to make changes to the bill that would, I think, potentially, dramatically expand support for the bill, and I am hoping that we can get to yes on those changes.

One of the reasons I think there is skepticism about the priority in the bill being more on wildfire and less on timber or vice versa is the issue that my colleague, Senator Bennet, was raising, and that is that so many of the actions we are taking right now are completely counterproductive, that have nothing to do with the need to change law, but they involve the laying off of firefighters, the hiring freeze on other firefighters, the termination of 3,400 employees at the Forest Service, the funding freeze affecting the halt of hazardous fuels reduction. All of this is moving us in the wrong direction, and so it is hard to make the case for the urgency of legislation when we are taking steps that are nonlegislative that are moving us in the wrong direction. I hope that we can both restore these employees in this workforce and this important work, and at the same time, make improvements to the bill and get this moving.

I would like, if I could—I received a letter from the Lomakatsi Project, which I request unanimous consent to be entered in the record.

[The letters can be found on page 125-126 in the appendix.]

Senator SCHIFF. I thank you.

This project is a forestry and workforce development organization in Oregon and California. Their work has resulted in thousands of acres of hazardous fuels reduction, millions of feet of timber sent to mills, billions of dollars saved in avoided property damage and firefighting costs, and freezing the funds has really adversely impacted their efforts.

The question I would like to ask, and I will throw it open to the panel, is, you know, first, how do we make sure that we are not making the problem worse with some of the actions we are seeing now? Second, how can we address some of the legitimate concerns that have been raised in the bill that some of the provisions go beyond what would be necessary for wildfire prevention and risk without adequate public input, taking actions that really could hurt the very forests we are trying to save? If you could comment on those efforts to negotiate some of those difficulties, and I yield to the panel.

Chairman MARSHALL. Well, let's just be brief here. We are at five minutes, so maybe one minute for an answer here.

Mr. WEINER. I can quickly speak to the last question, Senator, and thank you for the introduction. I found that when we engaged in the process with Chairman Westerman and Scott Peters to a lot of raised eyebrows from a lot of the conservation community, what we found was an incredibly productive process and a good-faith process in terms of working to identify some of those challenges you raised.

I think we are really heartened that there is a bipartisan group of Senators working to look at a Senate companion bill right now, but I think the bottom line for us is we think that it can continue to be improved in the Senate, and I think that we have good-faith

partners in the House to get that done and make sure that this bill does what it says it will do.

Senator SCHIFF. I thank you. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. We are obviously coordinating with my colleague, Senator Padilla, to try to be a constructive part of those negotiations. Thank you, and I yield back.

Chairman MARSHALL. Thank you, Senator Schiff.

Senator Warnock, you are next.

Senator WARNOCK. Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Many of my colleagues here today represent States that are at high risk for large-scale wildfires. Wildfires are not limited to the West. Atlanta is known as the city in the forest because of the city's dense tree canopy, and about 2/3 of Georgia is covered with forests, putting it at risk for wildfires. In fact, the National Inter-agency Fire Center predicts Georgia and much of the Southeast will be at above-average risk for wildfires over the next couple of months. In the last week alone, Georgia has seen over 4,000 acres burn, and neighboring South Carolina's Governor declared a state of emergency due to wildfires.

Mr. Beum, what are some of the contributing factors that are increasing Georgia's wildfire risk?

Mr. BEUM. Thank you for the question, Senator. You know, our weather patterns are certainly contributing to the wildfire risk. What we are seeing right now in the Carolinas, what we saw in Georgia, we saw at Gatlinburg, there is a number of things that were really, quite frankly, shocking. I worked in the South for a number of years and did not anticipate those type of fires happening in the South, and they do. Climate change is probably a factor. There are a number of factors to that, in addition, the lengthening of the season. Again, we do not really refer to fire seasons anymore; it is a fire year.

Senator WARNOCK. Right. I think climate change is clearly a contributing factor not only to wildfires. I can tell you something else that climate change is clearly causing is more frequent, larger, and stronger hurricanes. Last fall, Hurricane Helene, ravaged the Southeast, including Georgia. I remember spending time on the ground with folks who had lost everything. Helene paved a path of destruction all the way from the bottom of the State to the top, taking down 8.9 million acres of timber with it.

Mr. Beum, can you describe the increased fire risk of fallen trees from stronger storms create?

Mr. BEUM. Yes, Senator, thank you for the question. Anytime we have trees falling in the forest like that, they will start to decay, and you get a fire through there, and they will contribute to the intensity of that fire. In the South, that might take a year for those trees to dry out and be a large woody fuel for a fire, but regardless, that is a significant increased fire risk in the State because of hurricanes.

Senator WARNOCK. Given that risk, how important is swift clean-up?

Mr. BEUM. Very important, sir.

Senator WARNOCK. I ask that question because at this time of increased wildfire risk across the Southeast, the Trump Administration is firing the very workers who are responsible for mitigating

that risk through storm cleanup and proper forest management. Will these firings help or hurt Georgia's ability to mitigate wildfire risk?

Mr. BEUM. As I stated earlier, sir, they will absolutely hurt the ability for Georgia to mitigate that fire risk.

Senator WARNOCK. I agree, and I think we need legislation to require our Federal agencies take on more responsibility to address wildfires. If Congress does not provide them with proper resources and adequate staffing, we are not setting them up for success. I look forward to working with my colleagues to address these shortfalls as we work toward a comprehensive wildfire strategy bill. Thank you so much.

Mr. BEUM. Thank you, sir. I would add just one piece, that through the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law and the Inflation Reduction Act that was passed previous Congresses, infusion to the Forest Service was generational money to address wildfire mitigation. Even so, \$5 billion, north of \$5 billion, that is a down payment in what is really needed. I do not even know what the figure might be, \$20 billion, \$30 billion.

Senator WARNOCK. It is an important point, especially since there are efforts right now in Congress to take that back.

Mr. BEUM. Yes, sir.

Senator WARNOCK. Thank you so much.

Mr. BEUM. Thank you.

Chairman MARSHALL. Thank you, Senator Warnock. Senator Booker.

Senator BOOKER. The grace and generosity of our Chairman and our Ranking Member for letting a guy that is not on this Subcommittee come in. What a lot of folks in this room do not know is that New Jersey is a forest State. Yes, I am glad you all know that. Forty percent of my State is covered by forest, and last year, we had some horrible, horrible forest fires. I know a lot of attention is to the West of Jersey, but allow my Bon Jovi and Bruce Springsteen Jersey pride to come out here and come before you all right now.

What my friend and brother Warnock were talking about, these catastrophic wildfires are being caused by climate change. This is because climate change has led to higher temperatures, extended droughts, earlier snowmelt, which create higher, drier conditions for longer fire seasons, which we are all seeing, and even again, worse conditions in New Jersey.

We know that to combat climate change, one of the things we need to do is actually preserve our existing forests. I have been working with our current Secretary of Agriculture trying to continue a lot of our tree planting efforts, but especially our old growth forests, we just need to get more trees in the ground. We also need to engage in large-scale efforts to reduce the amount of hazardous fuel that has accumulated into our forests, as many people have testified today. Really the massively scaling up of the amount of prescribed burns that we are doing, I think that is important.

Unfortunately, we have seen with an executive order by the President, as well as this version of the Fix Our Forests Act, which passed the House, would do the opposite of this, and are instead focused on cutting down our forests, not planting more. In order to

fix this act, which I think it is important, as everybody said, how we work in a bipartisan way, I believe there is some changes that we need to make, and I want to mention a few.

In section 121 of the bill, this would severely restrict judicial reviews of agency actions. These provisions need to be deleted in their entirety in my opinion. Right now, we are dealing with an administration that will take any action, legal or not that I am seeing, that will only check against those illegal actions in the judiciary, and we need to make sure we preserve that ability.

The second area that I wanted to point out in this hearing was in section 121 which shortened the statute limitations from six years to 120 days. I believe some shortening may be appropriate but do not believe it should be reduced to less than one year. We should not limit who has standing to bring these challenges.

Finally, in section 106 of the bill, this would shift when environmental reviews happen from prior to agency actions to after those actions have already happened, essentially making the reviews meaningless. This bill is already watering down the NEPA and ESA reviews that will happen, but it is critical that those reviews continue to happen prior to projects commencing.

A final concern with the bill that I will mention and really lead into a question is the proposed increase in categorical exclusions up to 10,000 acres. Mr. Houck, if you do not mind because you have the best haircut of everybody up there, can you please talk about what the impact would be on both the environmental reviews and community participation of categorical exclusions were increased from 3,000 acres all the way up to 10,000 acres?

Mr. HOUCK. Yes, Senator, thank you for the question. My experience in Gunnison County, and I think it would probably be applicable to maybe the Pine Barrens as much as the Rocky Mountain West, but the idea that having the communities that are closest to this involved in that process are important. My concern with the watering down or increasing the threshold for these categorical exclusions would be that it does not allow the more robust issues to be discussed in a way where there is upfront input from local government, from industry, and also from other folks in communities that are invested. Then on the back end, what they are going to do is litigate in order to slow things down. Sometimes the idea of going slow to go fast is there.

I agree that there is opportunities for reform. I think that this bill has the seeds of that. When I look at the Wildfire Commission report, it seems to be that would be kind of a good north star to find some direction about how to mold and shape some of the—

Senator BOOKER. Answer me this, and if you answer it as well as that first question, I am going to do a Sense of the Senate Resolution that you can become an honorary New Jerseyan. Can you please just sort of expand on your written testimony, which I thought was really appointed, that NEPA and ESA have not been a problem in developing and implementing vegetation management projects, and say more about what the real causes of the delay in project implementation are in your view? Because I believe we need to cut bureaucracy and get things done, but it seems like you were saying that the delay in project implementation is not the NEPA and ESA.

Mr. HOUCK. What I have experienced in Gunnison County and in western Colorado is often it is the contracting, the time it takes the contracting and getting the resources on the ground after the environmental analysis has been done. That has been more of an impediment to getting good work done on the ground in my neck of the woods than the actual NEPA.

Senator BOOKER. Free tolls on the Jersey Turnpike. Thank you very much, sir.

Chairman MARSHALL. Is that for everybody, Senator Booker?

Senator BOOKER. No, sir. No, sir.

Chairman MARSHALL. Okay.

[Laughter.]

Senator BOOKER. Bennet must pay.

Chairman MARSHALL. There you go. Thank you so much.

Senator Bennet, any closing remarks?

Senator BENNET. No, I just want to thank you, Mr. Chairman. It has been an excellent hearing. Chair, I know you had a million places to be. Thank you. Critically important our country and grateful. To the witnesses, thank you all. It was a pleasure to hear the depth of your knowledge, the depth of your commitment. I think there is a broad view that we can move forward on here. I look forward to working with you, Chairman.

Chairman MARSHALL. Well, thank you, Senator Bennet.

A big thank you to our witnesses again. I know that this was short notice. You gave up personal time. You put this together. Your statements will be reviewed over and your questions as well. The record will be open for five business days.

I want to say a big thanks to our staff members too, both the Ranking Member's and my personal staff. The Committee Members on both sides of the aisle did an incredible job of putting this together, made it a very, very, very productive meeting as well. I think this says a lot, the House Speaker Johnson saying this is a priority to get it across the finish line this early in a Congress. Appreciate the Chairman and Ranking Member of the larger Committee saying this is a priority to have a hearing as well.

What we do not have much up here is oxygen. There is just a finite amount of issues we can get across the finish line. I do think this is something we can get across the finish line, and look forward to working with the Ranking Member and his team as well.

Today's hearing is now adjourned. Thank you.

[Whereupon, at 12:48 p.m., the Committee was adjourned.]

A P P E N D I X

MARCH 6, 2025



To: U.S. Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry Subcommittee on Conservation, Forestry, Natural Resources, and Biotechnology

From: Matt Weiner, CEO, Megafire Action

Subject: Legislative Hearing to Review H.R. 471, the Fix Our Forests Act, and Options to Reduce Catastrophic Wildfire

Date: March 6th, 2025

Introduction

Chair Marshall, Ranking Member Bennet, and distinguished members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to testify on legislative options to reduce catastrophic wildfire. My name is Matt Weiner, and I'm the founder and CEO of Megafire Action, a non-profit organization committed to ending the megafire crisis through a holistic approach to land management, wildfire response, and community resilience.

January's devastating fires in Los Angeles were just the latest, tragic demonstration of the need for bipartisan legislative action to address the escalating wildfire crisis across the United States. I am honored to testify in support of H.R. 471, the Fix Our Forests Act, which passed the House of Representatives on a wide bipartisan basis and represents an essential step toward reversing decades of mismanagement and reducing the scale and intensity of catastrophic wildfire.

Decades of fire suppression with inattentive land management, expansion of poorly planned development in the Wildland Urban Interface (WUI), and the accelerating effects of climate change have created a megafire crisis across the United States. Catastrophic megafires—distinguished by their extreme intensity, rapid spread, and large-scale destruction—are no longer anomalies but a persistent national emergency. These fires threaten human lives, destroy homes and critical infrastructure, and reshape ecosystems in ways that may be irreversible. Their impact extends beyond burned landscapes and communities; wildfires release massive amounts of carbon into the atmosphere, exacerbating climate change and contributing to long-term environmental degradation that fuels ever greater wildfires in a viscous feedback loop. We are running out of time to prevent widespread devastation to communities, ecosystems, and the climate, and legislative action is needed now more than ever.

At its core, the Fix Our Forests Act tackles two key challenges: permitting reform and technology adoption for improved decision making—both essential to scaling up effective wildfire mitigation. While this legislation will not resolve the long-standing workforce and budget constraints that have plagued wildfire mitigation and response for decades, it represents a critical and necessary step toward a more proactive and science-driven approach to wildfire management. We cannot ignore the fact that firefighters continue to be put in impossible positions - and our federal fighters in particular have been asked to do too much, with too little, for too long. A permanent, well-resourced federal wildfire workforce remains an urgent need.

The Fix Our Forests Act directly addresses key hurdles that are worth solving on their own, removing bureaucratic roadblocks that slow down essential forest restoration projects and integrating cutting-edge technology to modernize wildfire decision-making. In short, this legislation will make it easier for the federal wildfire workforce to do the critical work that keeps us safe. By prioritizing landscape restoration and improving coordination across agencies and communities, this legislation lays the foundation for a more resilient future, even as broader challenges remain.

The bipartisan, good faith negotiating process in the House led by Chairman Westerman and Representative Peters resulted in legislation that has the potential to significantly enhance landscape resilience and wildfire mitigation efforts. I look forward to working with the Committee to continue building on that progress and further refine and strengthen the bill to maximize its impact.

The Increasing Frequency and Severity of Catastrophic Wildfire

The growing scale and intensity of wildfires across the country present an alarming trend. While the majority of wildfires burn with relatively few adverse impacts, a small subset of fires—less than 3 percent—are responsible for nearly 90 percent of home losses¹. From 2005 to 2023, over 103,980 structures were destroyed by wildfire.² Looking beyond communities, a spate of wildfires tore through forests in California and killed nearly 20% of all the giant sequoias in the world between 2015 and 2021.³ Trees that had thrived with the regular occurrence of moderate- to low-severity fire for the first several thousand years of their life were killed by the uncharacteristic, extreme wildfires fueled by our relatively recent past century of fire suppression and land management policies.

Recent fires in California provide a sobering case study. The 2025 Fires in Los Angeles County destroyed over 56 percent of all properties in Pacific Palisades and nearly half of the properties in Altadena.⁴ According to UCLA Anderson School of Management, total property and capital losses from these fires range between \$95 billion and \$164 billion, with insured losses estimated at \$75 billion, comparable levels of damage to major hurricanes like Hurricane Katrina.⁵ These fires claimed 29 lives, underscoring the deadly consequences of inadequate wildfire mitigation in the WUI.

Despite the severity of these fires, they are not unique. Wildfire seasons are growing longer, fueled by drought, extreme heat, and excessive vegetation buildup. When paired with extreme winds like the Santa Anas of Southern California, these fast-moving fires exceed the suppression capacity of federal, state, and local agencies, overwhelming firefighting resources and leaving communities with few options for protection and recovery. It is noteworthy that the recent destruction in Los Angeles occurred despite the deployment of 4,700+ firefighting personnel, 6 air tankers, 31 helicopters, and 1,002 engines—a testament to the heroic efforts of CAL FIRE and the Los Angeles Fire Department.⁶ If some of the best trained and equipped agencies at suppression in the world cannot stop fires of certain magnitude, less equipped regions throughout the country don't stand a chance.

¹ Jennifer K. Balch et al., The fastest-growing and most destructive fires in the US (2001 to 2020). *Science* 386, 425–431 (2024). DOI: [10.1126/science.adk5737](https://doi.org/10.1126/science.adk5737)

² Kimiko Barrett, (2024), Wildfires destroy thousands of structures each year. *Headwaters Economics*.

<https://headwaterseconomics.org/natural-hazards/structures-destroyed-by-wildfire/>

³ U.S. National Park Service, July 18, 2023, "Wildfires Kill Unprecedented Numbers of Large Sequoia Trees".

<https://www.nps.gov/articles/000/wildfires-kill-unprecedented-numbers-of-large-sequoia-trees.htm>

⁴ <https://www.latimes.com/california/story/2025-02-21/real-estate-losses-from-palisades-and-eaton-fires-top-30-billion>

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ <https://news.caloes.ca.gov/more-than-7500-firefighting-emergency-personnel-deployed-to-fight-unprecedented-los-angeles-fires/#:~:text=More%20than%207%2C500%20firefighting%2C%20emergency,Angeles%20fires%20%7C%20Cal%20ES%20News>

Addressing the Unprecedented Hazardous Fuels Crisis with Permitting Reform

The United States' historical approach to fire management has significantly worsened wildfire risk. For over a century, federal and state agencies prioritized fire suppression, aggressively prohibiting and extinguishing all wildland fires. Although intended to protect communities and natural resources such as timber, this strategy has resulted in dangerously high fuel loads in many fire-adapted landscapes that had previously burned at regular intervals due to nature and widespread Indigenous stewardship practices. Now, when unintended fires spark in these fire-deficient landscapes, the fires burn hotter, faster, and more out of control, resulting in ever more destructive outcomes.

However, since this is a crisis we created, it is also a crisis we can solve. The expanded use of selective thinning and the intentional reintroduction of prescribed fire and Indigenous cultural burning in fire-deficit forests can help reduce hazardous fuel loads, restore ecosystem balance, and promote fire-adapted landscapes. A recent meta analysis of past treatments found that when conducted in tandem, thinning + prescribed fire treatments can reduce the severity of subsequent wildfires by up to 70% in Western US conifer forests.⁷

As outlined in the Wildfire Crisis Strategy, the goal of federal policy is now to reintroduce “good fire”—low intensity wildfire that clears excess fuels—through vegetation treatments, which “typically involve thinning fuels and removing vegetation to reduce heavy fuel loads that can increase the risk of extreme wildfire events and using a risk-based approach to restore healthy fire to fire-adapted ecosystems.”⁸ Over a period of 10 years, the Wildfire Crisis Strategy calls for:

- (1) Treating up to an additional 20 million acres on the National Forest System in the West, over and above current treatment levels;*
- (2) Treating up to an additional 30 million acres on other Federal, State, Tribal, and private lands in the West; and*
- (3) Developing a plan for long-term maintenance beyond the 10 years*

We are nowhere close to meeting these goals. In fiscal year 2024, the Forest Service treated 803,633 acres across the Wildfire Crisis Strategy landscapes—a record high for the agency—but still far short of what is needed. To truly get ahead of this crisis, we must go beyond the standard 2 to 3 million acres treated annually and scale up by millions more.⁹

There are several impediments to increasing the pace and scale of treatments: workforce shortages, a lack of markets and processing infrastructure for the excess biomass removed during fuel-reduction treatments, and lackluster deployment of innovative technologies. However, one of the most significant barriers is the cost and complexity of environmental permitting. The lengthy, expensive, and bureaucratic permitting process often results in years of delays, preventing critical treatment projects from moving from planning to implementation. In 2002, the Forest Service “estimated that planning and assessment consume 40 percent of total direct work at the national forest level...an expenditure of more than \$250 million per year.”¹⁰ This expenditure has no doubt grown since 2002.

⁷ Kimberly Davis et. al., 2024. “Tamm Review: A Meta-Analysis of Thinning, Prescribed Fire, and Wildfire Effects on Subsequent Wildfire Severity in Conifer Dominated Forests of the Western US.” *Forest Ecology and Management* 561: 121885. doi:10.1016/j.foreco.2024.121885.

⁸ <https://www.fs.usda.gov/sites/default/files/Wildfire-Crisis-Implementation-Plan.pdf>

⁹ <https://www.fs.usda.gov/sites/default/files/Wildfire-Crisis-Implementation-Plan.pdf>

¹⁰ <https://www.fs.usda.gov/projects-policies/documents/Process-Predicament.pdf>

Additionally, it takes an “average of 193 days to complete a categorical exclusion review, 519 days for an [Environmental Assessment], and 1082 days for an [Environmental Impact Statement]” meaning there are often years between a project being “shovel ready” and the work actually taking place.¹¹ When projects are delayed by years, conditions on the ground have often significantly changed during that period and the location, feasibility, and prioritization of treatments often must be reassessed, necessitating even more planning. This is an unacceptable state of affairs given the emergency of catastrophic fire.

In response to this issue, policymakers have taken action to remove hurdles in select regions. The 2016 Water Infrastructure Improvements for the Nation Act created a 10,000 acre CE for fuels reduction projects in the Lake Tahoe Basin, which enabled more land to be treated faster, helping to maintain forest health, create defensible space, and protect communities. In a FY25 budget hearing, Chief of the Forest Service, Randy Moore, stated that Lake Tahoe’s congressionally designated 10,000 acre CE was “very beneficial” to halting the Caldor Fire in South Lake Tahoe, potentially preventing the significant loss of property and lives.¹² The State of California has requested that Congress “Expand US Forest Service Categorical Exclusion authority from 3,000 to 10,000 acres for fire-prone areas in the western US.”¹³

After losing 20% of the world’s sequoias to extreme wildfires, the USFS in 2022 initiated an emergency action to expedite NEPA review to respond to the imminent threat of wildfires.¹⁴ The result was an immediate change in progress, the Giant Sequoias Land Coalition was able to significantly ramp up the pace and scale of work in sequoia groves within the first year of the emergency declaration.¹⁵ Since then, the Coalition has successfully treated 54% of giant sequoia forests for improved wildfire resilience.¹⁶

These examples from California demonstrate that we can rise to the occasion and solve the megafire crisis. What’s needed now is to expand efforts nationwide, and once again policymakers are taking action. *Just this weekend*, President Trump and California Governor Newsom issued similar orders to remove regulatory hurdles and expedite wildfire mitigation projects for federal and state responsibility lands respectively.¹⁷ The Fix Our Forests Act complements these emergency declarations by codifying in statute much needed process to ensure success.

¹¹ Clark, Sara A., et al. 2024, <https://doi.org/10.1186/s42408-024-00301-ylark>

¹² Response to Congressman McClintock, June 4, 2024,

<https://naturalresources.house.gov/calendar/eventsingle.aspx?EventID=416081>

¹³ https://www.cdfr.ca.gov/Farm_Bill/pdfs/2023_Farm_Bill_Priorities_FINAL.pdf

¹⁴ USFS, July 22, 2022, “Forest Service Taking Emergency Action to Protect Giant Sequoias”

<https://www.usda.gov/about-usda/news/press-releases/2022/07/22/forest-service-taking-emergency-action-protect-giant-sequoias>

¹⁵ California State Parks, Dec 14, 2022. “Giant Sequoia Lands Coalition Gains Momentum in Fight to Protect Giant Sequoias Threatened by Unprecedented Wildfire Risk” <https://www.parks.ca.gov/NewsRelease/1133>

¹⁶ Save the Redwoods League Annual Report 2023-24.

<https://www.savetheredwoods.org/about-us/publications/2023-24-annual-report/>

¹⁷ President Trump Executive Order, March 1, 2025, “Immediate Expansion of American Timber

Production”, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/03/immediate-expansion-of-american-timber-production/>

CA Governor Newsom, March 1, 2025, State of Emergency Proclamation to fast-track critical wildfire prevention projects

statewide. <https://www.gov.ca.gov/2025/03/01/with-growing-fire-risk-governor-newsom-proclaims-state-of-emergency-to-fast-track-critical-wildfire-prevention-projects-statewide/>

Categorical exclusions (CE) are one tool that have been used by land managers to get urgently needed projects to the ground more quickly and cheaply. CEs are a National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) determination that certain proposed actions (such as a critical fuels reduction project) do not require lengthier Environmental Assessments (EA) or Environmental Impact Statements (EIS).

The Fix Our Forests Act (FOFA) expands limits on CEs under NEPA from 3,000 to 10,000 acres, providing flexibility to do critical work on the highest risk areas identified by the Wildfire Crisis Strategy *before* areas succumb to megafire. Projects receiving up to a 10,000 acre CE must be identified by a firehatched assessment that complies with applicable forest plans developed with community input, the best available science, Tribal knowledge, and local participation, reducing the risk that CEs will be used for projects harmful to forests.

In assessing the potential benefits of 10,000 acre CEs, we lean on practitioner perspectives. Our board member Kelly Martin—Retired Chief of Fire and Aviation at Yosemite National Park and Prescribed Fire Burn Boss—had the following to say about Categorical Exclusions:

“Categorical exclusions (CE) are a key tool for forest resilience and wildfire mitigation. Currently, there is an over-allocation of funding and human capital dedicated to planning and revising existing NEPA Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) or Environmental Assessment (EA) documents sometimes 5 to 10 years in the making. This favors what seems like endless and duplicative planning efforts compared to implementing beneficial actions on the ground that we know are based on solid science and research. CEs help us streamline the public review process and start putting meaningful projects on the ground faster to meet existential wildfire threats.

Unfortunately, projects done under the current 3,000 acre CEs fall woefully short of what is needed to meet the ever increasing size of contemporary wildfires. Smaller CEs often don’t provide the buffer or resiliency needed to change conditions on the ground at a meaningful scale. In contrast, the value of a 10,000 acre CE is that you’re not just looking at small sections, you’re starting to look at the entire landscape and how it can withstand future challenges to watersheds, biodiversity, and key ecosystem services we deeply care about.

A common mindset around CEs is that they represent a rollback of environmental protections, but CEs are really about accelerating the implementation process for projects that have already been vetted and approved in existing land management plans backed by an EIS or EA. CEs are nothing new, they’ve been an important part of public engagement and meaningful land management actions for years. The CE reduces planning and analysis tiered to existing EISs and EAs and reduces the need for a redundant round of review for each specific project. This is not about returning to clear cut logging, going into sensitive areas, or removing mature growth old timber. We’re talking about targeting areas that are accessible, where intervention can make a meaningful difference to landscape resilience. While forestry in the past, particularly in the early 1900s, often led to negative outcomes, those earlier mistakes should not cloud the judgment of today’s forest management strategies, which are vastly more informed by modern science. We’re not going back to those days.”

In the wake of the Los Angeles fires, it is important to distinguish between the types and goals of wildfire risk reduction strategies across different ecosystems. Whereas many coniferous forests have suffered from a fire deficit—where decades of over-suppression have led to too little fire, resulting in overly dense fuel buildup—Southern California’s chaparral is experiencing the opposite problem: too much fire almost all of which is being sparked by unintended human-caused ignitions (utility equipment, cars, machinery, arson, etc). Now, many chaparral landscapes are burning far more frequently than their natural 30-50+ year fire return interval, leading to ecosystem degradation, loss of native vegetation, and increased fire hazards. This is why prescribed fire, a key tool for restoring fire balance in forests, is less often the land manager’s tool of choice in chaparral. Instead, fire management in these environments prioritizes strategies that reduce ignition potential and improve suppression capabilities for community defense.

Fuelbreaks are one such tool, but their role in chaparral ecosystems must be understood in context. While they are not a panacea—especially in extreme wind-driven events like the Santa Ana-fueled Palisades and Eaton fires, where fire spreads independently of fuel loads—they remain a critical component of fire response. Under less severe conditions, fuelbreaks can slow fire progression, provide vital access points for firefighters, and increase the likelihood of successful suppression efforts. However, their effectiveness depends on aggressive maintenance. If left unmanaged, fuelbreaks can become overgrown with invasive grasses, which thrive in disturbed areas and burn even more readily than native chaparral species, ultimately increasing fire risk rather than reducing it.

While much of the policy focus on permitting reform has centered on landscape-scale fuels treatments in forested environments, fuelbreak projects in chaparral and mixed landscapes face many of the same bureaucratic hurdles. The Fix Our Forests Act makes a difference in these ecosystems as well, by streamlining environmental review processes for critical wildfire mitigation projects, including fuelbreak maintenance. A case in point is the Angeles National Forest, which itself burned in the Eaton Fire. The Forestwide Fuelbreak Maintenance Strategy, an 8,685-acre project, initially began as an Environmental Assessment in 2020 but faced significant delays.¹⁸ Recognizing the urgency, land managers shifted to using multiple Categorical Exclusions (CEs) to expedite approval. These exclusions were ultimately granted in November 2023, allowing work to begin in 2024—four years after the project was first proposed.¹⁹ This example underscores the importance of permitting reform in ensuring that fire mitigation efforts are not stalled by bureaucratic red tape. By making it easier to approve and implement these projects, the Fix Our Forests Act helps improve wildfire preparedness and resilience, not just in conifer forests but across a range of fire-prone landscapes, including the chaparral of Southern California.

Finally, The Fix Our Forests Act expands CEs for hazard tree management adjacent to power lines from 10 to 150 feet and sets automatic approval timeframes (generally 120 days) for some plans prepared under the Federal Land Policy and Management Act. In the wake of frequent utility-caused ignitions, including those in chaparral ecosystems, removing any barriers to vegetation management around electrical infrastructure can be enormously valuable.

¹⁸ <https://www.fs.usda.gov/sopa/components/reports/sopa-110501-2025-01.pdf>

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

Leveraging Cutting Edge Technology for Improved Decision Making

Although advances in wildfire technology hold great promise, available technological services are highly fragmented across more than 50 federal programs, all with strained budgets. Simply put, *the technology is available, but the government currently lacks the ability to get tools and actionable information in the hands of those who desperately need it, when they need it.* To address this pressing need, the recent landmark Wildland Fire Mitigation and Management Commission Report calls for a centralized federal Wildfire Intelligence Center to leverage cutting edge technology and improve the interoperability and effectiveness of the many entities engaged in wildfire work.²⁰

The Fix Our Forests Act establishes such a Center. The “Fireshed Center” provides technologically-enabled decision support across the entire wildfire lifecycle of prevention, suppression, and recovery efforts. Wildfires burn across jurisdictional lines, necessitating cooperation between local, state, tribal, and federal agencies, as well as between the private and public sectors. The complexity of wildfire management across natural landscapes and the built environment demands a coordinated approach that ensures resources, expertise, and decision-making processes are effectively aligned to mitigate risk and improve response efforts. Whether it’s a local fire station, the National Park Service, Forest Service Hotshots, Tribes, prescribed burn association, firewise community, or public health departments, every organization should have real-time access to the best weather modeling, fire-spread and smoke modeling, fire and fuel treatment history, and common operating pictures available so they can plan effectively, operate safely, and collaborate across jurisdictions. The Fireshed Center will help break down silos and create the coordinated, whole-of-government response necessary to reduce the devastation caused by megafires.

Currently, inadequate data integration and decision support for fire and land management agencies result in precious resources being spent on scattered, uncoordinated efforts—often referred to as “random acts of restoration.” By centralizing data collection while broadening data access, providing advanced wildfire risk assessments, and supporting decision-making across multiple agencies and jurisdictions, the Fireshed Center would improve coordination in wildfire mitigation as well. This is more than just an administrative function—it is a force multiplier. To meet our restoration and wildfire mitigation goals effectively, we must move beyond reactive strategies and fully leverage the power of data and technology. The Fireshed Center represents a necessary step in achieving that transformation, and Sec. 302 of the Fix Our Forests Act goes even further to improve performance accountability by requiring publicly available annual reports on hazardous fuel treatments that include information on treatment types, cost per acre, whether treatments were inside of the WUI, and the effectiveness of treatments in reducing wildfire risk. These reporting requirements are an important step towards ensuring scarce resources are funding the highest-ROI treatments with real metrics for accountability.

The 2025 House-passed version of the Fix Our Forests Act includes substantial improvements to the Fireshed Center over the House-passed version in the 118th Congress, many of which address challenges that contributed to the devastation of the January wildfires in Los Angeles. One of the most critical updates is the Center’s new role in assisting jurisdictions with the pre-positioning of wildfire suppression personnel and assets based on real-time risk—a shortcoming that severely hampered the initial response to the Palisades Fire.²¹

²⁰ <https://www.usda.gov/sites/default/files/documents/wfmmc-final-report-09-2023.pdf>

²¹ <https://www.latimes.com/california/story/2025-02-21/lafds-failure-to-pre-deploy-before-palisades-fire-a-times-investigation>

Beyond improving immediate response capabilities, the updated Fireshed Center will provide support for Community Wildfire Protection Plans (CWPPs), wildfire smoke and air quality monitoring, and post-fire recovery efforts, including vegetation and watershed restoration, debris flow prevention, and flood mitigation. While CWPPs are a key tool in wildfire preparedness, their current planning process is slow and resource-intensive. Los Angeles has been working on its CWPP since 2020 and has yet to finalize it—despite having significant resources and technical expertise.²² For smaller, less-resourced communities across the country, this process is even more challenging. The Fix Our Forests Act helps address these barriers by providing technical assistance through the Fireshed Center and Community Wildfire Risk Reduction Program, ensuring all communities, regardless of size or resources, have access to the support needed to reduce their wildfire risk.

While no technological silver bullet exists that can stop 80-mile-per-hour ember casts like those seen in Los Angeles, improved predictive modeling, real-time risk assessment, and strategic pre-positioning of suppression resources can still make a meaningful difference in reducing wildfire damage. High-wind-driven fires will always present significant challenges, but better intelligence, coordination, and proactive mitigation strategies can limit their destructive impact. By equipping communities with better predictive tools, improved coordination, and access to real-time fire intelligence, the Fix Our Forests Act provides critical resources to help cities like Los Angeles—and fire-prone communities across the country—prepare for and mitigate the impacts of future wildfires.

The Fix Our Forests Act also creates a multi-agency public-private wildfire technology testbed program that identifies and advances key technologies in a competitive pilot program. Specific priorities include technologies that would advance hazardous fuels reduction treatments, dispatch communications, remote sensing/detection/tracking, safety equipment, thermal mid-wave infrared equipped low earth orbit satellites, and common operating pictures or operational dashboards. This provision is a substantial step forward in getting critical new technologies in the hands of those who desperately need them, when they need them.

Scaling these solutions as quickly as possible is key to meeting the emergency we are in—we do not have the luxury of continuing R&D and pilots forever. Existing deployments of innovative wildfire technologies have demonstrated their ability to increase the effectiveness of taxpayer-funded programs and are ready to scale nationwide. The Fireshed Center will coordinate with the technology pilot program established in Sec. 303 and streamline procurement processes for wildfire technologies, with the aim of getting these technologies past the demonstration phase and into the hands of operators across the country, regardless of agency.

However, even with procurement assistance, federal fire agencies often lack the appropriate acquisition authorities for acquiring cutting edge solutions from the private sector. These same agencies also lack appropriate budgetary incentives for exploring cost-saving technologies due to the significant separation that exists between fire suppression funding, forest and rangeland management funding, and IT/technology budgeting. To help address these gaps, Congress may wish to authorize existing funding to be used for the acquisition of key wildfire technologies. We are happy to work with the Committee on strengthening the bill's role in getting proven technologies to those who need them.

²²<https://www.npr.org/2025/01/15/nx-s1-5256348/los-angeles-fires-safety-evacuation-improvement-preparation>

Promoting Fire Resilient Communities, Tribal Stewardship, and More

The Los Angeles fires demonstrate how wildfires can rapidly transition into urban conflagrations, destroying entire city blocks even in the absence of vegetation. Once a fire breaches the wildland-urban interface, it can spread from structure to structure, fueled by embers, radiant heat, and direct flame contact. This reality underscores the urgent need for comprehensive community hardening and resilience efforts.

As Los Angeles tragically demonstrates, wildfire is not just a landscape management issue—it is also a built environment crisis that threatens homes, infrastructure, and public health. The intersection of worsening fire conditions, rapid urban expansion into fire-prone areas, and outdated policies has left communities dangerously exposed. Recognizing this challenge, the Fix Our Forests Act establishes the Community Wildfire Risk Reduction Program under Sections 201 and 202. Inspired by Recommendation 1 from the Wildfire Mitigation and Management Commission, this program is designed to improve interagency coordination and provide communities with the resources needed to reduce wildfire risk.²³ The program has five core objectives: advancing wildfire research and science, supporting local adoption of wildfire-resistant codes and standards, assisting communities in addressing wildfire impacts on property and air and water quality, encouraging public-private partnerships for fuel reduction, and expanding technical and financial assistance to at-risk communities. To streamline access to these resources, the bill requires USDA, DOI, and FEMA to create a unified and simplified application process for communities seeking financial or technical assistance. There is room to further strengthen this program to ensure it fully meets the scale of the wildfire crisis, and we stand ready to assist the Committee in refining its provisions.

Additionally, the Fix Our Forests Act strengthens the Joint Fire Science Program by incorporating a new research initiative focused on innovative designs for wildfire-resistant structures and communities. It also establishes a competition to drive innovation in resilient building practices, ensuring that emerging technologies and best practices are rapidly integrated into community planning efforts. Sen. Ben Ray Lujan’s Regional Leadership in Wildland Fire Research Act would build on this momentum by establishing regional research centers across the country.

As wildfires increasingly threaten densely populated areas, it is imperative that fire resilience extends beyond forest and fuels management to include home hardening, urban planning, and fire-resistant construction. The Fix Our Forests Act acknowledges this reality and provides critical tools to help communities prepare for and withstand the growing threat of wildfire-driven urban disasters.

The Fix Our Forests Act also contains several additional provisions that enhance wildfire resilience through improved coordination, resource management, and innovative mitigation strategies. Shared Stewardship (Section 104) ensures that USDA enters into agreements with states or Tribes within 90 days of a request, allowing for greater local involvement in wildfire management and the designation of additional Fireshed Management Areas. Expanding Collaborative Tools (Sections 111–116) strengthens the Good Neighbor Authority by allowing Tribes to retain revenue from forest product sales for restoration projects and expands Stewardship End Results Contracting to support both land management goals and forest product infrastructure. The bill also creates interagency strike teams to accelerate environmental reviews under NEPA, ESA, and the National Historic Preservation Act, cutting through bureaucratic delays to advance critical fuels management projects.

²³ <https://www.usda.gov/sites/default/files/documents/wfmmc-final-report-09-2023.pdf>

The legislation also emphasizes innovative wildfire mitigation approaches. Utilizing Grazing for Wildfire Risk Reduction (Section 117) directs the USDA to develop a strategy for increasing livestock grazing as a tool for fuels management, issuing temporary permits to control invasive grasses, and incorporating grazing into post-fire recovery efforts. A new 2025 provision improves fire department reimbursements, establishing standard operating procedures for timely repayment under fire suppression cost-share agreements, ensuring federal agencies reimburse local fire departments upon invoice submission and encouraging repayment within one year.

These provisions, combined with the Fireshed Center, Community Wildfire Risk Reduction Program, and expanded prescribed fire and fuels management efforts, make the Fix Our Forests Act a comprehensive step toward reducing the severity and impact of megafires nationwide.

Conclusion

While the Fix Our Forests Act is not a panacea for the wildfire crisis, it represents a critical and necessary step toward a more proactive and science-driven approach to wildfire management. This legislation lays the foundation for a more resilient future by prioritizing landscape restoration, modernizing wildfire risk decision-making with cutting-edge technology, and improving coordination across agencies and communities.

Looking beyond the Fix Our Forests Act, wildfire policy is only as effective as the workforce that implements it. Federal wildland firefighters are among the most dedicated public servants in the country, yet we continue to ask the impossible of them—longer fire seasons, grueling conditions, and life-threatening risks—all while failing to provide the pay, benefits, and stability they deserve. The Fix Our Forests Act's inclusion of a casualty assistance for wildland firefighters in the Department of the Interior is a critical step in the right direction, but much more is needed in future legislation, including permanent pay increases and a solution for the break-in-service issue. Without these additional workforce reforms, even the best policies and technology will fall short. Congress must also act swiftly to establish competitive pay, improve benefits, and expand hiring to ensure we have the firefighting force necessary to meet the escalating wildfire threat.

No single policy will eliminate the risk of catastrophic wildfires, but H.R. 471 advances the policies and practices needed to reduce megafire threats, protect communities, and restore the health of fire-adapted landscapes. It is essential that Congress continue building upon these efforts with additional investments in the wildfire fighting workforce, fuels management, home and grid resilience, and emerging technologies. We look forward to working with the Committee as it considers the Fix Our Forests Act and look forward to answering your questions.

Sincerely,

Matt Weiner
CEO, Megafire Action

**Testimony of Frank R. Beum
Board Member
National Association of Forest Service Retirees
Before the Senate Agriculture Subcommittee on
Conservation, Forestry, Natural Resources, and Biotechnology
March 6, 2025**

Chairman Marshall, Ranking Member Bennet, and members of the Committee, thank you for inviting me to testify today. I am Frank Beum, and I serve on the Board of Directors for the National Association of Forest Service Retirees (NAFSR). NAFSR is a non-partisan, professional, and science-based organization of U.S. Forest Service retirees and associates. We represent over 900 members dedicated to sustaining the heritage of our national forests and grasslands and adapting to the challenges of today and tomorrow.

In this moment, we are gravely concerned with the impacts to essential services caused by recent actions to cut the Forest Service workforce. Steeper cuts to staff and programs are expected, significantly impeding the ability of the Forest Service to deliver critical goods and services to the American people. This includes work outlined in the Fix Our Forests Act.

I retired from the Forest Service in May 2024 on the 43rd anniversary of my first day as a seasonal forestry technician on the Rio Grande National Forest in Colorado. I used a chainsaw to thin lodgepole pine forests during my first two seasons. In all, I worked on 5 ranger districts, 7 national forests, 3 regional offices in Atlanta, Ogden, and Denver, and at the headquarters here in Washington. I worked in the woods marking timber sales and taking care of wilderness and recreation areas before I moved into leadership roles - retiring as the leader of the Rocky Mountain region based in Denver, responsible for 17 national forests and 7 national grasslands in Colorado, Wyoming, South Dakota, Nebraska and Kansas.

In January 2024, NAFSR and 36 other organizations representing millions of outdoor enthusiasts sent a letter to Speaker of the House Mike Johnson and House Minority Leader Hakeem Jefferies supporting the Fix Our Forests Act (FOFA). This legislation would provide land managers with tools desperately needed to strengthen the role of states, tribes, local government, collaborative groups and other partners in forest management. The end goal is to leverage expertise, optimize investments, and maximize outcomes. Passage of the Fix Our Forests Act will help Forest Service staff plan and implement more projects that will reduce the threat of this country's wildfire crisis, improve forest resilience, and enhance rural prosperity.

Yet, we are greatly concerned about the ability of the Forest Service to carry out the intent of this legislation, and indeed its overall mission, considering the recent cuts in field-going staff. Additionally, other cuts to staff and programs are expected with the potential large-scale Reductions In Force (RIFs) required by the Executive Order signed on February 11, 2025.

As retired professionals who spent our careers working to conserve the more than 193 million acres of our national forests and grasslands, we members of NAFSR understand the importance of fiscal responsibility and recognize the need for efficiency and cost reductions. We know federal agencies operate within the Executive branch, and the Forest Service has always worked with incoming administrations to implement shifts in priorities.

However, the recent cuts imposed by the Department of Government Efficiency do not resemble an attempt to improve efficiencies, because they do not maintain essential services focused on the needs of the American public. These indiscriminate reductions, alongside nearly 1,000 staff who took deferred resignations and the planned significant Reductions in Force, are hollowing out the agency, jeopardizing the future of America's forests, and, ultimately, the American taxpayers they serve. Furthermore, it appears these drastic reductions were made so far with little or no review of the work these people were hired to do, and no analysis of the efficiency or performance of these individuals.

Ranchers, miners, loggers, campers, hikers, skiers, hunters, anglers, and even people who value clean drinking water will feel the impacts. Our national forests and grasslands are an incredible public land heritage managed for the benefit of present and future generations. Over 180 million people in more than 68,000 communities rely on national forests for their drinking water. Spending by visitors to national forests and grasslands contributes about \$10.3 billion annually to the U.S. economy and sustains more than 140,000 family wage jobs that are the foundation of many rural communities. The Forest Service works closely with State Foresters in the delivery of state programs. The agency also leads the world in forestry research, improving lives in countless ways, making homes safer from hurricanes, earthquakes, and wildfires.

All of this is at risk due to sweeping, indiscriminate staffing cuts that threaten the future of our public land heritage. I have several examples to share:

- Approximately 3,400 Forest Service employees with less than one year of service in their positions were designated for firing recently simply because they were easy targets.
- Many of these "probationary" employees were hired after a bipartisan call from Congress to build staffing to reduce wildfire risk. Removing them from the ranks of the Forest Service puts the agency back 2 years.
- Many of those fired are military veterans, hired through special authorities as a recognition of their service to our country.
- More than 75 percent of those dismissed employees had wildland firefighting qualifications—skills critical to supporting full-time firefighters.
- In Colorado alone, 67 employees trained in wildland firefighting have been fired or resigned in the last two weeks. Two of these employees were the most senior, experienced agency leaders in Colorado.

- Several individuals hired to work on Hurricane Helene recovery efforts on National Forests in the North Carolina mountains and middle Georgia were fired.
- Six of 7 members of the of the timber strike team in the Rocky Mountain region, responsible for 65% of the region's timber sales, were fired.
- We just received word that leases on many of the offices in your states and local communities are being cancelled, forcing the Forest Service to quickly abandon those locations.

While some of these employees who were hastily fired have been brought back to do important work, please do not underestimate how this uncertainty has damaged morale and slowed work in wildland fire prevention, timber management, and storm recovery. Additional program and personnel cuts are on the horizon, and these will cripple the Forest Service. That will make it difficult for the agency to deliver on the promise of the Fix Our Forests Act.

It means thousands of communities will face greater wildfire risks as planned fuel reduction projects go uncompleted. It means businesses reliant on forest-related goods and services will suffer, and it means the agency will struggle to meet the Administration's goal of wood independence. It also means campgrounds will close, visitor centers will reduce or eliminate services, and trails and roads will be blocked by fallen trees. Communities, especially rural ones, will lose not just economic opportunities but also the dedicated public servants who live and work there.

A point about these public servants: every one of them took an oath – the same oath taken by members of Congress – to protect and defend the Constitution and faithfully discharge their duties. They are real people - family, friends and neighbors - dedicated to caring for the land and delivering services to the American people.

If the Forest Service is hollowed out to the point of no longer being able to provide essential services and programs, there may be calls to move these treasured National Forest System lands to states, counties or private ownership. This would be a tragedy.

President Teddy Roosevelt had it right: public lands belong to all Americans and should be managed under federal protection. Roosevelt acted to save America's diminishing natural resources and brought 230 million acres of public land under increasing protection as national forests, national parks, and wildlife refuges. Public lands held in public trust is a uniquely American ideal. They are the envy of the world and managed using scientific principles that have become the bedrock of public land management policy.

Americans love and treasure their national forests and grasslands. Dedicated public servants protect and conserve these lands for all. Without them, our natural heritage is lost, and the intent of the Fix Our Forests Act cannot be delivered.

Thank you again for the opportunity to testify. I welcome your questions.



COW CREEK BAND OF UMPQUA TRIBE OF INDIANS
 GOVERNMENT OFFICES
 2371 NE STEPHENS STREET, SUITE 100
 ROSEBURG, OR 97470-1399
 Phone: 541-672-9405
 Fax: 541-673-0432

Testimony from Tim Vredenburg, Director of Forest Management, Cow Creek Band of Umpqua Tribe of Indians

Chair Marshall, Ranking Member Bennet, and members of the Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to speak today. My name is Tim Vredenburg, and I serve as the Director of Forest Management for the Cow Creek Band of Umpqua Tribe of Indians located in Roseburg Oregon. I am here to voice the Tribe's support for the Fix Our Forest Act. We believe that this legislation provides a dramatic step toward improving forest management and addressing the ever-growing wildfire crisis.

I want to begin by providing some background on the Tribe. The Cow Creek Umpqua is a small Tribe of just over 2,000 members. In 2018 the Western Oregon Tribal Fairness Act partially restored a small portion of the Cow Creek Umpqua Reservation. This is just a small piece of the Tribe's 6.2 million acre interest area, made up largely of ancestral areas of the Upper Rogue and Umpqua River Basins in southwestern Oregon. These forest lands are nested in a checkerboard of Private, State, and Federal lands (Forest Services and Bureau of Land Management Ownership).

Over the last several decades the Cow Creek Umpqua Tribe has witnessed the devastating and lasting effects of catastrophic wildfire. Just in the last ten years, approximately 1.1 million acres of forest have been consumed by fire within their ancestral territory.

These fires have decimated Tribal lands and resources, driven Tribal members from their homes, and significantly impacted the health and welfare of the membership due to harmful wildfire smoke. This is why the Cow Creek Umpqua Tribe has taken a committed approach to management both on and off Tribal lands.

The Cow Creek Umpqua Tribe currently has co-stewardship agreements in place with the Rogue Siskiyou National Forest, Umpqua National Forest, and Roseburg and Medford Districts of the Bureau of Land Management.

In addition, the Cow Creek Umpqua Tribe has served a pivotal role in establishing and leading the Wildfire Risk Reduction Partnership, a collaborative initiative that brings together Douglas County, the State of Oregon (Department of Forestry), the Bureau of Land Management, the Forest Service, private industry, and many other organizations. This partnership was formed in direct response to the escalating wildfire crisis, recognizing that no single entity can effectively tackle this challenge alone.

Through this initiative, the Cow Creek Umpqua Tribe has helped foster greater coordination and shared responsibility among federal, state, Tribal, and private stakeholders. By integrating Indigenous knowledge with modern science, the partnership is working to implement landscape-scale wildfire mitigation efforts, including hazardous fuels reduction, prescribed burning, and proactive forest restoration treatments.

A key focus of the Wildfire Risk Reduction Partnership is streamlining bureaucratic hurdles that have historically slowed down critical wildfire prevention work. The Cow Creek Umpqua Tribe has actively advocated for policy

reforms and legislative solutions that allow for faster, more effective management, ensuring that fire-prone landscapes are treated before the next disaster strikes. We are quite literally in a race to save our forest.

Additionally, this partnership is protecting communities, cultural resources, and ecosystems by prioritizing projects that reduce wildfire risk in high-hazard areas. Leadership by the Cow Creek Umpqua in this effort underscores a deep commitment to long-term sustainability and resilience, demonstrating that with the right tools, we can break the cycle of catastrophic wildfires and restore balance to our forests. For too long, federal policies have restricted management within the Tribe's ancestral area and across the federal forest estate, allowing our forests to become dangerously overgrown and unhealthy. Catastrophic wildfires have destroyed ecosystems, destabilized above ground carbon, choked our communities with smoke, and eroded the lands Cow Creek Umpqua people have stewarded for generations. We cannot continue to address this crisis with tools that are too small for the scale of the problem.

In the forests of Southwest Oregon, historical conditions supported 35 to 50 trees per acre, interspersed with open meadows due to indigenous forest management. Today, many areas have over 1,500 trees per acre, creating an unprecedented fuel load. Fires that once burned in a beneficial, low-intensity way now explode into catastrophic infernos, burning so hot that it can completely sterilize the ground, prohibiting new growth and cause erosion.

Millions of acres across the West have burned, and millions more are at risk. Yet, our response has been far too small. We cannot address this crisis with limited tools. We need legislative solutions that allow forest management treatments at a scale that makes a significant difference.

The Fix Our Forest Act goes a long way in providing several opportunities and tools that are needed if we are to be successful in curbing this devastating and life-threatening trend.

One of the biggest challenges we face is the lengthy bureaucratic review process, which has limited our ability to be flexible and nimble in addressing the growing wildfire crisis. To overcome this, we need adaptable tools such as large-scale categorical exclusions and streamlined environmental procedures. Our goal is to implement forest management and restoration projects at a landscape scale of at least 10,000 acres. We have hundreds of thousands of acres to treat. We urge the Senate to pass this important legislation that helps ensure Tribal lands receive attention and the necessary resources for wildfire prevention and mitigation. We are your partners. If asked and activated, Tribes can vastly improve and grow the impact of our federal land management agencies.

Here are a few other key components that the Cow Creek Band of Umpqua Tribe of Indians and other Tribes strongly support:

The Act acknowledges the significance of Tribal lands in wildfire management. This inclusion ensures that Tribal lands receive attention and resources for wildfire prevention and mitigation.

The Act creates meaningful Tribal representation in discussions and decision making ensuring that Tribal knowledge and perspectives are integrated into national wildfire management strategies.

It emphasizes shared stewardship, allowing the Secretaries of Agriculture and the Interior to enter into agreements with states and federally-recognized American Indian Tribes. This collaborative approach empowers tribes to actively participate in managing and protecting their ancestral lands from catastrophic wildfire risks.

The Act acknowledges cultural burning as a method of hazardous fuels management, as it has been learned and implemented by each individual Tribe. This recognition validates Indigenous approaches to conservation and management, that tribes have employed since time immemorial. It is a focus that I'd suggest may warrant even additional strengthening.

The Act creates modifications to the Good Neighbor Authority allowing revenue from timber sales, under Good Neighbor Agreements, to be retained and used by Tribal governments. This provision enables tribes to reinvest proceeds into further restoration and management activities on Tribal and Federal land and helps sustain programs such as those already being implemented by the Cow Creek Umpqua today.

The Act promotes locally led restoration efforts and supports Tribal sovereignty by enabling Tribes to lead restoration projects, ensuring that they align with cultural values and ecological knowledge.

Beyond large-scale treatments, we also need regulatory certainty in forest management planning. The Cottonwood decision has created extraordinary uncertainty for our land managers and existing forest plans. When a new listed species or significant new information arises, entire forest plan can be exposed to litigation, halting essential work. This provides zero conservation value to our forests, listed and endangered species, communities, or Tribes. The Fix Our Forest Act addresses it and could also present an opportunity to refine the language to better address the barriers that lead to woefully out-of-date land management plans.

Without a fix, agencies will be caught in an endless cycle of re-analysis instead of taking action on the ground. We can still do project level ESA consultation and protect our wildlife through thoughtful management; however we need durable forest management plans that provide stability and allow work to continue.

Notably, the Cow Creek Band of Umpqua Tribe of Indians is one of the only Tribes currently participating in the Indian Trust Asset Management Demonstration Project. We have found that by following Tribal environmental review procedures, we can respond far more quickly to these emergency issues, while meeting or exceeding all federal environmental requirements and standards. This stands in stark contrast to the federal policies, processes, and procedures.

We need to fundamentally rethink the way we're managing our federal lands.

The impact of mismanagement is clear in the Cow Creek Umpqua homelands and throughout the West. Of the areas that have burned in the last 30 years, well over half were within unmanaged reserve networks. Fires are returning to the same places two, three, even four times, destroying native ecosystems and replacing them with invasive species.

This is not just about forests — it is about clean water, healthy air, wildlife, and livable communities. Each fire that burns leaves behind degraded soils, damaged fish habitats, and hazardous smoke that fills the lungs of our children. We must stop waiting for disaster to strike before acting. The emergency is already here.

I urge each of you, as members of this committee and Congress, to continue approaching this catastrophic wildfire crisis with innovative, outside-the-box thinking. This is a bipartisan issue that requires strong collaboration, coordination, and communication for us to be successful.

This Committee has the power to provide the tools needed to confront this crisis head-on. That means:

- Expanding categorical exclusions to allow for projects up to 10,000 acres so we can work at a meaningful scale.

- Good Neighbor Authority for Tribes to reinvest in management.
- Fixing Cottonwood so that management plans remain durable and effective – we prefer a permanent fix, but a secondary alternative would be extending the current fix for another five years.
- Cutting bureaucratic red tape that prevents timely action.

These are not small changes—they are essential reforms that will allow practitioners like myself to address the wildfire crisis before it is too late. I think we can all agree that the pace of the U.S. Forest Service sometimes appears to be like watching an actual tree grow. Emergency fire-shed management is very important. But let's make sure that we have a clear, accurate definition of what constitutes the highest priority areas and ensure that Tribes are able to inform those designations. Doing so will ensure that limited resources are targeted strategically where they can best protect at-risk communities and resources.

I encourage the committee to move this package forward in the most bipartisan way possible. Unnecessary controversy surrounding forest management work has become the kryptonite of forest health recovery efforts. We must find ways to educate ourselves and others to garner the greatest support for our work. We must try to bring more people into the fold and develop language with broad support to ensure success.

My state's delegation has personally visited the destruction caused by wildfire on the Cow Creek Umpqua Reservation lands. I know that they stand ready to engage constructively in this process.

For too long, we have waited for wildfires to serve as our wake-up call. But we are far past the point of alarm. If we do not act now, we will lose not just our forests, but the natural and cultural heritage they sustain.

The wildfire crisis is not a distant threat. It is here, and it is growing more severe every year. The choice before us is clear: continue down the path of inaction and watch our lands, waters, and communities suffer, or take bold, decisive steps to implement large-scale solutions that will make a real difference.

Tribes have long been stewards of these lands, managing forests with proven techniques that promote resilience and sustainability. By fully empowering Tribes, streamlining bureaucratic hurdles, and expanding the tools available for forest management, we can break free from the cycle of catastrophic fires and move toward a future where our landscapes are healthier and more resilient, our communities are safer, and our resources are better managed and protected.

I urge this Committee to pass meaningful legislation that empowers those of us on the ground to act. We must move beyond short-term fixes and embrace real, large-scale solutions.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak today. I'd be happy to respond to any questions from members of the committee.

Testimony of Jonathan Houck
Commissioner, Gunnison County, Colorado
United States Senate Committee on Agriculture
Subcommittee on Conservation, Climate, Forestry, and Natural Resources
Legislative Hearing to Review H.R. 471, the Fix Our Forests Act,
and Options to Reduce Catastrophic Wildfire
March 6, 2025

Chairman Marshall, Ranking Member Bennet, and members of the subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to testify today, especially at this key moment of crisis for our Federal land management agencies.

I am a county commissioner for Gunnison County, Colorado, a former public school teacher, and—as many residents of Gunnison County—dedicated to the stewardship of our cherished Federal public lands.

Gunnison County comprises 2.1 million acres, 1.7 of which are Federal public lands managed by the Forest Service, Bureau of Land Management, and National Park Service. To put that in perspective, we are 1 1/2 times the size of the State of Delaware, and 80% is Federal public lands. Gunnison County public lands are home to the state's largest body of water, largest coal mine, a ski area and the source of the marble that was used for the Lincoln Memorial and the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier. In Gunnison County, our public lands are everything to us: they are the foundation of our economy, our culture, our values and our way of life.

We take seriously our commitment to working with our Federal land management agency partners to support the stewardship of these public lands, not only for the residents of Gunnison County today, but also for all Americans, all of whom have a stake and many of whom come to visit, as well as for the future generations of locals and visitors to come.

We are the headwaters of the Gunnison River, the second largest tributary to the Colorado River and the 40 million people throughout the West that depend on it for survival. So we appreciate and respect that what we do here affects our neighbors as well. About two-thirds of the county's private lands, as well as a large portion of the Federal lands, are used for ranching operations. Outdoor recreation is a driver of our economy and our culture. We have an active timber program in our national forest and on other public lands, as well as considerable hazardous fuels, insect and disease management, grazing, recreation, and wildlife management programs. As have other communities around the country, we have seen dramatic wildfire activity in recent years, increasing challenges associated with invasive species, severe drought, growing pressures on our wildlife populations, and, especially since COVID, an explosion in recreation pressures on Federal public lands in Gunnison County.

The Fix Our Forests Act, H.R. 471, is a compilation of provisions making technical amendments to a variety of forest laws, codifying existing programs, granting new authorities, fine-tuning directions, and calling for new studies, many of which have the potential to be helpful improvements.

Unfortunately, it also includes a variety of NEPA categorical exclusions, restrictions on judicial review, and limitations on consultations under the ESA that would be harmful to the science-based, community-collaboration that has been the hallmark of our success in public land decision-making in Gunnison County. We depend on NEPA to guarantee that our community has a seat at the table to work in an informed and cooperative manner with the Forest Service to generate the best alternatives for achieving desired conditions in our forests. We depend on proactive approaches to conserving species so we can avoid listing them and, when we can't, recover and delist them. And while litigation is an extremely rare occurrence, we know that none of that is possible if the rule of law and the potential for its enforcement by the courts is not respected.

Our situation in Gunnison County is both illustrative and not unusual. As just two examples, we have collaboratively developed in recent years two significant science-based, landscape-scale projects to increase forest resilience, reduce the risk of large-scale fires, and provide wood products. The Taylor Park Vegetation Management Project¹ and the Spruce Beetle Epidemic and Aspen Decline Management Response project,² known locally by its acronym, SBEADMR. Both are projects that are designed to be implemented over a decade and cover tens of thousands of acres of national forest lands. They were collaboratively developed under NEPA and in accordance with the ESA, and collaboration is a critical part of their adaptive implementation.³

NEPA and the ESA have not been a problem in developing and implementing those projects. Forest Service capacity to implement them is the problem, with key portions of the project having failed to be implemented because of staff vacancies. Those who know the Forest Service know that the agency has been in a staffing crisis for years. The firing of hundreds of staff in Colorado over the last few weeks has exacerbated that crisis dramatically.

The Wildland Fire Mitigation and Management Workforce Crisis

For those who have been paying attention to the serious workforce challenges of our Federal land management agencies, combined with the rapidly growing wildfire activity and risks to

¹ See Taylor Park Vegetation Management Project; <https://www.centerforpubliclands.org/cpl/taylor-park/>; see also <https://www.fs.usda.gov/project/?project=53662>.

² See Spruce Beetle Epidemic & Aspen Decline Management Response (SBEADMR); <https://cfri.colostate.edu/projects/sbeadmr/>; see also <https://www.fs.usda.gov/detail/gmug/landmanagement/resourcemanagement/?cid=fseprd497061>.

³ In addition to annual field trips and public participation, both projects are advised by Adaptive Management Groups that provide opportunities for community members and other stakeholders to get involved in their implementation.

landscapes and communities, the growing wildland fire management and mitigation workforce crisis has been apparent for years.

Overall, the Forest Service workforce declined nearly 30% since 1995.⁴ The strains on our wildfire mitigation and management workforce represent “a system on the brink”, “a system under strain—widespread resource scarcity, critical resource shortages, fatigue, and burnout”—that, especially given that “climate change, expanding human development, and other factors will undoubtedly increase extreme wildfire activity and exacerbate strains on the system”,⁵ was not sustainable even before the recent indiscriminate firings and deferred resignations. As the Forest Service testified before the House Committee on Natural Resources in 2021, “[t]hese and other factors have caused our Federal wildland firefighting workforce to be stressed like no time in our history.”⁶

The workforce crisis has been well-documented, including by the recent report by the national Wildfire Mitigation and Management Commission, which was chartered by Congress to make recommendations to Congress “to improve Federal policies relating to—(1) the prevention, mitigation, suppression, and management of wildland fires in the United States; and (2) the rehabilitation of land in the United States devastated by wildland fires.”⁷

Although the Commission was not specifically tasked with addressing workforce issues,⁸ it—on its own initiative—identified building a comprehensive workforce as a “cornerstone” for successfully confronting the wildfire crisis.⁹ As the Commission summarized, “increased workforce capacity is essential for sustaining fire response, risk reduction (including the use of

⁴ See Westphal, L.M., et al., (2022), *USDA Forest Service Employee Diversity During a Period of Workforce Contraction*, Journal of Forestry, v. 120 (No. 4) at 436 (describing decline in Forest Service staffing from 49,249 employees in 1995); https://www.fs.usda.gov/nrs/pubs/jrnl/2022/nrs_2020_westphal_001.pdf; USDA Forest Service, “About the Agency” (“approximately 35,000 employees working across the country” at the agency); <https://www.fs.usda.gov/about-agency#:~:text=We%20have%20approximately%2035%2C000%20employees,out%20how%20to%20contact%20us>.

⁵ Thompson, M. P., et al. (2022). *Wildfire response: A system on the brink?*, Journal of Forestry, 121(2), at 121. https://www.fs.usda.gov/rm/pubs_journals/2023/rmrs_2023_thompson_m001.pdf.

⁶ USDA Forest Service, Testimony of Jaelith Hall-Rivera, Deputy Chief, State & Private Forestry, USDA Forest Service, Before the United States House of Representatives Committee on Natural Resources – Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests, and Public Lands, October 27, 2021; https://www.fs.usda.gov/sites/default/files/fs_media/fs_document/20211027-fs-hnrc-npfp-wildland-ff-workforce-jhrivera.pdf; see also, USDA Forest Service, Testimony of Jaelith Hall-Rivera, Deputy Chief, State & Private Forestry, USDA Forest Service, Before the United States Senate Committee on Natural Resources, June 8, 2023 (“it is imperative to ensure a robust year-round workforce available to respond at any time and also be available to undertake preventive actions like hazardous fuels management treatments during periods of low fire activity” and noting that “the USDA, DOI, and the Office of Personnel Management developed a comprehensive legislative proposal that would provide solutions to these challenges”); https://www.fs.usda.gov/sites/default/files/fs_media/fs_document/20230608-senr-wildland-fire-testimony-jaelith-hall-rivera.pdf.

⁷ Pub. L. No. 117-58; § 40803, 135 Stat. 1097 (2021).

⁸ See Pub. L. No. 117-58; § 40803, 135 Stat. 1097 (2021).

⁹ “On Fire: The Report of the Wildland Fire Mitigation and Management Commission” (Sept. 2023) at 157 (hereinafter “Wildfire Commission Report”); <https://cdn2.assets-servd.host/material-civet/production/images/documents/wfmmc-final-report-09-2023.pdf?dm=1696280375>.

beneficial fire) and recovery.”¹⁰ And while this certainly includes the wildland firefighting workforce, the Commission recognized that “numerous agency staff, at all levels of government, are vital to planning and implementing various aspects of wildfire mitigation and management work, from planning specialists to contract administrators.”¹¹

“From a land management perspective, the Federal workforce that supports mitigation activities has seen years of declining investment, due in part to increases in wildfire size and severity that required Federal spending to be shifted to response functions. For the Forest Service, for example, not only have overall staffing levels declined, but staff dedicated to non-fire land management duties have become a much smaller share of that agency’s workforce.”¹²

To address this workforce “crisis”, the Commission recognized that “recruiting must be scaled up to meet both short-term needs and the longer-term goal of creating a fire-related workforce that remains viable and robust in the decades to come”, stating that “strategies should target roles across sectors (i.e., not solely Federal hiring needs and not solely focused on wildfire response) and across the career arc, including entry level positions and mid-career roles that may be better filled by professionals from related but complementary fields.”¹³

The Fix Our Forest Act does nothing to address the workforce crisis highlighted by the Commission and many others.

The Recent Indiscriminate Layoffs of Federal Land Management Agency Employees

In late January, the Administration announced an indiscriminate effort to “buyout” Federal employees who opted immediately to resign from Federal employment. I have been able to gather very little information on how these deferred resignations will affect agency capacity in and around Gunnison County, which is not surprising given the rapid, chaotic, and secretive nature of the program, but it is clear that it will have significant adverse effects. As described above, even before these deferred resignations, the Federal wildfire mitigation and management workforce was already “facing a demographic attrition crisis as more skilled personnel retire or resign without a pipeline of workers to replace them.”¹⁴

¹⁰Wildfire Commission Report at 157.

¹¹ Wildfire Commission Report at 158. *See also id.* at 162 (“Federal land management agencies have a significant body of work focused on proactive wildfire mitigation on lands they manage, which involves a wide variety of staff including foresters, engineers, managers, range managers, biologists, botanists, and others.”) and 172 (“Because of the interdisciplinary nature of community resilience, the Commission’s recommendations are focused on facilitating workforce development and retention across a broad range of fields and include those who are not exclusively tied to wildfire suppression but support integrated program delivery.”).

¹² Wildfire Commission Report at 171.

¹³ Wildfire Commission Report at 169.

¹⁴ Wildfire Commission Report at 169.

For example, the Deferred Resignation Program resulted in the loss of the top two staff in our White River National Forest, which includes lands in northern Gunnison County, as well as dozens of others.¹⁵ Those officials played critical wildfire mitigation and management planning and operations roles, representing many decades of agency experience in leading the White River, which “ranks as not just the busiest, but the largest economic engine of any forest in the country.”¹⁶ They had planned to lead an important effort to revise the forest management plan for the White River beginning this year. As a result of the deferred resignation program, it is a safe bet that that process will be delayed indefinitely, likely for many years.

The recent indiscriminate firings of probationary employees of the Federal land management agencies, including long-tenured experts in fire mitigation and management, have dramatically amplified the devastating impact on capacity.¹⁷ While the administration has been secretive about the details, reports indicate that 3,400 employees at the Forest Service alone were summarily fired.¹⁸

To state the obvious, the recent deferred resignations and firings of probationary employees are inconsistent with the Commission’s findings and recommendations, inconsistent with the efficient management of our Federal wildfire mitigation and management workforce, and inconsistent with our preparedness for the growing wildfire threat. What should also be obvious is that the way these public servants have been treated is simply un-American. Those fired and those seasonal employees who have had their upcoming contracts rescinded are hardworking Americans who mark timber sales, clear trails, perform fire patrol, issue grazing permits, prepare mineral leases, clean bathrooms and assist visitors. They are the stewards of our nation’s public lands. They deserve a thank you, not a mass e-mail falsely claiming they are being summarily fired for poor performance.

¹⁵ See, e.g., John LaConte, “Top official for White River National Forest takes Federal buyout offer: Scott Fitzwilliams opts into deferred resignation early buyout program for Federal workers”, Post Independent (Feb. 28, 2025) (“within the White River National Forest, as many as 20 employees are suspected to have taken the deal,” including the Forest Supervisor and Deputy Supervisor, “although official numbers have not been announced”); <https://www.postindependent.com/news/top-official-in-americas-most-visited-national-forest-takes-Federal-buyout/#~:text=Fitzwilliams%2C%20the%20top%20official%20for,the%20fiscal%20year%20this%20September>.

¹⁶ Jason Blevins, “White River Forest Supervisor Scott Fitzwilliams resigns amid slashing of agency workforce: Fitzwilliams guided the 2.3 million-acre forest for 15 years, helping manage soaring visitation and an annual \$1.6 billion impact in Colorado”, The Colorado Sun (Feb. 28, 2025); <https://www.postindependent.com/news/top-official-in-americas-most-visited-national-forest-takes-federal-buyout/#~:text=Fitzwilliams%2C%20the%20top%20official%20for,the%20fiscal%20year%20this%20September>. See also Jason Blevins, “Colorado’s White River is the country’s busiest national forest, with a \$1.6B impact. But can it keep it up?”, The Colorado Sun (Dec. 20, 2022).

¹⁷ Isabelle Crow, Wide U.S. Forest Service layoffs leave projects delayed, Fire & Safety Journal Americas (Feb. 24, 2025) (“A spokesperson with the USDA Department of Agriculture confirmed that 2,000 mostly probationary workers were fired in the Forest Service, though the union representing them estimates 3,400 are being laid off”); <https://fireandsafetyjournalamericas.com/wide-u-s-forest-service-layoffs-leave-projects-delayed/>.

¹⁸ Marcia Brown & Jordan Wolman, “Forest Service fires 3,400 people after ‘deferred resignation’ deadline passes: The cuts amount to about a 10 percent reduction in the agency’s workforce”, Politico (Feb. 14, 2025); <https://www.politico.com/news/2025/02/13/forest-services-fires-3400-employees-00204213#:~:text=The%20U.S.%20Forest%20Service%20will,them%20to%20be%20let%20go>.

In Gunnison County alone, between the probationary firings and the hiring freeze for both open positions and seasonal employees, the Forest Service's Gunnison Ranger District alone is short more than 50 employees who are critical to carrying out the most basic operations. This is a substantial portion of the agency's total capacity in just one of Colorado's 64 counties.

The loss of thousands of Federal land management agency civil servants threatens public safety, local economies, and resource damage, and it will no doubt result in dramatic long-term costs.¹⁹ Most Forest Service workers who do not occupy official firefighter positions still have firefighting certifications (known as "red cards"), and they are called up by the thousands to help fight fires every season. These red card staff are integral to wildfire fighting efforts, from direct fire suppression and containment efforts to incident command and the many logistical demands of rapidly setting-up a large fire camp in a rural area.

Many non-firefighters are also involved in removing fuels and other projects aiming at lowering a future wildfire's intensity. Meanwhile, trail crews keep trails free of fallen trees and other debris, trails that firefighters need to fight fires. And without planners, none of that work can be done efficiently and effectively. The Administration claims firefighters were "exempt" from recent firings, but the reality is they eliminated hundreds, if not thousands, of employees who play critical fire mitigation and management roles.

We need to invest in our public lands and the agencies that maintain them, not dismantle the very institutions that are on the front lines of keeping our forests healthy and our communities safe. Whether in the context of hazardous fuels reduction, ecological restoration, facilities maintenance, or good, proactive planning, it is clear that the efforts to indiscriminately cut the workforce from our Federal land management agencies will prove very costly to taxpayers, public lands communities, and our public lands themselves. If not stopped, these efforts will destroy our four Federal land management agencies—the Forest Service, National Park Service, Bureau of Land Management, and Fish and Wildlife Service—and, ultimately, our communities that depend on them to manage our Federal public lands. If Congress is serious about addressing the threat of forest fires, start with these firings.

Debating the merits of the Fix Our Forest Act is only a distraction from the real crises at hand. The Fix Our Forest Act does nothing to address the significant exacerbation of the wildland fire mitigation and management workforce crisis that was caused by the recent deferred resignations and firings of probationary employees. It doesn't even include appropriations to support the implementation of its provisions, in one case unnecessarily going out of its way to declare that "no additional funds are authorized to carry out the requirements" in the bill.²⁰

¹⁹ See Mackenzie Bodell & Savannah Eller, "Federal layoffs could impact firefighting, recreation on Colorado public lands", *The Gazette* (Feb. 28, 2025); https://gazette.com/colorado-state-parks/federal-layoffs-could-impact-firefighting-recreation-on-colorado-public-lands/article_a2556c86-f088-11ef-96de-bf8cccb017c3.html.

²⁰ H.R. 471, § 302(e), 119th Congress, 1st Session (Engrossed in the House).

Restrictions on Seeking Judicial Review

Section 121 of the Fix Our Forests Act includes problematic “limitations” on judicial review, one of which would limit potential litigants to filing claims within 120 days. In our experience in Gunnison County and Colorado, litigation over forest projects is a rare, but essential, tool for local communities. Afterall, it is the rule of law—including its potential enforcement—that makes collaboration possible and maintains the social license that is essential to efficient land management by the Federal land management agencies. Especially at this moment, when faith in our institutions of government is being challenged and the basic tenets of adherence to the rule of law are being tested, we should not be adding limitations on judicial enforcement of the law.

We should also be clear that the limitations on the public seeking judicial review proposed in section 121 would be just the beginning—not the end. As should be obvious from the repeated expansions of categorical exclusions exemplified by section 106 of the bill, we can fully expect that the proposed path to limiting claims to 120 days begun in section 121 today, for example, will be subject to a proposal to further restrict it to 90 days in the next session, 60 days in the following, etc.

NEPA Categorical Exclusions

Today, the Forest Service categorically excludes about 87% of its projects from NEPA analysis.²¹ If the categorical exclusions proposed in the Fix Our Forests Act were enacted, public participation and environmental analysis for vegetation management projects could effectively be excluded entirely. For reference, of the 20,515 total hazardous fuels treatments completed by USDA and DOI across Colorado since 1984, only 23—or about 0.1%—exceeded the 10,000-acre limitations of a number of the categorical exclusions proposed in the bill.²²

This is despite the fact that the Wildfire Mitigation and Management Commission was “in general agreement that planning, including robust public engagement and effective analysis of environmental impacts, is critical to wildfire mitigation and management.”²³ But to the contrary, categorically excluded projects generally exclude meaningful public participation in the development of the project.²⁴

²¹ Examining the President’s Fiscal Year 2024 Budget Request for the U.S. Forest Service: Oversight Hearing before the Subcommittee on Federal Lands of the Committee on Natural Resources, U.S. House of Representatives, Serial No. 118-20, at 30 (Apr. 26, 2023) (Forest Service Chief Randy Moore).

²² Calculation based on data compiled by the [SWERI ReSHAPE project](#). The actual number is almost certainly a small fraction of the 0.1%, as most of the large projects in the data cited above did not include mechanical treatments. In addition, numerous hazardous fuels treatment projects are often approved in the same NEPA decision, so the implications of 10,000-acre categorical exclusions is likely to be underestimated.

²³ Wildfire Commission Report at 82.

²⁴ 36 C.F.R. §218.23 (“the legal notice and opportunity to comment procedures of this subpart do not apply to: (a) Any project or activity categorically excluded from documentation in an environmental assessment or environmental impact statement.”).

To be clear, I am not opposed to the use of categorical exclusions. When thoughtfully developed and implemented, they are an important tool for efficient land management. But NEPA analyses are not the main barrier to timely forest management. Indeed, in most cases, “the Forest Service takes as long or longer to award first contracts and roll out initial activities than to comply with the 1970 National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), and that NEPA compliance accounts for approximately one-fifth of planned implementation time”²⁵ Multiple observers, including the GAO, CRS and the Forest Service itself, have concluded that many delays associated with NEPA compliance are caused by factors external to NEPA, “including permitting or legal compliance with other statutes, unstable funding, and inadequate staffing.”²⁶ As a result, “[a] surprising number of CEs take longer to complete than the median completion time for an EA.”²⁷

And when arbitrarily established or used inappropriately, CEs exclude the public from productive engagement in Federal land management, they erode the agencies’ social license, and they can lead to inefficient, ineffective, and shortsighted management activities.²⁸ In sum, legislatively-established categorical exclusions are “a politically convenient strategy with high risks under a changing climate future, historic inequity and government mistrust.”²⁹

As far as I am aware, no analyses have been conducted to determine whether the categorical exclusions that would be established by the Fix Our Forests Act would in fact “not significantly affect the quality of the human environment,” as specifically required by the amendments to NEPA passed by Congress in 2023.³⁰ It seems dubious that they would, as they would legislatively establish multiple categorical exclusions for logging and other vegetation management across up to 10,000 acres—15.6 square miles—of National Forest System lands at a time.³¹

And this is all proposed as the Administration recently issued an interim final rule to revoke CEQs NEPA regulations,³² upon which agency NEPA practice has been based for some 45 years. And on March 1st, the president issued an executive order directing that “[w]ithin 180 days of the date of this order, the Secretary of the Interior and the Secretary of Agriculture shall consider and, if appropriate and consistent with applicable law, adopt categorical exclusions administratively established by other agencies to comply with the National Environmental Policy Act and reduce unnecessarily lengthy processes and associated costs related to administrative

²⁵ Struthers, C.L., et al. Environmental impact assessments not the main barrier to timely forest management in the United States, *Nature Sustainability*, v. 6, at 1542 (Oct. 5, 2023); <https://www.nature.com/articles/s41893-023-01218-1>.

²⁶ Ruple, J. C., et al., Evidence-Based Recommendations for Improving National Environmental Policy Act Implementation, 47 *Columbia Journal of Environmental Law* 273, 299-310 (2022); <https://doi.org/10.52214/cjel.v47iS.9479>.

²⁷ Ruple, J. C., et al., *supra* at 280.

²⁸ Holly Parker Curry, Swallowing the Rule: Exploring Categorical Exclusions in National Forests, 102 *J. Land Use* 101, 115 (2021).

²⁹ Struthers, et al., *supra*, at 1544.

³⁰ 42 U.S.C. 4336e(1) (as amended by Public Law 118-5).

³¹ H.R. 471, § 106, 119th Congress, 1st Session (Engrossed in the House).

³² Council on Environmental Quality, Removal of National Environmental Policy Act Implementing Regulations: Interim Final Rule, 90 Fed. Reg. 10,610 (Feb 25, 2025).

approvals for timber production, forest management, and wildfire risk reduction treatments.”³³ As a result of these actions, the real-world implications of legislatively establishing these categorical exclusions, including their impacts to our national forests and our communities, remain very unclear. And the context in which these dramatic proposals were drafted and debated in the House has itself changed dramatically, calling for the Senate to take a wholesale reevaluation of the bill.

There are other ways to increase the speed and efficiency that hazardous fuels projects are carried out. As mentioned above, it typically takes the Forest Service as long to award a first contract as it does to carry out a NEPA analysis. The same goes for contractors to actually begin conducting activities under a contract once it is awarded.³⁴

According to the Wildfire Mitigation and Management Commission, “lack of capacity and staff turnover are major contributing factors to delays in planning and implementation.”³⁵ “Between 1992 and 2018, the number of Interdisciplinary Team leads positions decreased by 45 percent, with other positions involved with planning and analysis also declining, including foresters (74 percent decrease), forestry technicians (49 percent decrease), and engineering technicians (72 percent decrease).”³⁶ Of course, this lack of capacity has been dramatically exacerbated by the recent deferred retirements and firings, as described above.

The Commission also recommended, for example, “the development and funding of employee training, use of performance measures that value collaboration, and the explicit inclusion of collaborative activities in employees’ programs of work and job descriptions. Collaboration with communities during environmental planning and analysis is especially essential in places with a history of low trust between the Federal government and the public.”³⁷

As one set of expert commentators concluded (consistent with others) after an exhaustive study, “[f]orcing a project that merits analysis in an EIS into an EA may not result in a faster decision, and CEs are not synonymous with swift decisions. Reforms should focus on identifying efficient strategies for analyzing complex and controversial projects rather than forcing analyses into a lower level of review.”³⁸ “[R]educed agency capacity, inadequate funding, and low prioritization of NEPA-related activities like planning and monitoring cause delays. Without stabilizing agency capacity and providing secure agency funding for NEPA-related activities, even the most elegantly drafted NEPA reforms will falter.”³⁹

The Fix Our Forests Act does little or nothing to address these more critical needs and opportunities.

³³ Executive Order, “Immediate Expansion of American Timber Production” (Mar. 1, 2025); <https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/03/immediate-expansion-of-american-timber-production/>.

³⁴ Struthers, *et al.*, *supra*, at 1543.

³⁵ Wildfire Commission Report at 80.

³⁶ Wildfire Commission Report at 80.

³⁷ Wildfire Commission Report at 81 (reference omitted).

³⁸ Ruple, J.C., *et al.*, *supra*, at 332.

³⁹ Ruple, J.C., *et al.*, *supra*, at 332.

Endangered Species Act Consultations

Section 122 of the Fix Our Forest Act would override requirements for reinitiating ESA consultations on land management plans when new species are listed or critical new information is available. Congress clarified these requirements in 2018,⁴⁰ and the applicable regulations have since been amended to further address the issue.⁴¹

As far as I am aware, this has not been an issue in Colorado, and, according to the Congressional Research Service (CRS), the significance of this issue elsewhere remains unclear because the Forest Service has provided limited data on the subject (despite 10 years of scrutiny).⁴² From data that is available, CRS “was unable to identify any noticeable difference in the overall volume of timber sold or harvested across the entire NFS and between the NFS units covered by the Ninth Circuit relative to other NFS units.”⁴³ CRS suggested that “[a] robust statistical analysis may reveal trends and identify the related causal factors. This may be an area of interest to academic researchers. Alternatively, Congress could consider requesting the Government Accountability Office conduct an official audit.”⁴⁴ As far as I am aware, Congress has not done so. The Fix Our Forests Act does not.

What I can say from our experience in Gunnison County is that proactive approaches to conserving species so we can avoid listing them, and, when we don’t, recover and delist them, are critical. While cutting corners may seem expedient in the short-term, in the long-term that can erode species conservation, resulting in greater restrictions for communities and for longer periods of time. The focus should be on what consultation and planning processes will lead to proactive approaches that will efficiently and effectively result in species recovery and delisting, while avoiding unnecessary restrictions and negative impacts on communities. The broad waivers in section 122, unlike the more balanced approaches reflected in the 2018 legislation and the recent amendments to agency regulations, do not seem to strike that balance.

Conclusion

In other times, the issues compiled in the Fix Our Forests Act would be of significant interest to Gunnison County. But right now, there are critical things we need from Congress regarding our

⁴⁰ Pub. L. 115-141, § 208, 132 Stat. 1065 (2018).

⁴¹ Congressional Research Service, *supra*, at 14.

⁴² Congressional Research Service, Legal and Practical Implications of the Ninth Circuit’s Cottonwood Environmental Law Center v. U.S. Forest Service Decision Under the Endangered Species Act at 16 (Aug. 2, 2022); <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/R/R47201/3>. See also Testimony of Susan Jane M. Brown, Western Environmental Law Center, U.S. House of Representatives Natural Resources Committee, Subcommittee on Federal Lands Legislative Hearing on H.R. 200, H.R. 1473, H.R. 1567, and H.R. 1586 (Mar. 23, 2023) (concluding, based on available data summarized in the testimony, that “[t]he ‘problem’ allegedly posed by *Cottonwood* is, in fact, much ado about very little and does not warrant congressional intervention involving the nation’s premier wildlife conservation law”); https://naturalresources.house.gov/uploadedfiles/testimony_brown.pdf.

⁴³ Congressional Research Service, *supra*, at 17.

⁴⁴ Congressional Research Service, *supra*, at 17.

public lands, and the Fix Our Forests Act simply is not among them. My list of things we desperately need from Congress for our public lands right now is short, but critical.

Numbers one, two, three, and four: stop the destructive, arbitrary, and inhumane firings of our Federal land managers at the Forest Service, the National Park Service, the Bureau of Land Management, and the Fish and Wildlife Service. We can and should, as always, work with experts, state and local governments, and others to identify areas for increased efficiency *and* needed increases in capacity. But we cannot ignore the reality that climate change, population and development growth in the wildland-urban interface, the increasing cost of living, the growing challenges from invasive species, and other factors are *increasing* the need for agency capacity to steward our public lands.

And I will add two more that are on our list for Gunnison and other counties across Colorado. Pass the Colorado Outdoor Economy and Recreation Act. The CORE Act represents the culmination of 50 years of work by our community to protect our watershed and our economy. It has broad support across the state (including by every county where its provisions touch down), was reported with bipartisan support from the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee, and has passed the House, with bipartisan support, multiple times. And we are anxious for the Gunnison Outdoor Resources Protection Act, newly introduced in the last Congress, to follow closely behind. That, too, represents many years of local collaboration among diverse stakeholders to advance critical public land management in and around Gunnison County. Thank you, Senator Bennet, for continuing to champion the CORE and GORP Acts.

Finally, please continue to fully fund the PILT and the Secure Rural Schools programs, which provide essential resources to counties like mine across the country to help sustain essential county services and their critical roles in public land stewardship.

This, not the Fix Our Forests Act, is the critical work that desperately needs attention. This is the work that supports communities and protects landscapes. None of it should be controversial or partisan—it certainly isn't in Gunnison County.



Testimony of Robert Gordon, Senior Vice President of the
American Property Casualty Insurance Association (APCIA)

To The U.S. Senate Agriculture, Nutrition,
& Forestry Subcommittee on Conservation, Forestry,
Natural Resources, and Biotechnology

Legislative Hearing to Review H.R. 471, The Fix Our Forests Act,
and Options to Reduce Catastrophic Wildfire

March 6, 2025

**Testimony of Robert Gordon, Senior Vice President of the
American Property Casualty Insurance Association (APCIA)**

**To The U.S. Senate Agriculture, Nutrition,
& Forestry Subcommittee on Conservation, Forestry,
Natural Resources, and Biotechnology**

**Legislative Hearing to Review H.R. 471, The Fix Our Forests Act,
and Options to Reduce Catastrophic Wildfire**

Chairman Marshall and Ranking Member Bennet, thank you for holding today's hearing to examine the Fix Our Forests Act, H.R. 471, introduced by House Natural Resources Committee Chairman Bruce Westerman (R-AR) and Rep. Scott Peters (D-CA). This legislation passed the House in January with bipartisan support (279-141), in the wake of the devastating Los Angeles fires. Wildfire events impacting communities have grown in severity and number over the past several years, and this hearing provides an opportunity to hear directly from various perspectives on ways to reduce the risk of catastrophic wildfires in the U.S.

The American Property Casualty Insurance Association (APCIA) strongly supports the Fix Our Forests Act and encouraged its passage in the House. Several of the provisions in the bill reflect the findings and recommendations of the Wildland Fire Mitigation and Management Commission (Commission). The Commission's final report to Congress includes 148 consensus-based recommendations, which highlight the critical need to improve federal policies at every stage of the wildfire cycle—before, during, and after fire. Their purpose is to reduce the risk of catastrophic wildfires and the harmful impacts on communities and the environment.

I would also like to share my perspective, on behalf of APCIA, as our President and CEO, David Sampson, served as a member of the Commission, occupying the property development industry seat. I serve as Senior Vice President in the Policy, Research and International Division of the APCIA, which represents 67 percent of the U.S. property casualty insurance market.¹

¹ APCIA represents the broadest cross-section of home, auto, and business insurers of any national trade association. APCIA members represent all sizes, structures, and regions, protecting families, communities, and businesses in the U.S. and across the globe.

Property casualty insurers have long been engaged in efforts to prevent and reduce devastation from natural catastrophes, including wildfires. Further, property casualty insurers are on the frontlines working to help individuals, families, homeowners, businesses, and governments identify and reduce their wildfire risk, promote preparedness, and assist in post-disaster recovery. Following are key principles for promoting greater resilience:

- *Risk Identification* - To effectively mitigate the physical and financial threats individuals and communities face from natural disasters, insurers believe the ability to identify and communicate risk is critical and requires an increased investment in advanced data, tools, and technologies to help understand and prepare for the rising physical threats that climate change and natural disasters may pose.
- *Preparedness and Response* - To promote greater resilience, insurers believe adaptation is critical and will require enhanced coordination and alignment of resources between federal, state and local governments to help educate, facilitate and support community preparedness and response.
- *Recovery* - To recover from catastrophic loss events fully and most effectively, insurers believe improved financial tools and resources must be made available to families and businesses to help manage the financial costs when disaster strikes, while also promoting enhanced resilience to future risks.

The insurance industry has supported the creation and ongoing funding of research-focused organizations like the Insurance Institute for Business & Home Safety (IBHS). IBHS is a leader in the development of evidence-based solutions to effectively reduce wildfire risk and other harm to communities, including its Wildfire Prepared Home program.² This voluntary designation program, launched in California, allows homeowners to take preventative steps to mitigate wildfire risk for their home and yard.

While there are many natural causes of wildfires, such as lightning strikes, humans caused 87 percent of wildfire ignitions in the U.S. over the last decade as more people live and recreate in areas prone to wildfires.³ Increasingly, many regions in the U.S. are experiencing evolving man-made and natural environmental conditions that are making them more prone to burn. For example, federal and

... many regions in the U.S. are experiencing evolving man-made and natural environmental conditions that are making them more prone to burn.

state policies that have led to the buildup of hazardous fuels further contribute to increased wildfire risk, while local land use policies have allowed substantial community development and population migration in the wildland urban interface (WUI) – an area where the built environment meets or intermingles with nature. The collective impacts of such policies have put a growing number of communities directly in harm's way.⁴

² <https://wildfireprepared.org/>.

³ <https://www.nifc.gov/fire-information/fire-prevention-education-mitigation/wildfire-investigation>.

⁴ Increasing Wildfire Risk in the Wild, Wild West (Nov 2022) at <https://www.apci.org/attachment/static/7103/>.

Housing growth in the WUI has exploded in recent decades with local land use policies allowing more homes and communities to be built in areas at high risk for disasters. According to Cape Analytics and HazardHub, from 2011-2020, 22,382 new homes were built in zones at 'high' risk of wildfire.

FIGURE 1

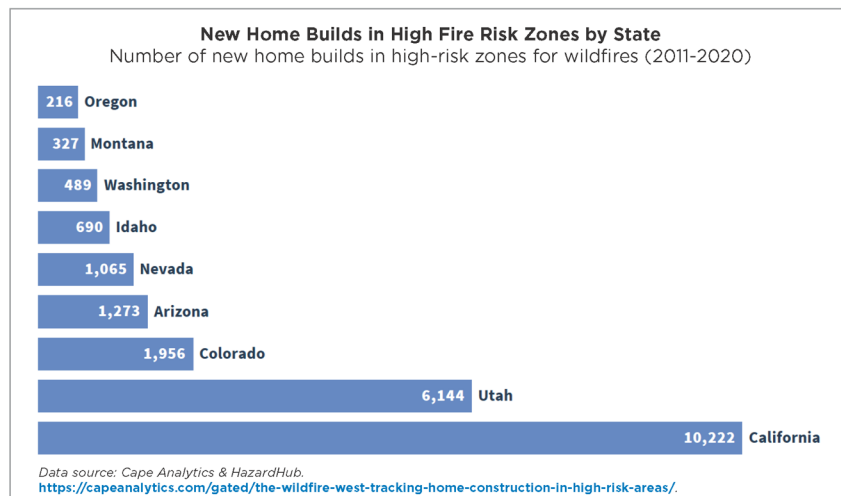
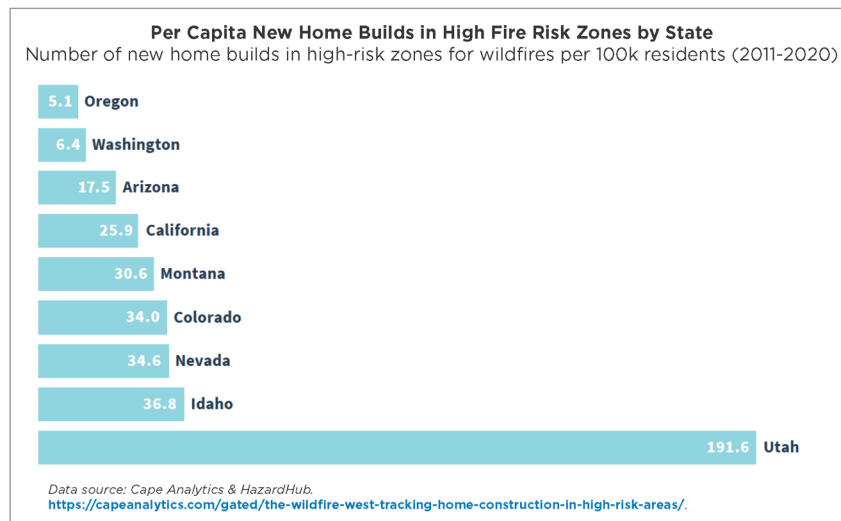
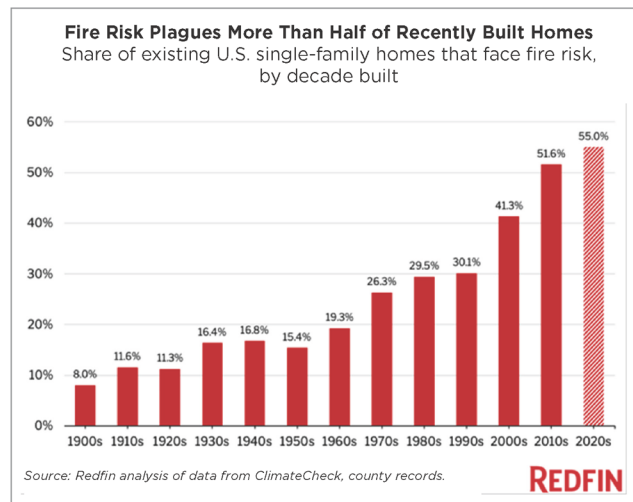


FIGURE 2



REDFIN has noted that 55.0% of single-family homes built in the 2020s face fire risk. While these land use policies may be well-intentioned, their collective impacts have contributed to massive concentrations of risk that need to be mitigated.

FIGURE 3



Separately, the intensifying impacts from climate change and drought are enabling fires to ignite more easily and spread more rapidly, resulting in more catastrophic losses as ember storms consume entire communities in mere hours. Wildfire seasons are longer and more intense, particularly in the West. Many parts of the East, which have nearly 28 million homes located in zones prone to burn, have seen smaller but impactful increases in fire weather putting more people at risk.⁵

The effects of warmer and drier conditions are resulting in increased fire risk.

Additionally, evolving climate conditions are enabling fires to burn at higher altitudes. In a study entitled 'Warming enabled upslope advance in western US forest fires', published in Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences in June 2021, researchers found climate warming has diminished the 'high-elevation flammability barrier' — the point where forests historically were too wet to burn regularly because of the lingering presence of snow. They further noted, over three decades (1984-2017) fires have advanced 252 meters uphill in Western mountains, or roughly 800 feet in elevation, amongst other findings.⁶

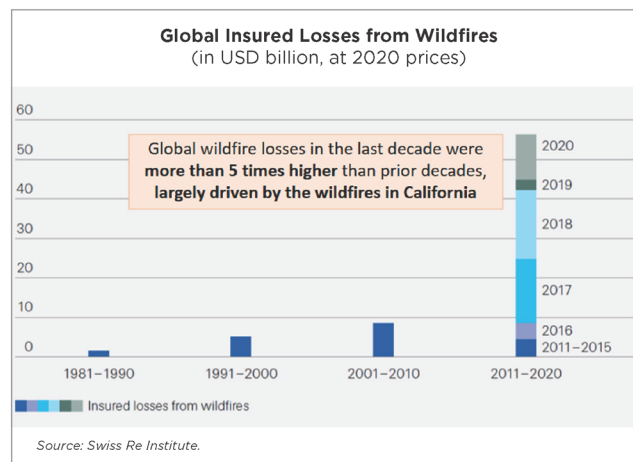
⁵ <https://www.climatecentral.org/climate-matters/fire-weather-2023>.

⁶ <https://www.mcgill.ca/newsroom/channels/news/mountain-fires-burning-higher-unprecedented-rates-331540>.

This was most recently evidenced in California in 2021 as the Dixie Fire became the largest single wildfire in California history.⁷ Conditions also enabled for the first time ever a wildfire to burn from one side of the Sierra Nevada mountains to the other – first through the Dixie fire, which destroyed the Gold Rush-era community of Greenville, only to be repeated one month later after the Caldor fire largely destroyed the mountain hamlet of Grizzly Flats and threatened South Lake Tahoe.⁸

As a result, the U.S. is increasingly experiencing unprecedented economic and insured losses due to wildfire. For example, global insured wildfire losses in the last decade were more than five times higher than prior decades, largely driven by wildfires in California.⁹ Since 2017, U.S. insurers have experienced 8 of the top 10 costliest insured wildfires ever, globally.¹⁰

FIGURE 4



In its 2024 National Overview,¹¹ the National Centers for Environmental Information (NCEI) noted based on preliminary analysis, 2024 ranked as the warmest year in the 130-year record. Nearly the entire contiguous U.S. experienced much-above-average temperatures during 2024, with concentrated areas of record warmth across the Southwest, Deep South, Upper Midwest, Great Lakes and from the central Appalachians to the Northeast. Seventeen states (Texas, Oklahoma, Minnesota, Wisconsin, Michigan, Indiana, Kentucky, Tennessee, Ohio, West Virginia, Virginia, Pennsylvania, Maryland, New York, Vermont, New Hampshire and Maine) had their warmest year on record while all but two remaining states across the Lower-48 ranked as one of the warmest five years on record.

⁷ The August Complex Fire in 2020 is the largest wildfire in California after multiple fires merged into a single fire, becoming the state's first 'Gigafire' – a single fire resulting in over 1 million acres burned. Only three other Gigafire events have occurred in recent history, including two brush fires in Australia in 2020 that combined to burn 1.5 million acres, the 2004 Taylor Complex fire in Alaska which burned 1.3 million acres, and the 1998 Yellowstone fire in Montana and Idaho which burned 1.58 million acres.

⁸ <https://www.latimes.com/california/story/2021-12-13/winter-storms-poled-to-end-california-wildfire-season>.

⁹ Swiss Re Institute.

¹⁰ Aon Climate & Catastrophe Insight.

¹¹ <https://www.ncei.noaa.gov/access/monitoring/monthly-report/national/202413>.

Some notable highlights from the 2024 National Overview:

- A total of 1,117 counties across the Lower 48 and Alaska were record warm (35% of counties) while an additional 1,908 counties, including three in Alaska, ranked in the top-10 warmest for the year (61% of counties).
- Within those counties, more than 300 million people experienced a top-10 warm year during 2024 with more than 140 million people impacted by the warmest year on record.
- Annual temperatures across nearly the entire Lower 48 were much-warmer than average to record warm in 2024. Seventeen states from the Upper Midwest to the Mid-Atlantic and into the Northeast as well as in parts of the South had their warmest year on record. All but two remaining states (Washington and Oregon) experienced a top-five warmest January–December.
- Las Vegas, Nevada reported an all-time high temperature record of 120°F on July 7.
- In Deadhorse, Alaska, the high temperature of 89°F on August 6 broke the previous all-time record high temperature of 85°F set in July 2016. This is also the highest temperature on record in Alaska north of 70°N.
- Phoenix, Arizona reached 110°F or higher on 70 days during 2024 and recorded its hottest summer and year on record. Phoenix also shattered a record for consecutive days at or above 100°F with 113 (previous record was 76 days in 1993).

The 2024 National Overview also highlighted concerning drought conditions. According to the U.S. Drought Monitor (USDM), drought coverage across the contiguous U.S. remained significant for the fourth year in a row. The year began with approximately 33 percent of the contiguous U.S. in drought. Drought coverage shrank as the year progressed and reached the minimum extent for the year at 12 percent on June 11—the smallest contiguous U.S. drought footprint since early 2020. As the summer progressed, hot and dry conditions led to the expansion of drought across the Southeast and Mid-Atlantic as well as across the Plains. By October 29, the extent of drought peaked with more than half of the contiguous U.S. (54 percent) in drought, covering significant portions of the Northwest, Southwest, northern and central Rockies, Plains, Great Lakes, the western and central Gulf Coast states as well as the central Appalachians, Mid-Atlantic and portions of the Northeast.

Such abnormally warm and dry conditions have contributed to devastating wildfires in multiple states in recent years. For example, in 2023, wildfires occurred in North Carolina, Tennessee, Georgia,¹² and the tragic fires of Hawaii – states which are not typically accustomed to such events. Further north, record wildfires in Canada resulted in extremely smoky conditions blanketing northeastern states for extended periods, causing air quality to plummet to “very dangerous” or “hazardous” levels for the first time in some regions.¹³ In February 2024, following an abnormally warm winter in Texas,¹⁴ dry and windy conditions resulted in the Smokehouse Creek fire, which burned over a million acres becoming Texas’ largest wildfire on record. In January 2025, catastrophic wildfires devastated regions across

¹² <https://www.foxweather.com/weather-news/nc-popular-drive-fire-forrest>.

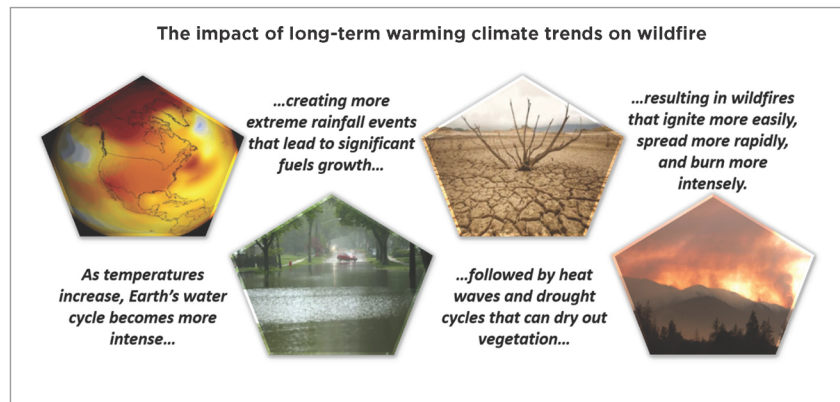
¹³ <https://www.cnn.com/2023/09/17/us/air-quality-wildfire-pollution-allergy-dg/index.html>.

¹⁴ <https://www.texasmonthly.com/news-politics/texas-warm-el-nino-winter/>.

Los Angeles, shattering records to become the costliest insured wildfire loss in history, globally, and the most destructive wildfire in Los Angeles history. The region had experienced extreme swings from wet conditions following two rainy winters that led to widespread flooding and heavy growth of brush, followed by severe drought conditions due to one of the hottest summers on record for the region with no measurable rain for roughly nine months prior to the fires.

Such large swings between extreme heat and precipitation cycles are a hallmark factor of a warming climate. Simply put, this phenomenon that communities are facing will not only continue but further amplify as the Earth further warms, increasing the risk of wildfire in a growing number of states.

FIGURE 5



Wildfire is a natural part of our ecosystem. However, to address these challenges – preventing conflagration-scale losses from devastating communities, natural resources, and ecosystems – the focus must be on the underlying issue – reducing wildfire risk in and around communities. Wildfire research from the Insurance Institute for Business & Home Safety (IBHS) shows homeowners must focus on three vulnerable areas of a home: the roof, specific building features, and defensible space, including a critical 0-5-foot home ignition zone. The primary goal is to break ignition pathways, whether through embers that may land on the home or enter through eaves or vents, as well as vegetation or other combustible materials that ignite and are attached or adjacent to the home. The IBHS notes in its recent report, “The Return of Conflagrations in Our Built Environment”, that as the impacts of climate change increase, dense construction, lack of ignition-resistant construction materials, and dense fuels between structures have set the stage for the built environment conflagrations we have seen over the past decade.¹⁵ The tragedy in Hawaii in 2023 demonstrates the dangers of wildfires are not limited to drought-prone western states. The buildup of vegetation around Lahaina, in particular, was a known threat for years and ultimately culminated in a catastrophic fire that spread through the community.

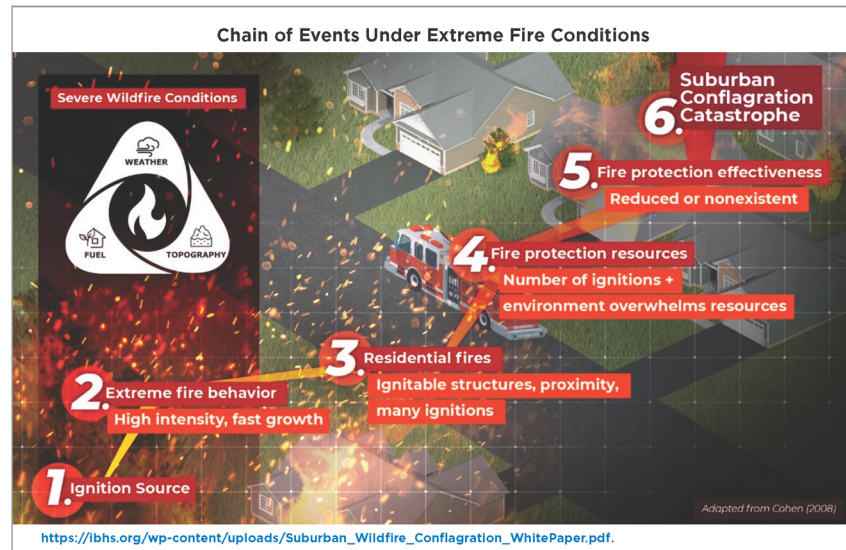
¹⁵ <https://ibhs.org/wildfire/returnconflagration/>.

Similarly, the recent Los Angeles fires occurred in areas prone to wildfire. The risk is predictable and widely known, yet policymakers have continued to allow development that puts homes in the path of fires without appropriate mitigation, such as the region burned in the Palisades fire. "In 1955, the Ventu Park wildfire tore through the canyons above Malibu, burning nearly 14,000 acres and eight homes. The same area saw two large fires burn hillsides and homes over the next three years. There were two in the 1970s, one in the '80s and three in the '90s. This century those hills saw the Woolsey fire, one of the most destructive burns in California history. The Franklin fire, which scorched the hills just last month, has now been overshadowed by the firestorm that followed."¹⁶ Of all the structures destroyed by wildfire between 1985 and 2013, more than 80% were in that fire-prone zone.¹⁷

The science from the IBHS shows that homes can be built to be fire-resistant, through both structural and landscape modifications. Though, these actions must be taken at the scale of entire neighborhoods or communities, not only individual parcels, and vegetation maintenance must become an ongoing priority. Particularly as conflagration-scale loss events occur when the speed of fire spread overwhelms the capacity and response time of our fire suppression resources, limiting ability to extinguish and/or steer the fire away from the community. Whether fires ignite in the natural or built environment, under extreme fire conditions, such as high wind events, only mitigated properties can slow this progression, by eliminating fuel sources and pathways that enable the rapid spread of fire within communities.

The science from the IBHS shows that homes can be built to be fire-resistant ...

FIGURE 6



¹⁶ <https://www.kpbs.org/news/environment/2025/01/16/why-california-keeps-putting-homes-where-fires-burn>.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

The Commission's final report¹⁸ contains several important takeaways for policymakers. The first is that we must shift our overall approach to wildfires from reactive to proactive, which includes investing in proactive planning, mitigation, risk reduction, and the workforce needed to accomplish these tasks to break the current cycle of increasingly severe wildfire risk, damage, and loss. Another important takeaway, and essential connection for policymakers, is that actions taken to reduce risk "must encompass both the built and natural environment."

To protect communities across the U.S. and prevent conflagration-scale devastation, mitigation in the natural and built environment is critical. A holistic approach is needed to combat this significant long-term challenge.

The Commission report identifies policy recommendations to reduce risk in the natural environment such as removing excess fuel loads and safely restoring beneficial fire to the landscape. It also highlights the need to better manage fine fuels that ignite easily (e.g., grasses and shrubs), such as through expanding the use of grazing and other tools that can play a critical role in reducing fast moving fires. These recommendations are important to restore balance in the natural environment and reduce the risk of catastrophic fires.

Adapting communities to be more resilient to wildfire is also imperative. We must slow the spread of fire and prevent transition from the natural environment into the built environment where conflagration may occur. This is critical to preventing loss of life and property and is also crucial in reducing harmful environmental contaminants. The Commission developed recommendations to drive mitigation within the built environment, including promoting incentives for improvements to land-use planning, building codes, and defensible space. Recommendations also focused on continued investments to support hardening utility infrastructure, which the insurance industry supports as a growing number of utility-involved ignitions across multiple western states during high wind events are resulting in the costliest and deadliest losses in history. If adopted and implemented, these measures can help save lives and protect communities from immediate and long-lasting impacts.

¹⁸ <https://www.usda.gov/sites/default/files/documents/wfmmc-final-report-092023-508.pdf>.

The Fix Our Forests Act touches upon several major themes the Commission report identified, such as the need to expand and speed wildfire risk reduction efforts on public lands and built environments, improve delivery of decision support and modelling tools to fire practitioners, and improve post fire recovery. In particular, the Fix Our Forests Act proposes two sections that closely align with two transformational program concepts proposed in the Commission's recommendations:

- **Sec. 201. Community wildfire risk reduction program:** Establishes an interagency program for reducing wildfire risk in the wildland-urban interface and creates a one-stop grant portal for certain wildfire funding sources. The section identifies five core purposes of the program, including advancing research and science, supporting local adoption of code and standards, supporting local efforts to address wildfire impacts including property damage as well as air and water quality, encouraging public-private partnerships for fuel reduction, and providing technical and financial assistance to communities. It also requires the USDA, DOI, and FEMA to create a unified, simpler, and less complex application and portal for community applications for financial or technical assistance. This would effectively combine the application process for many of the current community-based wildfire grant programs.

Commission members recognized that federal efforts and agencies focused on wildfire are currently very fragmented, which in turn has also made it very difficult for states and communities to navigate and access federal resources. To more proactively and comprehensively address wildfire risk reduction in the built environment, the first recommendation within the report is to establish a Community Wildfire Risk Reduction program. In establishing a federal interagency partnership between the principal agencies listed, this could help transform these fragmented efforts by creating a more integrated, effective, and science-based approach. These principal agencies would then coordinate and align with state agencies, local departments and tribes for various aspects of the program.

- **Sec. 102. Fireshed Center:** Establishes an interagency center to aggregate data around wildfire management and to provide cross-government coordination related to wildfire decision support. The center would focus on assessment and prediction of fire in both the built and natural environment, reduce fragmentation across federal land management agencies, promote coordination and data sharing, streamline procurement processes, provide publicly accessible information to support planning for both fire response and recovery, and disseminate data tools.

A significant challenge the Commission identified was the need for greater integration of modern science and technology, to help inform real-time decisions. Federal agencies currently have various predictive services and decision support functions, but they have limited interoperability and dissipated priority-setting and purchasing power. Thus, the Commission recommended establishing a 'Fire Environment Center' to facilitate increased integration of data and tools.

Selected additional Fix Our Forests Act provisions APCIA supports:

- **Sec 106. Emergency Fireshed Management:** Directs the Secretary of Agriculture to carry out fireshed management projects and activities which include hazardous fuel management, fuel break creation, hazard tree removal, routine maintenance, vegetation management or operations and maintenance plan, stand density reduction, chemical treatments, and any activity recommended in a state-specific fireshed assessment or community wildfire protection plan. Allows use of categorical exclusions (CEs) for areas suitable for timber production, as identified in a forest plan or where not otherwise prohibited. This section also expands existing Health Forest Restoration Act (HFRA) categorical exclusions from, generally, 3,000 acres to 10,000 acres. The Secretary of Agriculture is also directed to use additional authorities, such as good neighbor agreements, stewardship contracting, self-determination contracts, and agreements under the Tribal Forest Protection Act to the maximum extent possible.

- **Sec. 117. Utilizing livestock grazing for wildfire risk reduction, including fuels reduction and postfire recovery:** The bill provides direction to the agencies to develop a strategy for the increased use of targeted grazing, including for the purpose of reducing invasive annual grasses. This is strongly aligned with the Commission's recommendation that federal agencies should expand the use of existing authorities and develop new, nimble ways to apply targeted, off-season grazing to treat invasive annual grasses on landscapes to reduce the role these invasives play in the uncharacteristic frequency and severity of wildfire, thus helping to restore ecosystem function.
- **Sec. 202. Community wildfire defense research program:** Expands the Joint Fire Science Program by adding a research program focused on testing and advancing innovative designs to create or improve wildfire-resistant structures and communities and establishes a competition for innovative designs in the creation of ignition resistant structures and fire adapted communities. Also creates an innovation prize for such research. The program sunsets after seven years. The Commission encouraged rewarding innovation in the fields of affordable building material design, subdivision design, landscape architecture, and safe and sustainable building practices to create more ignition-resistant structures and communities.
- **Sec. 203. Vegetation management, facility inspection, and operation and maintenance relating to electric transmission and distribution facility rights-of-way:** Expands the ability of utilities to remove "hazard trees" from 10 feet to those within 150 feet of their power lines and rights of way. The Commission recommended that Congress should direct agencies to support implementation of consistent rules and processes for federal rights-of-way and develop a guide for states to adopt similar rules and processes.
- **Sec. 204. Categorical exclusion for electric utility lines rights-of-way:** Establishes a categorical exclusion for vegetation management, facility inspection and operation and maintenance plans and related activities. (Excludes wilderness areas or areas where Congress has previously restricted or prohibited vegetation removal.)
- **Sec. 205. Seeds of Success:** Directs DOI, USDA, and DOD to develop and implement a joint strategy to facilitate sustained interagency coordination and a comprehensive approach to native plant materials development and restoration, such as promoting the re-seeding of native or fire-resistant grasses post-wildfire, particularly in the wildland-urban interface. The Commission recognized the need to support development of seed capacity and called for additional investment in seed collection, processing and storage, investment in reforestation and revegetation implementation.
- **Sec. 206. Program to support priority reforestation and restoration projects of Department of the Interior:** Requires DOI to identify lands that require reforestation and areas unlikely to experience natural regeneration of forests and report back to Congress on an annual basis on progress addressing these issues. DOI is tasked with coordinating with state, local, and Tribal governments, as well as universities, other federal agencies, and other stakeholders in the process. The provision sunsets in seven years.
- **Sec. 207. Fire department repayment:** Requires USDA and DOI to establish standard operating procedures for timely reimbursement of local fire departments when they are utilized by federal agencies for wildfire response. The Commission found that the slow reimbursement process for local fire departments, and uncertainty of allowable expenses created hardships for local departments and decreased their willingness to lend resources to fire incidents.

- **Sec. 301. Biochar innovations and opportunities for conservation, health, and advancements in research:** Establishes biochar demonstration partnership program to support development and commercialization of biochar. To the extent practicable, biochar demonstration projects are to use at least 50% of their feedstock from forest thinning and management activities conducted on Forest Service or Bureau of Land Management managed lands. The Commission called for an expansion of research and funding for pilot projects for biomass utilization with the hope that further commercialization of biomass products would help defray the expenses of mechanical risk reduction projects, and recommended incentivizing the adoption of new technologies by the private sector to produce value added, and demand-driven innovative wood products.
- **Sec. 302. Accurate Hazardous Fuels Reduction Reports:** Requires annual reporting, available to the public, of hazardous fuel treatment acres on federal land with materials. In determining the number of acres, the Departments of Agriculture and the Interior are prohibited from counting multiple treatment practices as multiple acres and instead are directed to count each acre only once. Activities and cost per acre, as well as the degree of wildfire risk reduction, must also be reported.

The Commission recommended changes to reporting, and noted success should be measured by outcomes such as the number of protected assets, values, and resources, and the degree to which forests and rangeland are returned to and maintained in a more resilient state.
- **Sec. 303. Public-private wildfire technology deployment and demonstration partnership:** Creates a public-private wildfire technology testbed program jointly housed at USDA and DOI to include federal land management agencies, and other agencies involved with wildfire response. Collectively, the program is instructed to identify and advance key relevant technologies in a competitive pilot program with private companies, nonprofits, and institutions of higher learning. The Commission identified the need for the development and adoption of new technologies for wildfire detection, mitigation, response, and related activities, recommending the development of a fire science and technology advisory board to aid this process.
- **Sec. 309. Fire-Safe Electric Corridors:** Allows the Forest Service or Bureau of Land Management to provide standing permission for electrical utilities to cut and remove hazardous trees near power lines without requiring a timber sale.

When it comes to wildfire risk reduction, there is often a focus on forest and land management to the exclusion of issues involving the built environment (homes, businesses, infrastructure). We applaud the sponsors for including language in the Fix Our Forests Act to create a new "Community Wildfire Risk Reduction Program". Recognizing there are 44 million homes at risk in the wildland-urban interface, we encourage additional focus by Congress to improve the resiliency of the built environment, which is a critical piece of any comprehensive wildfire solution, to prevent conflagration-scale losses. An appendix has been included identifying key recommendations from the Commission report that promote greater risk identification, preparedness and response, and recovery.

Thank you for the opportunity to highlight policies that can help reduce the risk of catastrophic wildfires. The Fix Our Forests Act will help reduce this risk and safeguard lives, properties, and the environment. We stand ready to serve as a resource as the Committee works to advance wildfire solutions.

APPENDIX

The Commission's final report includes 148 consensus-based recommendations, which highlight the critical need to improve federal policies at every stage of the wildfire cycle —before, during, and after fire -- to reduce the risk of catastrophic wildfires and the harmful impacts to communities and the environment. This includes better integration of technology, data, tools, and ensuring workforce and capacity.

Below are some selected recommendations within each fire stage to illustrate the comprehensive approach taken by the Commission.

BEFORE FIRE - REDUCING WILDFIRE RISK:

NATURAL ENVIRONMENT

- **PRIORITIZE AND INVEST IN FUEL REDUCTION TREATMENTS** — Invest in and make fuel reduction planning more effective and efficient; change the system of land management agency performance metrics beyond acres treated to actual risk reduced. *[See Report Recommendation(s): 17, 33, 147]*
- **FACILITATE PRESCRIBED BURNING** — (1) Direct Federal agencies develop a strategic plan for the implementation of prescribed fire at a national scale and clarify the extent to which non-federal partners in this plan have Federal Tort Claims Act protection when burning on federal lands. (2) Create a compensation or claims fund for burn damages to third parties that can quickly provide financial relief in instances of escape – also examine whether Farm Service Agency and Natural Resources Conservation Service programs can be used to compensate producers for forage losses due to the use of beneficial fire. (3) Direct EPA, DOI and USDA to work together to expeditiously evaluate current federal regulations (such as the exceptional events pathway) around the treatment of smoke from wildland fire in air quality management programs with the intent of ensuring the programs can accommodate increased use of beneficial fire. *[See Report Recommendation(s): 10, 11, 12, 42, 59]*
- **FACILITATE MECHANICAL THINNING TREATMENTS** — Invest in wood processing facilities and the wood utilization sector as well as programs to help private landowners dispose of woody biomass. Incentivize pilot projects for biofuels and biomass utilization technologies as well as the adoption of new technologies and processing systems to produce value added, and demand-driven innovative wood products. *[See Report Recommendation(s): 19, 20, 21, 27]*
- **FACILITATE FINE FUELS REDUCTION** — Manage fine fuels and shrubs through the expanded use of flexible, targeted grazing and develop new, nimble ways to apply targeted, off-season grazing to treat invasive annual grasses. *[See Report Recommendation(s): 22, 23]*
- **ACCELERATE HAZARDOUS FUELS REDUCTION** — Reduce red tape and accelerate funding to more quickly address hazardous fuels by expanding hazardous fuels authorizations by predetermined amounts above appropriations. *[See Report Recommendation(s): 25]*

BUILT ENVIRONMENT

- **COMMUNITY WILDFIRE RISK REDUCTION PROGRAM** — Establish an interagency coordinating partnership to reduce program friction and create greater alignment and support to proactively address wildfire risk reduction actions and increase ignition resistance of the built environment. *[See Report Recommendation(s): 1]*
- **UPDATE EXISTING FEDERAL PROGRAMS TO INCLUDE WILDFIRE** — Integrate wildfire risk reduction measures and technical assistance into existing programs. *[See Report Recommendation(s): 2]*
- **IMPROVE HAZARD ASSESSMENTS** — Support data procurement and analytic systems to inform building codes/standards and promote ignition resistant construction and defensible space. Evaluate need to refine and/or expand state and national wildfire hazard datasets. *[See Report Recommendation(s): 4]*
- **IMPROVE HAZARD DISCLOSURES** — Require all-hazard risk disclosures for real estate transactions involving all federally backed mortgages. *[See Report Recommendation(s): 5]*
- **INCENTIVIZE COMMUNITY PREPARATION ACTIVITIES** — (1) Create incentives to encourage state, local, and Tribal governments to improve land use planning while increasing accessibility of federal grants for wildfire risk reduction efforts. (2) Incentivize innovation in affordable building material design, subdivision design, landscape architecture, and safe and sustainable building practices to create more ignition-resistant structures and communities. *[See Report Recommendation(s): 3, 6, 142]*
- **UTILITY HARDENING** — While continuing resilience investments in energy infrastructure systems, develop both federal standards for electric utility wildland fire mitigation plans and consistent rules and processes for wildfire management of federal rights-of-way. *[See Report Recommendation(s): 7, 8, 9]*

WORKFORCE, TECHNOLOGY & DATA

- **CREATE MITIGATION WORKFORCE** — Create and train a fire workforce primarily focused on restoration and mitigation, to include a Reservist Program to increase both planning and implementation capacity. *[See Report Recommendation(s): 55, 89, 93, 95]*
- **FIRE ENVIRONMENT CENTER** — Establish interagency joint office (Fire Environment Center) for comprehensive assessment and prediction of fire in the wildland and built environment interface to inform land and fuels management, community risk reduction, and fire management and response. *[See Report Recommendation(s): 104, 105, 106]*
- **EXPAND SHARED DATA** — Support data collaboration to advance modeling and to improve codes, standards, and ignition-resistant materials. *[See Report Recommendation(s): 107, 108]*
- **IMPROVE TOOLS** — Direct relevant agencies to adopt new and existing technologies to improve the mitigation and management of wildfire and establish more flexible means to work with the private sector. *[See Report Recommendation(s): 117, 118]*

DURING FIRE — RESPOND:

- **SUPPORT THE FRONTLINE** — Increase wages and benefits for the federal wildland fire workforce and make permanent the Wildfire Suppression Operations Reserve Fund. *[See Report Recommendation(s): 84, 121]*
- **SMOKE MONITORING AND MITIGATION CAPABILITIES** — Invest in national monitoring and alert systems and public strategies to mitigate smoke impacts. *[See Report Recommendation(s): 43, 44]*
- **STREAMLINE EVACUATION PROTOCOLS** — Provide support for local entities to utilize the best available technology and develop consistent methods for evacuation, including incorporating a new national standard of evacuation terminology based on "Ready, Set, Go!" terminology. *[See Report Recommendation(s): 45, 46]*

AFTER FIRE — RECOVER:

- **SPEED-UP RECOVERY** — Increase the deployment speed of community mitigation and recovery funds for wildfires while also accelerating individual recovery and increasing flexible housing options. *[See Report Recommendation(s): 61, 71, 72, 73, 74]*
- **EXPAND RECOVERY** — Expand FEMA Public Assistance-eligible activities to cover downstream risks caused by wildfire and review/amend existing programs for barriers which prevent distribution of funds to mitigate impacts from higher flows as a result of wildfire. *[See Report Recommendation(s): 63, 79]*
- **FACILITATE RECOVERY** — Expand existing/create new Categorical Exclusion (N12) to include activities associated with post-wildfire soil stabilization and erosion control measures. *[See Report Recommendation(s): 81]*
- **TECHNICAL SUPPORT** — Increase funding and technical assistance to state, local, tribal and territorial partners to manage post-fire recovery. For example, by amending the Stafford Act to allow Section 1206 funding for code enforcement for up to 24 months rather than the current 180 days. *[See Report Recommendation(s): 68, 70]*



555 12th Street, NW, Suite 550, Washington, DC 20004
8700 W. Bryn Mawr Avenue, Suite 1200S, Chicago, IL 60631-3512

The American Property Casualty Insurance Association (APCIA) is the primary national trade association for home, auto, and business insurers. APCIA promotes and protects the viability of private competition for the benefit of consumers and insurers, with a legacy dating back 150 years. APCIA members represent all sizes, structures, and regions – protecting families, communities, and businesses in the U.S. and across the globe.

**DOCUMENTS SUBMITTED FOR THE
RECORD**

MARCH 6, 2025



March 6, 2025

The Honorable Roger Marshall
Chairman, House Committee on
Agriculture, Nutrition and Forestry
Subcommittee on Conservation, Forestry,
Natural Resources and Biotechnology
328A Russell Senate Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Michael Bennet
Ranking Member, House Committee on
Natural Resources
Subcommittee on Conservation, Forestry
Natural Resources and Biotechnology
328A Russell Senate Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20510

Dear Chairman Marshall and Ranking Member Bennet:

On behalf of the newly formed Association of Firetech Innovation (AFI), a coalition of companies driving technological solutions to detect, mitigate, suppress, and recover from wildfires, we write to express our appreciation for your leadership in expeditiously moving forward to consider the Fix Our Forests Act by holding a legislative hearing on the House-passed bill, H.R. 471, as well as evaluating other potential elements of the bill. As you know, the Senate has an historic opportunity to advance bipartisan legislation that will strengthen wildfire resilience and safeguard our communities through innovative, technology-driven approaches.

AFI's founding members—Burnbot, Convective Capital, Fire Aside, Flyseneca, Gridware, Muon Space, Pano AI, Rain Industries, Technosylva, and Vibrant Planet—deploy, develop, and support cutting-edge technologies that enhance fire detection, mitigation, suppression, infrastructure/ecosystem resilience to fire, and post-fire recovery. Such technological innovation enables faster responses, more efficient resource allocation, and long-term strategies to reduce fire risks and rebuild resilient communities—all while delivering a high value per taxpayer dollar by maximizing the impact of public investments, where applicable.

We support the provisions in the Fix Our Forests Act that seek to accelerate landscape-scale restoration work, to drive data-informed decision making, and to leverage innovative technologies in wildfire response. AFI's founding members also support Megafire Action's broader mission to eliminate catastrophic megafires. Therefore, AFI associates itself with the testimony of Matt Weiner, CEO of Megafire Action. In particular, we want to highlight the following excerpt:

Although advances in wildfire technology hold great promise, available technological services are highly fragmented across more than 50 federal programs, all with strained budgets. Simply put, the technology is available, but the government currently lacks the ability to get tools and actionable information in the hands of those who desperately need it, when they need it. To address this pressing need, the recent landmark Wildland Fire Mitigation and Management Commission Report calls for a centralized federal Wildfire Intelligence Center to leverage cutting edge technology and improve the interoperability and effectiveness of the many entities engaged in wildfire work.²⁰ The Fix Our Forests Act establishes such a Center.

The “Fireshed Center” provides technologically-enabled decision support across the entire wildfire lifecycle of prevention, suppression, and recovery efforts. Wildfires burn across jurisdictional lines, necessitating cooperation between local, state, tribal, and federal agencies, as well as between the private and public sectors. The complexity of wildfire management across natural landscapes and the built environment demands a coordinated approach that ensures resources, expertise, and decision-making processes are effectively aligned to mitigate risk and improve response efforts. Whether it’s a local fire station, the National Park Service, Forest Service Hotshots, Tribes, prescribed burn association, firewise community, or public health departments, every organization should have real-time access to the best weather modeling, fire-spread and smoke modeling, fire and fuel treatment history, and common operating pictures available so they can plan effectively, operate safely, and collaborate across jurisdictions. The Fireshed Center will help break down silos and create the coordinated, whole-of-government response necessary to reduce the devastation caused by megafires.

We are highly supportive of the Fireshed Center’s establishment, which would provide decision support across the entire wildfire lifecycle of prevention, suppression, and recovery efforts. This center would leverage advanced technologies to manage “firesheds”—landscapes where fire behavior poses a significant risk and requires targeted intervention. State-of-the-art tools developed by our companies, such as satellite-based monitoring systems, predictive analytics, and advanced data modeling, can provide critical insights for managing high-priority firesheds. Additionally, technology platforms that support defensible space management, fuel reduction logistics, and community engagement would empower local stakeholders with actionable data and resources to mitigate fire risks effectively. By creating a centralized, technology-driven framework, the Fireshed Center will enhance interagency collaboration and ensure that fire management efforts are strategic, data-informed, and impactful.

AFI also strongly supports inclusion of additional language to enable expedited federal contracting with private entities deploying mature technologies today, as well as language that will help create a pathway, in collaboration with a “Wildfire Technology Testbed” to scale successful technologies across the government.

We appreciate the opportunity to submit this letter for the record. AFI and its members are ready, willing, and able to collaborate to generate additional support for these important measures and to ensure their success once enacted. Please feel free to contact Joy Ditto at joy@firetechinnovation.org or Paul Griffin at paul@firetechinnovation.org with any questions.

Sincerely,

Bill Clerico
 Founder and Managing Partner
 and Chairman of the Association of Firetech Innovation
 Convective Capital

Anukool Lakhina
 Co-Founder and CEO
 Burnbot

Jason Brooks

CEO and Co-founder
Fire Aside, Inc.

Tim Barat
Co-founder and CEO
Gridware

Jonny Dyer
CEO and Co-founder
Muon Space, Inc.

Sonia Kastner
Co-founder and CEO
Pano AI

Maxwell Brodie
CEO
Rain Industries

Stuart Landesberg
Founder and CEO
Seneca

Bryan Spear
CEO
Technosylva

Allison Wolff
CEO and Cofounder
Vibrant Planet

cc: Members of the Subcommittee and full Committee

March 5, 2025

The Honorable Roger Marshall
Chairman
U.S. Senate
Subcommittee on Conservation,
Forestry, Natural Resources and
Biotechnology
328-A Russell Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Michael Bennet
Ranking Member
U.S. Senate
Subcommittee on Conservation,
Forestry, Natural Resources and
Biotechnology
328-A Russell Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20510

Re: Support for the Fix Our Forests Act

Dear Chairman Marshall and Ranking Member Bennet:

The undersigned organizations support the Fix Our Forests Act. Thank you for prioritizing this important bipartisan legislation and for your leadership in addressing forest health needs and wildfire challenges. Improving the health of our nation's forested lands and protecting communities and watersheds is critically important.

We represent a broad coalition of stakeholders that includes water providers, farmers, utilities, forestry professionals, and local governmental entities. We are deeply committed to advancing forest and watershed health. We support the Fix our Forests Act and its comprehensive approach to improving forest and watershed health. Enacting this legislation will help protect our communities and address forest health needs by fostering collaboration between federal agencies, local communities, and tribal nations, authorizing common sense environmental streamlining authorities, providing targeted litigation reform, expanding good neighbor authorities, and investing in data sharing, research, and technology.

Communities nationwide continue to face widespread destruction caused by intense wildfires. The USDA reported last year that more than one-third of the U.S. population and buildings—roughly 115 million people and 48 million buildings—are in high wildfire risk counties.¹ In 2024, 61,685 fires burned 8,851,142 acres, the seventh most acres burned in the last two decades.² Wildfire is an important part of a healthy ecosystem. However, the catastrophic wildfires that are becoming more common often burn with a severity that falls outside of historic norms.³ Catastrophic fires threaten public health and safety and adversely affect community resilience and infrastructure. Catastrophic fires can also impact water supplies. Almost 90% of the people served by public water systems in the Western United States rely on federal forested lands for a portion of their water.⁴

¹ U.S. Forest Service: *Updates to WildfireRisk.org Identify Communities with Increased Risk and Provide Resources to Mitigate Wildfire*. May 28, 2024. <https://www.fs.usda.gov/inside-fs/leadership/updates-wildfire-risk-tool-advance-understanding-wildfire-vulnerabilities>

² NOAA National Centers for Environmental Information, Monthly Wildfires Report for Annual 2024, published online January 2025, retrieved on January 15, 2025 from <https://www.ncei.noaa.gov/access/monitoring/monthly-report/fire/202413>.

³ Parks, Sean A.; Holsinger, Lisa M.; Blankenship, Kori; Dillon, Gregory K.; Goeking, Sara A.; Swaty, Randy. 2023. Contemporary wildfires are more severe compared to the historical reference period in western US dry conifer forests. *Forest Ecology and Management*. 544: 121232.

⁴ Liu, Ning; Dobbs, G. Rebecca; Caldwell, Peter V.; Miniati, Chelcy F.; Sun, Ge; Duan, Kai; Nelson, Stacy A.C.; Bolstad, Paul V.; Carlson, Christopher P. 2022. Quantifying the role of National Forest System and other forested lands in providing surface drinking water supply for the conterminous United States. Gen. Tech. Rep. WO-100. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Agriculture, Forest Service, Washington Office. 40 p. [plus supplement]. <https://doi.org/10.2737/WO-GTR-100>.

Forest management resources included in the Fix Our Forests Act are crucial to help control and reduce the severity of wildfires to enhance air quality, wildlife habitat, and more. For example, this legislation would improve water supply sources such as drinking water and rivers, improve water quality by decreasing runoff, pollutants, and erosion, and save costs by reducing infrastructure repairs to reservoirs, pipelines, and treatment plants.

Once again, thank you for your leadership in addressing our nation's urgent wildfire management needs. Improvements made in the Fix Our Forests Act would provide lasting positive impacts on our communities, environment, and economy.

Respectfully,

American Farm Bureau Federation
American Forest Resource Council
Association of California Water Agencies
California Farm Bureau Federation
Family Farm Alliance
Federal Forest Resource Coalition
National Association of Counties
National Water Resources Association
Washington State Water Resources Association



March 5, 2025

The Honorable Roger Marshall
Chairman
Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, and
Forestry
Subcommittee on Conservation, Forestry,
Natural Resources, and Biotechnology
U.S. Senate

The Honorable Michael Bennet
Ranking Member
Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition and
Forestry
Subcommittee on Conservation, Forestry,
Natural Resources, and Biotechnology
U.S. Senate

Dear Chairman Marshall and Ranking Member Bennet,

In advance of your Subcommittee's legislative hearing on Thursday, March 6, the Congressional Sportsmen's Foundation (CSF) would like to express our support for H.R. 471, the Fix Our Forests Act. This legislation passed the House on a strong bipartisan vote of 279 – 141, a sign of the widespread support to combat the wildfire crisis we are facing, and we are thankful to see the Senate hold a hearing on this important bill.

As the Subcommittee is aware, more than 117 million acres of our federal forests are fire-prone and need restoration through active management to mitigate severe wildfire risks. As wildfires increasingly degrade the forests, rangelands, and watersheds that America's sportsmen and women depend on for hunting and fishing access, the need to improve how our public lands are managed, in collaboration with other landowners, is paramount. To that end, the Fix Our Forests Act seeks to come the wildfire crisis by establishing a more proactive management approach through reforms that facilitate increasing the pace of science-based forest restoration work at the landscape-level to improve forest health and resilience to protect communities, conserve fish and wildlife habitat, and improve access for hunters and anglers.

H.R. 471 prioritizes hazardous fuels management on landscapes at high risk for wildfire identified in the U.S. Forest Service's 2022 Wildfire Crisis Strategy and the top 20% of firesheds in the Fireshed Registry, designated as Fireshed Management Areas. Fuel treatment projects, including mechanical thinning, prescribed fire, and cultural burning, will be conducted at scale through categorical exclusion (CE) acreage increases, including insects and disease, wildfire resilience, and fuel breaks, as well as expanding the successful community-supported Lake Tahoe Restoration Act beyond the Tahoe Basin, to treat forest stands at high risk for wildfire. Increasing the acres of the CEs improves efficiency to enable more acres to be treated, and utilizing these CEs is critical

because the time to go through extended NEPA processes is significantly longer, measured in years. The size, growth rates, and severity of fires beseech that policymakers give land managers expanded authorities to reduce fuel loads on more acres in less time because every year that a stand is not treated, fuel loads build and increase the likelihood of catastrophic wildfire.

Forest treatments in Fireshed Management Areas will also take place through shared stewardship agreements with states and Indian Tribes. Additionally, H.R. 471 expands several important collaborative tools that are longstanding priorities for the sportsmen's community, including the Good Neighbor Authority, stewardship contracting, and the Collaborative Forest Landscape Restoration Program, that will improve their effectiveness in reducing wildfire risk in collaboration with states, Indian tribes, and private partners. Supporting collaborative cross-boundary management is critical because wildfires do not recognize man-made lines drawn on a map.

The Fix Our Forests Act importantly addresses the 2015 *Cottonwood Environmental Law Center v. U.S. Forest Service* decision that has hindered forest management projects and threatens to require the U.S. Forest Service to revise forest plans for more than 120 National Forests which, as U.S. Forest Service testified in 2021, would cost millions of dollars and take years to complete. Shortly after the 2015 decision, the Obama administration supported a *Cottonwood* fix and stated in their 2016 petition for writ of certiorari to the U.S. Supreme Court that the decision "has the potential to cripple the Forest Service and BLM's land management functions and to impose substantial and unwarranted burdens on FWS and NMFS." H.R. 471 would not obviate the need for Endangered Species Act consultation the project level, but it would allow projects to move forward without having to revise a U.S. Forest Service forest plan or Bureau of Land Management resource management plan. *Cottonwood's* duplicative analysis diverts limited agency resources and holds up wildfire risk reduction projects, which ironically, negatively impacts wildlife (listed, game, and nongame) as habitat improvements projects that have been enjoined have subsequently had catastrophic wildfires occur in the same analysis area. We appreciate your past work to remedy *Cottonwood*, and we look forward to working with you to overcome the time-consuming hurdles, created by the decision, that delay forest restoration projects without any conservation benefit.

H.R. 471 includes provisions to provide important guardrails for the litigation of forest management projects, which are challenged in court more than any other public lands management project case brought under NEPA. Litigants lose more than 75% of their cases, resulting in increased costs and delayed implementation of critical hazardous fuel reduction work. Without these changes, which do not remove public input, the U.S. Forest Service is unlikely to meet its forest restoration goals.

H.R. 471 requires federal land management agencies to improve reporting on hazardous fuel reduction work, which is important to have accountability to track progress. Additionally, H.R. 471 encourages the U.S. Forest Service to revise out of date forest plans and improve public access to information about forest plans and amendments for every National Forest. Last, the legislation advances efforts to restore white oak species, which are critical for wildlife, by supporting research and pilot programs to improve white regeneration.

In closing, CSF thanks the Subcommittee for holding a hearing on the bipartisan Fix Our Forests Act, which is strongly supported by CSF and many of the nation's leading sporting-conservation

organizations, and we look forward to working with the Subcommittee and the bill sponsors to see H.R. 471 signed into law.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "JWC", with a long, sweeping horizontal line extending to the right.

John Culclasure,
Senior Director, Forest Policy



Testimony for the Hearing Record

**Dan Keppen
Executive Director
Family Farm Alliance**

**Before the
Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition and Forestry
Subcommittee on Conservation, Climate, Forestry and Natural Resources
United States Senate
Washington, D.C.**

**Legislative Hearing to Review H.R.471, “The Fix Our Forests Act”,
and Options to Reduce Catastrophic Wildfire**

March 6, 2025

Good morning, Chairman Marshall, Ranking Member Bennet and Members of the Subcommittee.

On behalf of the Family Farm Alliance (Alliance), thank you for the opportunity to present this testimony today on *The Fix Our Forests Act* (H.R. 471), a bill aimed at increasing forest thinning, timber harvesting, and prescribed burns to reduce wildfire risks. The bipartisan bill, introduced by Rep. Bruce Westerman (R-AR) and Rep. Scott Peters (D-CALIFORNIA), seeks to streamline environmental reviews and limit legal challenges to wildfire prevention projects.

Today’s hearing could not come at a better time. In the wake of the tragic wildfires that devastated swaths of Southern California, we are encouraged to see our elected leaders from both political parties take actions to prevent these types of catastrophes in the future.

President Trump last week issued an Executive Order (EO) that expedites permitting for forest management projects to reduce wildfire fuels and lower the risk of catastrophic fires. California Governor Newsom on Monday proclaimed a state of emergency to fast-track critical projects protecting California communities from wildfire, ahead of peak fire season.

It is encouraging to see this sort of high-level political attention being paid to the critical need of getting ahead of future fire crises through active management of our dead and dying Western forests. It is time for Congress to enact legislation that transcends shifts in political leadership at

the executive level. If enacted into law, the *Fix our Forests Act* will very definitely reduce future catastrophic wildfire risk and improve forest health in the West.

About the Family Farm Alliance

The Family Farm Alliance (Alliance) is a grassroots organization of family farmers, ranchers, irrigation districts, and allied industries in 16 Western states. We are committed to the fundamental proposition that Western irrigated agriculture must be preserved and protected for a host of economic, sociological, environmental and national security reasons – many of which are often overlooked in the context of other national policy decisions. The American food consumer nationwide has access to fruits, vegetables, nuts, grains and beef throughout the year largely because of Western irrigated agriculture and the projects that provide water to these farmers and ranchers. And Western irrigated agriculture depends on healthy forests in the upper watersheds to provide adequate amounts of clean water to our rivers and reservoirs. When wildfires destroy those forests, our water supply becomes less certain as fire debris flows into our reservoirs and lack of tree canopy changes the hydrologic timing and quality of the snowmelt runoff we depend on for our existence in the West.

Frequency, Costs and Health Dangers of Wildfires are Getting Worse

In recent years, severe wildfires are becoming a part of the summer landscape in many parts of the West, and they carry with them increasingly expensive impacts. In 2024, there were a total of 61,685 wildfires in the U.S. — an increase of 238% compared to 1983, when official wildfire recordkeeping began, according to the National Centers for Economic Information. The 2024 fires burned 8,851,142 acres, the seventh most acres burned in the last two decades.¹

The Insurance Information Institute (Triple-I) rated the [costliest wildland fires](#) in the United States. Based on its data, the top five were all in California, each causing several billions of dollars in insured losses. Four of those fires – the Camp, Tubbs, Woolsey and Atlas Fires - have occurred in the past 8 years. The series of wildfires that devastated Los Angeles earlier this year, destroyed more than 16,000 structures. The total damage is still being calculated, but a preliminary estimate from [AccuWeather](#) put total economic losses north of \$250 billion. Together, the Palisades and Eaton fires are forecast to be the most expensive natural disaster in U.S. history.

I live in Southern Oregon's Klamath Basin, where wildfire smoke is making our air unhealthy to breathe, as it is in other parts of Central and Eastern Oregon. Wildfire smoke can also worsen chronic respiratory and cardiovascular health conditions.

¹ NOAA National Centers for Environmental Information, Monthly Wildfires Report for Annual 2024, published online January 2025, retrieved on January 15, 2025 from <https://www.ncei.noaa.gov/access/monitoring/monthly-report/fire/202413>.

The acronym “USG” stands for "Unhealthy for Sensitive Groups" in air quality. It's a level of the Air Quality Index (AQI) that indicates that people with certain conditions may experience health effects. From 1989 to 2014, Klamath Falls had 37 \geq USG days from wildfire smoke, according to the Oregon Department of Environmental Quality. From 2015 to 2022, we had 117 \geq USG days. That is a 10.4-fold increase in days impacted per year. Klamath Falls had its first hazardous AQI day in 2020.

These types of statistics are being seen in other parts of the Pacific Northwest, as well. Before 2015, Portland, Oregon had not had a single day with air quality that was \geq USG from wildfire smoke since air quality monitoring began in 1985. From 2015 to 2022, Portland had 26 \geq USG days or 3.3 \geq USG days/year. In 2020 Portland had its first days over the unhealthy AQI level with three very unhealthy and five hazardous days.

Communities nationwide continue to face widespread destruction caused by intense wildfires. The USDA reported last year that more than one-third of the U.S. population and buildings—roughly 115 million people and 48 million buildings—are in high wildfire risk counties.²

The State of Western Forests

Wildfire is an important part of a healthy ecosystem. However, the catastrophic wildfires that are becoming more common often burn with a severity that falls outside historic norms³. Increasingly fierce Western wildfire disasters are becoming an annual occurrence and underscore the importance of improving on-the-ground vegetation management actions that can lead to improved forest health. Catastrophic fires threaten public health and safety and adversely affect community resilience and infrastructure.

Catastrophic fires can also impact water supplies. Almost 90% of the people served by public water systems in the Western United States rely on federal forested lands for a portion of their water.⁴ Improving the condition of our nation's forested lands is also of primary importance to water providers. Devastating wildfires can impact the water supplies that support farms, ranches and drinking water needs in the American West.

In addition, our already fragile water infrastructure can be severely damaged or rendered useless by wildfire and post-wildfire flooding and debris flows. These burned areas hold no water at all, leading to floods, erosion, and mudslides. It also increases turbidity in the streams flowing through our watersheds. The unhealthy state of our national forests, which were initially reserved specifically to protect water resources, has led to catastrophic wildfires that threaten the reliability,

² U.S. Forest Service: *Updates to Wildfire Risk.org Identify Communities with Increased Risk and Provide Resources to Mitigate Wildfire*. May 28, 2024. <https://www.fs.usda.gov/inside-fs/leadership/updates-wildfire-risk-tool-advance-understanding-wildfire-vulnerabilities>

³ Parks, Sean A.; Holsinger, Lisa M.; Blankenship, Kori; Dillon, Gregory K.; Goeking, Sara A.; Swaty, Randy. 2023. Contemporary wildfires are more severe compared to the historical reference period in western US dry conifer forests. *Forest Ecology and Management*. 544: 121232.

volume, and quality of water for thousands of acres of irrigated agricultural lands, tens of millions of Americans, along with the wildlife, recreational, and multi-purpose values of these lands.

Many of our great Western forests are damaged and diseased. This came about through a perfect storm of neglect, misguided litigation, lack of use of science, strained management budgets, and, of course, climate change. We can have no doubt that the West is warming, and some places are warming more rapidly than past modeling has predicted. Insect outbreaks have weakened and killed trees. Violent winds have brought these trees down providing an abundant source of fuel. Drought and forests cluttered with dead fall timber serve as a tinderbox for increasingly intense and devastating fires. Our National Forests in the Rocky Mountain Region are suffering, in part from climate-driven lack of function. The inability to develop a logical management strategy has led to these consequences: catastrophic fires, lack of wildlife habitat, and critical interruption of our water supply.

Western Wildfire and Forest Health Challenges

Today's wildfires are often larger and more catastrophic than in the past. Some of the blame can be attributed to climatic conditions, like reduced snowpack in alpine forests, prolonged droughts and longer fire seasons. Western population growth has also played a role, since we now have more homes within or adjacent to forests and grasslands. However, decades of fire suppression and inability to manage our forests through controlled burns, thinning, and pest/insect control probably play an even bigger role. Where California now has about 100 trees per acre, it once had about 40 trees / acre.

Much of the media coverage on the fires that raged in Northern California in recent years featured commentary from politicians, environmental activists and academics who pointed to climate change as the driving factor behind the fires that have forced tens of thousands of Westerners to flee their homes. Climate change concerns may certainly be shared by some rural Westerners who live in once-thriving timber dependent communities. However, there is also a growing frustration that forest management – or rather, the lack of management by federal agencies, driven in part by environmental litigation – fails to get the attention it deserves in many media accounts of policy solutions offered to combat the current Western wildfire infernos. Simply laying the blame for deteriorating forest conditions and the resulting wildfires solely at the feet of climate change is inaccurate. It also perpetuates inaction and ignores the body of science showing many substantive things we can do now to make our forests more resilient to climate change and restore their value to water supply and the environment.

Some of us who live in rural Western communities and have observed the condition of federal forests deteriorate in recent decades have a different perspective. We have witnessed how federal forest management actions have been hampered in recent decades, in part due to environmental lawsuits initiated by certain activist groups. I am encouraged that this new bipartisan bill reflects the concerns of the men and women on the ground regarding the urgency of implementing forest restoration and management.

Cumbersome Processes Associated with Forest Health Projects

The U.S. Forest Service (Forest Service) is not fully meeting agency expectations, nor the expectations of the public, partners, and stakeholders, to improve the health and resilience of forests and grasslands, create jobs, and provide economic and recreational benefits. The Forest Service spends considerable financial and personnel resources on paperwork and dealing with environmental litigation.

In recent years – catalyzed by the ominous increase in Western wildfire activity – we have worked with other organizations, seeking ways to discourage litigation against the Forest Service relating to land management projects. We have supported efforts to cut red tape associated with vegetative management activities carried out to establish or improve habitat for economically and ecologically important Western species like elk, mule deer, and black bear. Thus, we have advocated for expediting and prioritizing forest management activities that achieve ecosystem restoration objectives.

We need to find ways to streamline projects that would reduce wildfire risk and improve forest health for a variety of reasons. An increasing percentage of the Forest Service's resources have been spent each year to provide for wildfire suppression, resulting in fewer resources available for other management activities, such as restoration. In 1995, wildland fire management funding made up 16 percent of the Forest Service's annual spending, compared to 57 percent in 2018.

It is essential to begin taking a risk management approach to restoring and managing our Western forests before the fear and over analysis cause more forest land, along with the multiple values to water supply, wildlife habitat, recreation, and food production, to be lost.

Forest Health Solutions

Regardless of the causes behind the sad state of our forests, it is our job now to look for solutions. These solutions will be applied through specific and thoughtful management. The problem involves a natural landscape, so some of the solutions will be time-tested natural processes. Others will be driven by landowners and forest managers through proactive, aggressive actions. The neglect and deterioration of our forests cannot continue. We must act now to heal them. If we don't, we will lose them for a generation. We offer below the recipe for success.

1. Actively Manage and Restore our Federal Forests

Drought brings less snowfall in many areas. The snow that falls melts off up to 45 days earlier and runs off downstream on frozen ground. Therefore, the snowpack no longer functions as a reservoir delaying the release of water in a timely manner. However, the forest floor can be restored through thoughtful management. A responsible level of continuous fuels reduction includes a combination of robust mechanical thinning and prescribed fire. This can be employed to significantly reduce

evapotranspiration, tree stress, disease, and pest infestation, preserve healthy forest conditions, and protect species and habitats.

This is not only good stewardship – it is good economics.

Failure to employ this approach will continue the downward, accelerating spiral of fuel accumulation, drought, disease, and invasive insects. This will lead, inevitably, to additional high-intensity and costly fire events in the future.

We believe active forest management can increase water yield, improve water quality, provide for jobs, and reduce the cost and danger of firefighting, while increasing forest resiliency. This can be done, in part, by increasing the productivity of national forests and grasslands; employing grazing as an effective, affordable forest and grassland management tool; increasing access to national forest system lands; expediting environmental reviews to support active management; and designing West-wide studies to quantify water yield.

a. Use Controlled Fire, Grazing, and Timber Harvest as Management Tools

Wildlife habitat has suffered profoundly from the “pick-up-sticks” of dead trees on the forest floor, from disruption in water function, and most dramatically, from widespread hot fires. These large catastrophic fires not only eliminate habitat, but kill millions of animals, birds and insects. Controlled fire is one of the tools that can be used to improve forest grounds. However, it is not the only tool. A 2021 article in the Sacramento Bee (“[‘Self-serving garbage.’ Wildfire experts escalate fight over saving California forests](#)”) does a nice job explaining this. We are seeing a major shift happening; the people who love the forest are coming together.

The Organic Administration Act of 1897 (Organic Act) addresses the role of the forests as part of a larger community—a larger and complex landscape. They do not exist in a vacuum. National Forest lands were intended to produce timber for Americans. We have seen the terrible effects of the near halting of the timber industry. Foresters know how to log in a responsible and sustainable manner. When done properly, it is one of the most effective tools to restore forest health. The alternatives are unregulated logging in other parts of the world and sky-high lumber prices. Sustainable timber management is a practice that must be encouraged and facilitated.

Likewise, the forests are part of our food production system. The grasslands existing in forest lands sustain not only grazing wildlife like deer, elk, bighorn sheep, and antelope, but also forage for domestic livestock like cattle and sheep. Proper grazing improves soil through hoof actions and fertilization from manure. Grazing returns carbon to the soils and is a tool, indeed almost the only tool, for improving and restoring soils. Again, it must be properly managed, but many grazers are experts in just those practices. Narrow policy proposals that disconnect the role of responsible grazing, or even seek to eliminate this practice, from grassland function will result in cascading impacts to habitat connectivity, soil health, wildlife habitat, and carbon sequestration. These actions will also create added strain on rural communities.

b. Secure Long-Term Conditions of Water Flows

“Securing long-term conditions of water flows” is named as a top priority in the Organic Act, yet it is perhaps the most severely impacted by the deteriorated forests. The forests act as a sponge. Winter snowfall settles among the trees, and snowmelt and rainfall alike traditionally soak into the humus and healthy soils on the forest floor. Climate change and human mismanagement have disrupted this crucial cycle. Upland watershed and forest management activities can help increase water quality and quantity, as well as mitigating the risk of catastrophic wildfire. Restoration – utilizing what we refer to as “AgroForestry” - is very doable. It will require planning, resources, commitment and will. All of these things exist.

2. Engagement of the U.S. Forest Service

Since the Forest Service is responsible for much of the forestland in the West, its engagement will be critical. Bold action is required. Decision-makers must be empowered to act, rather than get bogged down in bureaucratic morass. Unfortunately, current bureaucratic practices are not equipped to fulfill the need. Upper-level policy makers and managers will need to create a plan and set an agenda that will lead to success. We must “empower the competent” to achieve scale. The areas in need of restoration encompass millions of acres; 100-acre solutions will not suffice. Legislation may be required to help move agency words into actions.

Experts from the Forest Service and various affected interests must be part of the planning process. These interests would necessarily include area and state foresters, private sector forest managers, watershed experts, wildlife scientists, grazers, and local community representatives. This group should be broad enough to cover areas of concern, but nimble enough to plan quickly and set the wheels in motion. The multi-level strategy includes solutions to sustainably manage our water, which largely originates on forest landscapes and watersheds. It must consider the habitat provided, or formerly provided, by the affected forest lands, and the needs of those species whose lives depend upon those lands. Likewise, traditional forest uses that have sustained local communities must be considered both as a tool to bring about needed change, and as a part of the holistic system which includes trees, wildlife, water and people. These tools include targeted logging, particularly of dead standing trees, and grazing to restore soils and reduce fire danger.

Healthy forests provide multiple recreation, agricultural, ecological and economic benefits, and indeed the legislation that created the Forest Service, mandates this. A successful plan must direct the effective transition from the forests’ present non-functioning state to a functioning state. This will take time, but a commitment to action is required to ensure long-term success.

3. Improve federal funding programs and delivery

To increase stakeholder confidence and ensure effective funding delivery, federal agencies should invite outside guidance and clearly state to the maximum extent practical, the intended

impact of funds, method of distribution, and other discretionary factors. We understand that these agencies have limited influence over specific legislative prescriptions and that further direction may be provided as the legislative process unfolds. We also believe that a certain amount of discretion based on agency expertise is necessary to ensure proper allocation of funds. However, we submit that our collective on-the-ground experience can serve as a guide to ensure that such funds broadly dedicated to conservation and restoration are best utilized to the benefit of ecosystem function, local community vitality, and working lands health.

4. Remove regulatory barriers to forest management

From our decades of collective expertise, we are aware of numerous barriers that prevent interested landowners and other entities from participating in programs administered by federal agencies, and ultimately, prevent funding from reaching the ground in a meaningful way. Statutory limitations such as program payment caps can create misalignment between program eligibility and conservation objectives. Regulatory hurdles can prolong agency action.

We do not seek changes that waive or ignore existing federal environmental laws. Instead, we call for improvements to make those laws work for the benefit of the nation as intended. By eliminating duplicative or unnecessary processes and using streamlining tools already allowed under the law - and promoting action instead of litigation - the status quo could be changed. The proposed changes could help government agencies to use their limited resources to expeditiously implement land management actions designed to prevent wildfires and improve habitat for priority, endangered and/or threatened species. Surely that would be a dramatic improvement over spending precious time and resources on bureaucratic process and litigation. These types of critically needed procedural changes will improve our Western landscapes and protect our valuable water supplies from the devastating effects of wildfires. They will also allow agencies to improve habitat, restore ecosystems for the benefit of federally important species and allow continued agricultural use of our public lands.

Increasing the efficiency of environmental analysis would enable the Forest Service to do more to increase the health and productivity of our national forests and grasslands and be more responsive to requests for goods and services. The Forest Service's goal should be to complete project decision making in a timelier manner, improve or eliminate inefficient processes and steps, and, where appropriate, increase the scale of analysis and the number of activities in a single analysis and decision. Improving the efficiency of environmental analysis and decision making will ensure that lands and watersheds are sustainable, healthy, and productive; mitigate wildfire risk; and contribute to the economic health of rural communities through use and access opportunities.

The Alliance Supports the Fix our Forests Act

The Family Farm Alliance joined a broad coalition of water providers, farmers, utilities, forestry professionals, and local governmental entities in formal support of H.R. 471. Enacting this legislation will help protect our communities and address forest health needs by fostering

collaboration between federal agencies, local communities, and tribal nations, authorizing common sense environmental streamlining authorities, providing targeted litigation reform, expanding good neighbor authorities, and investing in data sharing, research, and technology. In addition to the Alliance, a letter in support of H.R. 471 was signed by the American Farm Bureau, the American Forest Resource Council, the Association of California Water Agencies, the California Farm Bureau Federation, and the National Association of Counties.

The Alliance previously supported the *Fix Our Forests Act* in the 118th Congress, where it passed the House by a bipartisan vote of 268-151.

H.R. 471 will:

- Simplify and expedite environmental reviews for forest management projects;
- Make communities more resilient to wildfires by better coordinating existing grant programs and promoting new research;
- Promote federal, state, tribal and local collaboration;
- Deter frivolous litigation that delays essential projects;
- Create a framework for prioritizing treatments in the forests at the highest risk of wildfire and near vulnerable communities;
- Encourage the adoption of state-of-the-art science and techniques for federal land managers;
- Encourage active management to improve the safety of powerlines and other infrastructure;
- Strengthen tools like Good Neighbor Authority and Stewardship Contracting; and
- Support wildland firefighters and their families by ensuring continuity in casualty assistance programs.

Forest management resources included in the *Fix Our Forests Act* are crucial to help control and reduce the severity of wildfires to enhance air quality, wildlife habitat, and more. For example, this legislation would improve water supply sources such as drinking water and rivers, improve water quality by decreasing runoff, pollutants, and erosion, and save costs by reducing infrastructure repairs to reservoirs, pipelines, and treatment plants.

Applicability to the Headwaters of the Colorado Initiative

Family Farm Alliance member Ladder Ranch (WYOMING/COLORADO) is helping to lead an effort to design a comprehensive, multi-stakeholder, large landscape initiative to restore two severely degraded (non-functioning) 50,000-acre watersheds; one in the Medicine Bow National Forest in Wyoming and a second in the Routt National Forest in Colorado. The vision of the “Headwaters of the Colorado” (HOC) initiative is to restore two forested rangelands to a resilient state that filters and stores water, produces protein, sustains wildlife and fisheries, sinks carbon, produces renewable energy feedstocks and enables economically viable rural communities to thrive.

The Little Snake River Watershed is a fascinating combination of a functioning conservation district that has a 30-year record of nationally recognized river restoration, grazing habitat enhancement, fish passage, and migratory bird habitat enhancement projects. A primary headwater of the Colorado River Basin, the watershed is impacted by complex shifts in basin-wide hydrology due to warming temperatures and reduced snowpack, historic fire suppression policies that have exacerbated the potential for large wildfires, and diverse land use values and demands across multiple sectors.

The HOC team is designing a plan to implement an integrated, multi-disciplined and multi-level watershed enhancement project that will demonstrate how collaborative and cooperative restoration efforts can be carried out at scale and replicated in watersheds across the West. The watershed group will develop a communication plan and conduct outreach to stakeholders, complete an analysis of baseline environmental conditions, and create a collaborative watershed restoration plan. The plan will involve private lands, state lands in Wyoming and Colorado, and federal lands in the Medicine Bow-Routt National Forest and the U.S. Bureau of Land Management's Little Snake and Rawlins field offices.

Men and women who live and work in the forests have up-close and personal experiences and observations upon which they formulate their assessment of the conditions in these forests. They view the watersheds and assess their functionality as intact, interconnected ecosystems. In their view, the forested watersheds are in a state of dramatic decline as a result of decades of siloed, top-down management, litigation that has prevented many pragmatic enhancement and restoration initiatives from moving forward. Climate change has further taken a major toll on the health and functionality of the watersheds.

We believe it is time for a new way forward, one that would be characterized by large landscape scale, integrated and multi-disciplinary enhancement projects guided by multi-stakeholder collaboration. Obviously, the provisions for promoting federal, state, tribal and local collaboration in the *Fix our Forests Act* will better allow the stakeholders involved in the HOC project to achieve success.

Conclusion

The revival of Western watershed forests is crucial to combating and adapting to the effects of climate change. By bringing together changemakers and working collaboratively, we can change the paradigm of forest management. Success will mean healthier forests, healthier wildlife populations, more prosperous and dynamic local communities, more recreation opportunities, greater economic benefits, and much-needed security in our water supplies.

Balance in production and conservation is the answer to forest health. The Family Farm Alliance supports the *Fix our Forests Act* and urges your subcommittee to advance this important legislation.

Thank you for this opportunity to submit this testimony.

March 5th, 2025

The Honorable Senator John Boozman
Chairman, Senate Committee on
Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry
731 Hart Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Senator Amy Klobuchar
Ranking Member, Senate Committee on
Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry
425 Dirksen Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Chairman Boozman and Ranking Member Klobuchar,

On behalf of the Federation of American Scientists (FAS), a nonpartisan nonprofit dedicated to embedding science, technology, innovation, and experience into government and public discourse in order to build a healthy, safe, and prosperous society, **I am writing to request that you support H.R. 471, the Fix Our Forests Act, which represents a critical step towards ending the megafire crisis.** The Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry has a historic opportunity this Congress to advance legislation that will strengthen wildfire resilience, safeguard our communities, and protect our natural landscapes.

On January 23rd, 2025, the House of Representatives passed the Fix Our Forests Act with strong bipartisan support. This underscores Congress's recognition of the urgent need for accelerated and improved forest management practices and getting the best possible tools in the hands of our wildland firefighters. The Fix Our Forests Act expands upon proven methods to streamline permitting for critical fuels reduction projects without undermining the intent of landmark environmental protection laws by expanding categorical exclusions from 3,000 acres to 10,000 acres. Since 2016, the 10,000-acre Tahoe Basin Categorical Exclusion has been used to streamline the permitting process for wildfire mitigation treatments in the Tahoe region which, according to former Forest Service Chief Randy Moore, helped keep South Lake Tahoe communities safe from the 2021 Caldor Fire.¹

The bill capitalizes on the opportunity to use new science and technology to help us meet our resilience goals faster, more cost effectively, and with better results. As FAS CEO Daniel Correa has previously [stated](#):

“Failing to address the root causes of devastating wildfires is a policy choice. As the crisis in Los Angeles shows, it’s a choice we can no longer afford. The Fix Our Forests Act takes important steps to confront these disasters. FAS particularly supports the creation of the Fireshed Center, which would provide first responders with science-backed decision-support tools, and serve as a nerve center to embed and deploy critical technology across the entire wildfire lifecycle of prevention, suppression, and recovery.”

FAS is proud to have championed important provisions of this bill, including the Firefighter Casualty Assistance Program (Sec. 401), Community Wildfire Risk Reduction Program (Sec. 201 & 202), Biochar Innovations and Research (Sec. 301), and Reporting on the Effectiveness of Hazardous Fuels Reduction Treatments (Sec. 302). Additionally, we supported multiple additions to the bill including incentivizing the use of proactive animal grazing for fuels mitigation (Sec. 117), public-private partnerships for low earth orbit satellites, and the addition of artificial intelligence support tools to the Fireshed Center. We also supported provisions that will help us get on

¹ Forest Service Chief Randy Moore’s response to Congressman McClintock, Subcommittee Oversight Hearing, June 4, 2024, Examining the President’s FY 2025 Budget Request for the U.S. Forest Service | Federal Lands Subcommittee | House Committee on Natural Resources.

a sustainable mitigation track, such as the inclusion of a testbed pilot program for innovative wildfire mitigation technologies (Sec. 303), provisions to strengthen Good Neighbor Authority (Sec. 111), and increased biochar utilization.

Decades of mismanagement and accelerating climate change are driving an alarming rise in catastrophic megafires, which are characterized by their extreme intensity, uncontrollable scale, and unprecedented damage to the natural and built environment. By some measures, the number of structures destroyed by megafires has increased by 160% over the last two decades, exhausting federal, state, Tribal, and local resources. The ecological toll that megafires wreak threatens to permanently transform landscapes and remake entire ecosystems. There is also a significant climate impact from megafires – as extreme fire behavior can transform ecosystems from carbon sinks to net carbon emitters. Wildland firefighters who confront megafires on the ground have never faced greater demands, and it is imperative to provide them with the tools they need to succeed and the benefits they deserve. We must act to forestall future devastating impacts on human health, workers, communities, ecosystems, and the climate.

FAS looks forward to working with Members of the Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry on this critical piece of bipartisan legislation. We appreciate your thorough consideration of this legislation and welcome the opportunity to discuss further. Please feel free to contact FAS Wildfire Policy Specialist James Campbell at jcampbell@fas.org with any further questions.

Sincerely,

Hannah Safford, Ph.D.
Associate Director of Climate & Environment, FAS

cc Members of the Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry



NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF STATE FORESTERS

444 North Capitol Street NW | Suite 387 | Washington, DC 20001 | www.stateforesters.org

H.R. 471 - Fix Our Forests Act ("FOFA")

Prepared for the Senate Agriculture Subcommittee on Conservation, Forestry,
Natural Resources, and Biotechnology Hearing on March 6, 2025

Background: The National Association of State Foresters (NASF) is a non-profit organization composed of the directors of forestry agencies ("State Foresters") in the 50 states, five U.S. territories, three nations in compacts of free association with the U.S., and the District of Columbia. State Foresters and their agencies are responsible for wildfire protection on more than 1.5 billion acres. Collectively, state forestry agencies directly employ nearly 30,000 individuals, including over 7,800 trained foresters and over 12,000 wildland firefighters, who provide significant expertise, national capacity, and on-the-ground delivery of forestry and wildland fire management.

NASF Support for FOFA: Substantially increasing active forest management across all states, landscapes and ownership boundaries – federal, state, and private – remains a national challenge. NASF supports the legislation's efforts to streamline project review requirements as well as reforming existing litigation processes to grow the pace and scale of federal forest management and associated cross-boundary work (Sec. 121 "Commonsense Litigation Reform", Sec. 122 "Consultation on Forest Plans", and Sec. 106(b) "Expansion").

In addition, the following provisions are consistent with NASF priorities:

- **Sec. 111 "Modification of the treatment of certain revenue and payments under Good Neighbor Authority"** - While the EXPLORE Act, passed and signed into at the end of the 118th Congress, finally enabled timber sale revenue from states under Good Neighbor Authority projects to be spent on forest management activities on all-lands, we appreciate FOFA's further extension of this authority to the end of FY 2030.
- **Sec. 201 "Portal and Uniform Grant Application"** - NASF is in support of Congressional action to increase communities' access to federal financial assistance for wildfire risk reduction and recovery, including the creation of uniform grant application portals.
- **Sec. 315 "Tree nursery shortages"** - It is NASF's position that Congress must increase support to federal, state, tribal, and private nurseries and seed orchards. We support FOFA's direction to the Forest Service to develop and implement a national strategy addressing the nation's tree seedling shortage.

Amendments and Other Considerations:

- **Sec. 207 "Fire Department Repayment"** – NASF respectfully requests an amendment to include "state wildland firefighting agencies" alongside local fire departments in the bill's

requirements for USDA and DOI to establish payment timelines for fire suppression cost share agreements. Because local fire departments are not typically included in master agreements between the states and federal land managers, states act as the intermediary, floating local stations for wildfire suppression and then waiting to be made whole by the appropriate federal agency. This dynamic also works in the reverse with some state wildland firefighting agencies not having the budget to deploy and float the cost of engaging local fire departments, limiting the total amount of resources that can be put on a fire.

- Sec. 102 “Fireshed Center” – While the bill allows the Secretaries discretion to include state representation on the Fireshed Center, NASF recommends that the “may” be a “shall” or otherwise ensures state forestry agency representation. The intent of the intergovernmental Fireshed Center is to centralize the comprehensive assessment and prediction of fire in the wildland and built environment to inform nation-wide fire mitigation, response and recovery across all jurisdictions. Given state forestry agencies’ responsibility pre-, during and post- wildland fire on state and private land as well as the capacity we provide on federal land fire incidents, we should be at the table. In addition, state forestry agencies hold many of the products and data required for the Fireshed Center’s assessment and predictive work.
- Sec. 201 “Community Wildfire Risk Reduction Program” – NASF supports the creation of a new Community Wildfire Risk Reduction Program to assist Tribes and local governments in the wildland-urban interface to reduce the risk of and the damages resulting from fire; however, we would like to see greater accountability in the implementation and administration of the program. We recommend the Senate add an accompanying advisory commission (as proposed by Rep. Pettersen) inclusive of state and local representation to reserve an opportunity to consult and guide program implementation and ensure the program functions as Congress intends.
- Incorporating Meaningful Policy to Support Prescribed Fire – Prescribed fire is necessary for making our forests and communities more resilient to natural and necessary fire cycles. As a major vehicle for forest management policy, NASF would like to key National Prescribed Fire Act provisions (as reworked by the Senate) incorporated into FOIA including reduced liability for partners operating on federal lands, the study of enacting a national prescribed claims fund, and the codification of the Exceptional Events Rule for prescribed fire.



National Cattlemen's
Beef Association



March 06, 2025

The Honorable Roger Marshall
Chairman
Subcommittee on Conservation, Forestry,
Natural Resources, and Biotechnology
Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, and
Forestry
328A Russell Senate Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Michael Bennet
Ranking Member
Subcommittee on Conservation, Forestry,
Natural Resources, and Biotechnology
Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, and
Forestry
328A Russell Senate Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20510

Chairman Marshall and Ranking Member Bennet:

The Public Lands Council (PLC), American Sheep Industry Association (ASI), and National Cattlemen's Beef Association (NCBA) write today to express our strong support for the proposed bipartisan *Fix Our Forests Act* as reintroduced at the start of the 119th Congress. This critical legislation addresses the urgent need to restore forest health, enhance landscape resilience, and protect communities from catastrophic wildfires that devastate lives, property, and ecosystems.

Livestock producers are deeply invested in sound stewardship of our natural resources, and as resource managers and business owners, they play a core role in the socioeconomic stability of the rural communities that are most deeply impacted by the wildfire crisis. PLC is the only national organization dedicated solely to representing the cattle and sheep producers who hold roughly 22,000 federal grazing permits and operate on federal lands. Since 1865, ASI has been the national trade organization representing the interests of more than 100,000 sheep producers located throughout the country who produce America's lamb and wool. NCBA is the U.S. cattle industry's oldest and largest national trade association, representing 26,000 individual producers and the approximately 178,000 cattle producers who are members of the 44 state affiliate organizations who provide much of the nation's food supply.

PLC, NCBA, and ASI appreciate the Committee's consideration of this wildfire and forestry bill. We strongly support and applaud the *Fix Our Forests Act*, particularly in Sec. 113 *Inter-Agency Strike Teams*; Sec. 117 *Utilizing Grazing for Wildfire Reduction*; and Sec. 121. *Commonsense Litigation Reform*. The inclusion of targeted, commonsense provisions in this legislation is a welcome step toward achieving effective forest management and reducing the risk of destructive wildfires.

Despite widespread agreement on the efficacy of preventative measures such as grazing, prescribed burning, along with both chemical and mechanical treatments, recent news reports and studies have underscored how burdensome federal regulations make it nearly impossible to do fuels mitigation and forest restoration work at the required scale to effectively prevent these natural disasters. This bill would help protect livestock producers, local conservationists, timber production, and recreation industries who are dependent on healthy public forests. Public land permittees make up a large portion of these people and provide the land with grazing and other natural preventative measures.

We offer strong support to the Section 113 provision as it ensures timely completion of the National Environmental Protection Act and other planning requirements, allowing for proactive and efficient forest management. Streamlining these processes is essential to improving landscape resilience and mitigating wildlife risk. With the number and severity of wildfires growing each year, it is important that we supply agencies with the necessary tools to combat these dangerous natural disasters and implement the proper forest managements that are necessary to protect communities across the west. This bill would codify the Shared Stewardship Initiative, creating a new fire shed center which would promote collaboration between federal, state, tribal, and local agencies.

We also commend Section 117 on Targeted Grazing as it reflects the effective use of grazing as a tool for reducing wildlife fuel loads. Targeted grazing not only improves forest health but also provides economic opportunities for ranchers, demonstrating a practical, mutually beneficial solution. This proposed bill focuses on making communities more resistant to wildfires, giving agencies vital emergency tools to restore watersheds, and would simplify environmental reviews, which reduces costs while still maintaining rigorous environmental standards.

Section 121's provision on Commonsense Litigation Reform ensures the durability of agency actions as it is critical for long-term forest management. By addressing frivolous litigation, this provision empowers agencies to focus on managing forests for health and resilience rather than being bogged down by unnecessary legal challenges. The *Fix Our Forests Act* would restore forest health, increase resilience for forests and wildfires, and ensure the safety of our communities by expediting environmental analyses, increasing forest restoration, and reducing unnecessary lawsuits.

The catastrophic wildfires in Los Angeles earlier this year, which tragically claimed lives, destroyed over 12,000 homes, and displaced thousands of residents, underscores the urgency of this legislation. The *Fix Our Forests Act* offers a bipartisan, comprehensive solution to reduce wildfire risks, enhance forest health, and protect communities from devastating impacts of wildfire events.

During the 118th Congress, this same legislation demonstrated its broad bipartisan appeal with a 268-151 vote in the House. We encourage continued collaboration to ensure its successful passage in the 119th Congress.

Ranchers understand that fire is a normal part of ecosystem management. Fire can be useful for clearing debris, stimulating growth of certain forage, and supporting healthy soil carbon storage. However, the condition for the catastrophic wildfire that continue to dominate has been allowed to persist due to decades of mismanagement. A federal focus on preservation, rather than true conservation, has suppressed the natural fire cycle and put human lives and billions of dollars of property at risk. Together, we can support forest management practices that balance ecological sustainability, economic opportunity, and public safety. We appreciate the Committee's work on this important issue and hope this will be just one step in an ongoing, comprehensive, and active fire management strategy to come.

Sincerely,

Public Lands Council
American Sheep Industry Association
National Cattlemen's Beef Association

OUTDOOR ALLIANCE

March 5, 2025

Senator Roger Marshall
Chair, Subcommittee on Conservation,
Forestry, Natural Resources, and
Biotechnology
479A Russell Senate Building
Washington, DC 20002

Senator Michael Bennet
Ranking Member, Subcommittee on
Conservation, Forestry, Natural
Resources, and Biotechnology
261 Russell Senate Building
Washington, DC 20510

Re: Legislative Hearing to Review H.R. 471, the Fix Our Forests Act, and Options to Reduce Catastrophic Wildfire.

Chair Marshall, Ranking Member Bennet, and members of the Subcommittee,

On behalf of the human-powered outdoor recreation community, we write to express our concern with H.R. 471, the Fix Our Forests Act (FOFA), ahead of March 6th's Subcommittee hearing. The outdoor community and the outdoor economy are profoundly affected by the wildfire crisis and we strongly support science-based actions needed to build resilience to wildfire across our nation's landscapes and communities. While a number of provisions in FOFA would further this goal, others would unacceptably weaken environmental analysis and stakeholders' ability to inform forest management projects on federal lands. We have outlined our concerns and recommendations below, including certain aspects of the bill that we support. Although we oppose FOFA as written, we appreciate your attention to this important issue and offer our community's support and collaboration as Congress works towards reforming forest and wildfire management.

Outdoor Alliance is a coalition of ten member-based organizations representing the human powered outdoor recreation community. The coalition includes Access Fund, American Canoe Association, American Whitewater, International Mountain Bicycling Association, Winter Wildlands Alliance, The Mountaineers, the American Alpine Club, the Mazamas, Colorado Mountain Club, and Surfrider Foundation and represents the interests of the millions of Americans who climb, paddle, mountain bike, backcountry ski and snowshoe, and enjoy coastal recreation on our nation's public lands, waters, and snowscapes.



OUTDOOR ALLIANCE

As frequent visitors to America's public lands, outdoor recreationists experience the effects of wildfire first hand. While wildfire is an essential ecological process across many landscapes visited by recreationists, fire suppression, removal of Indigenous burning, logging, climate change, and other changes over the past two centuries have altered the fire environment, causing an increase in extreme and destructive wildfires in many areas of the U.S. Severe wildfires degrade the outdoor recreation experience through closures, smoke, damage to scenic values and recreation infrastructure, and other economic and ecological impacts.¹ Wildfires also disproportionately affect communities that depend on the economic benefits of outdoor recreation.²

At the time of this writing, communities across southern California are still recovering from a series of destructive wildfires that devastated portions of the Los Angeles area earlier this year. The L.A. fires, driven by particularly strong Santa Ana winds, occurred not just in wildlands but also in heavily urbanized areas, illustrating the complexity of the wildfire crisis. We appreciate that some sections of FOFA—notably Title II's provisions on community wildfire defense and local fire department repayment—would enhance the federal government's ability to support local communities facing these sorts of wildland-urban interface fires. However, many of FOFA's other provisions, which focus heavily on fuels reduction in forested areas, would not address the drivers of wildfires such as those in L.A., which largely did not occur in forests. As Congress considers how to prevent similar disasters in the future, we recommend that you work to implement the more comprehensive, bipartisan, consensus-based recommendations of the Wildland Fire Mitigation and Management Commission (hereinafter the "Commission"), which provide a roadmap for building resilience to wildfire at all levels of the wildfire crisis, including community hardening, workforce development, improved wildfire planning, and other strategies to mitigate future wildfire risk both within and outside of forested wildlands.³

¹ See, Jamie Ervin, *Wildfire and Outdoor Recreation in the West: How Recreationists Can Support a Fire-Resilient Future*, Policy Report, Outdoor Alliance, Washington, D.C. (2023).

² See, Megan Lawson, *Future-proofing the outdoor recreation economy*, Headwaters Economics (2024), https://headwaterseconomics.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/HE2024_Future-proofing-outdoor-recreation-economy.pdf. Recreation-dependent communities have nearly twice the wildfire and flood risk as non recreation-dependent communities.

³ See, Wildland Fire Mitigation and Management Commission, *ON FIRE: The Report of the Wildland Fire Mitigation and Management Commission* (2023).



OUTDOOR ALLIANCE

The current version of FOFA is considerably improved over earlier drafts, and we appreciate the bill sponsors' willingness to remove some of the most problematic sections of the bill. Outdoor Alliance supports the following sections of FOFA, which are aligned with the Commission's recommendations:

- **Sec. 102. Fireshed Center:** Establishes an interagency center to aggregate data around wildfire management and to provide cross-government coordination related to wildfire decision support.
- **Section 103. Fireshed Registry:** Establishes a modern publicly-accessible data repository for wildfire and forest health information.
- **Section 105. Fireshed Assessments:** Requires federal land managers and partners to collect certain data related to wildfire risk and to use this data to plan strategic wildfire mitigation activities.
- **Sec. 113. Intra-agency strike teams:** Creates strike teams to assist project planning and implementation for fireshed management projects.
- **Sec. 201. Community wildfire risk reduction program:** Establishes an interagency program for reducing wildfire risk in the wildland-urban interface and creates a one-stop grant portal for certain wildfire funding sources.
- **Sec. 202. Community wildfire defense research program:** Expands the Joint Fire Science Program's work to identify strategies for home and community hardening.
- **Sec. 207. Fire department repayment:** Ensures timely reimbursement of local fire departments engaged in wildfire suppression on federal lands.
- **Sec. 302. Accurate hazardous fuels reduction reports:** Increases transparency related to hazardous fuels management on federal lands.
- **Sec. 401. Wildland Fire Management Casualty Assistance Program:** Establishes a Department of Interior casualty assistance program for families of wildland firefighters who are killed or injured in the line of duty.

Despite our support for the sections noted above we remain strongly opposed to FOFA's provisions on litigation reform, expanded categorical exclusions, and Endangered Species Act consultation. Our concerns with these sections—which do not align with the Commission's recommendations—are outlined below.

Section 106. Emergency Fireshed Management



OUTDOOR ALLIANCE

Section 106 addresses environmental analysis as it relates to fireshed management projects directed by Title I of FOFA. Specifically, Section 106 establishes that existing emergency authorities for NEPA, the Endangered Species Act (ESA), and the Historic Preservation Act, apply to fireshed management projects. This section also expands several existing NEPA categorical exclusions (CEs) from the Healthy Forests Restoration Act and the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act from 3,000 to 10,000 acres and clarifies that these expanded CEs apply to fireshed management projects.

In our experience, landscape scale forest management projects require thoughtful planning to ensure that fuel treatments are designed strategically. The NEPA process is the primary way that outdoor recreationists participate in the decision making process on federal public lands and come to understand projects that affect recreation infrastructure and landscapes that we care about. Shortcutting these planning processes through greatly-expanded CEs unnecessarily limits our and other stakeholders' ability to inform how fireshed management projects address outdoor recreation and conservation concerns at the local level. We are concerned that, under Section 106, federal agencies will be pressured to move forward with projects that lack public support, ultimately leading to controversy and litigation around critical wildfire mitigation work. Moreover, while we are unaware of any map delineating the areas where the Section 106 provisions would apply, we assume based on Section 101 that these authorities could apply over vast areas of America's public lands, including a number of high-value recreation landscapes.⁴ Implementing projects under these very large CE's over such a broad area would almost certainly lead to significant environmental impacts in areas that recreationists value.

Section 121. Commonsense Litigation Reform

Outdoor Alliance strongly opposes Section 121, which would severely limit stakeholders' ability to seek judicial relief for fireshed management projects. The

⁴ Section 101, Designation of Fireshed Management Areas, states that fireshed management areas shall be designated in any of the high-risk firesheds identified in the Forest Service's Wildfire Crisis Strategy and in any firesheds identified in as being in the top 20% for wildfire exposure as identified by the Rocky Mountain Research Station of the Forest Service in 2019 based on wildfire exposure to communities, municipal watersheds and tribal water supplies, and risk of forest conversion due to wildfire.



OUTDOOR ALLIANCE

ability to challenge agency decisions that might cause adverse harm to a resource of concern—including impacts to recreation resources—is core to the public process afforded by NEPA and other environmental laws. Section 121 essentially allows agencies to ignore public input and proceed with projects that lack stakeholder support.

Specifically, this section would alter the existing standards for injunctive relief by establishing an extremely high bar for courts to enjoin forest management projects that propose unacceptable adverse impacts to important public lands resources like recreation sites, watersheds, or sensitive species. Instead, FOFA would direct a court to remand the issue to the relevant agency and direct the agency to address any wrongs done by the project within 180 days. Meanwhile, the agency may carry out portions of the project in question and cannot prepare a new environmental document. Finally, this section would bar claims seeking judicial review unless they are submitted within 120 days of a decision document being posted *and* the party seeking judicial review submitted a detailed public comment on the issue for which they are seeking redress (if a public comment period was held). Together, these provisions will reduce agencies' accountability to the American public and will lead to less collaboration on forest management projects.

Section 122. Consultation on Forest Plans

Section 122, intended as a *Cottonwood* "fix" provides that USFS and BLM are not required to reinstate consultation under Section 7 of the ESA when new information indicates that implementation of land management plans may be harming a listed species. On-the-ground conditions on public lands are changing rapidly due to climate change and related stressors like forest pathogens and high severity fire. ESA consultation is necessary to ensure that land management plans are adaptable in a way that protects listed species in light of these changes. Effects to ESA listed species are often a marker for overall problems with landscape health, and the opportunity to view wildlife is often a core and valued part of recreational experiences on public lands and waters. Section 122 would undermine the ESA and allow agencies to ignore relevant information while implementing land management plans.

* * *



OUTDOOR ALLIANCE

Thank you for considering our community's input. We believe that Fix Our Forests, as currently written, should not become law, but we remain committed to constructively engaging with Congress and the administration to support solutions to our country's wildfire crisis. We look forward to working with you to build resilience to wildfire across America's communities and landscapes.

Best regards,



Louis Geltman
Vice President for Policy and Government Relations
Outdoor Alliance

cc: Jamie Ervin, Senior Policy Manager, Outdoor Alliance
Adam Cramer, Chief Executive Officer, Outdoor Alliance
Heather Thorne, Executive Director, Access Fund
Beth Spilman, Executive Director, American Canoe Association
Clinton Begley, Executive Director, American Whitewater
Kent McNeill, CEO, International Mountain Bicycling Association
David Page, Executive Director, Winter Wildlands Alliance
Tom Vogl, Chief Executive Officer, The Mountaineers
Ben Gabriel, Executive Director, American Alpine Club
Rebekah Phillips, Executive Director, the Mazamas
Madeline Bachner Lane, Chief Executive Officer, Colorado Mountain Club
Chad Nelsen, Chief Executive Officer, Surfrider Foundation



**CHAIR OF THE BOARD**

Noel Boyer, CTSP
All About Trees, LLC
Springfield, Missouri

VICE CHAIR

Jim Houston
The Davey Tree Expert Co.
Kent, Ohio

SENIOR DIRECTOR

Austin Bonnema
Vermeer Mountain West
Salt Lake City, Utah

DIRECTORS

Arthur Balsom, III
Lucas Tree Experts
Portland, Maine

Amy Burkett
Burkett Arbor Care, LLC
Boerne, Texas

Jennifer McPhee
Harrison McPhee, Inc.
Mills, Massachusetts

Eric Petersen
ArboRisk Insurance
Berlin, Wisconsin

Megan Townsend
Altitude Arborist, LLC
Broomfield, Colorado

John Smithmyer
Bartlett Tree Experts
Finksburg, Maryland

Mike Tifford
SavATree
Bedford Hills, New York

PRESIDENT & CEO

David White, CAE
Tree Care Industry Association
Manchester, New Hampshire

March 6, 2025

The Honorable Roger Marshall
Chairman
Subcommittee on Conservation, Forestry,
Natural Resources, and Biotechnology
United State Senate
328A Russell Senate Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Michael Bennet
Ranking Member
Subcommittee on Conservation, Forestry,
Natural Resources, and Biotechnology
United State Senate
328A Russell Senate Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20510

Dear Chairman Marshall and Ranking Member Bennet:

The Tree Care Industry Association (TCIA) writes to thank you for holding a hearing to “Review H.R. 471, the Fix Our Forests Act, and Options to Reduce Catastrophic Wildfire.” We appreciate the Subcommittee’s efforts to advance comprehensive wildfire mitigation policies that improve forest resilience and protect communities.

TCIA represents approximately 1,400 businesses nationwide that engage in commercial tree care, providing services to residential communities, state and local governments, commercial businesses, and utilities. Collectively, TCIA members employ more than 150,000 people, representing an estimated 75% of all tree care workers in the country.

Our members play a vital role in wildfire prevention by identifying and mitigating hazardous vegetation near utility infrastructure, maintaining rights-of-way, and creating defensible spaces that reduce the likelihood of ignition. This work is particularly critical given that the federal government owns approximately 640 million acres of land in the United States, containing roughly 90,000 miles of electrical distribution and transmission rights-of-way. Properly managing these areas is essential to preventing utility-related ignitions and improving grid reliability.

The Fix Our Forests Act takes important steps to increase the nation’s resiliency to catastrophic wildfires by expediting forest restoration, reducing regulatory barriers to forest management projects, and improving wildfire mitigation through the establishment of high-risk fire management areas, interagency coordination, and streamlined environmental review processes. The bill also advances technological innovations, supports biochar demonstration projects, provides assistance to wildland firefighters, and seeks to harden utility infrastructure and improve rights-of-way against wildfire by encouraging more active management and removal of hazardous trees.

The 2025 California wildfires, along with the increasing frequency and severity of wildfires nationwide, underscore the urgent need for comprehensive strategies to mitigate fire risks—particularly those associated with electric infrastructure. Trees near power lines can be an ignition source, especially during extreme weather conditions, where high winds or falling limbs can cause contact with energized lines and spark wildfires. Electric utility corridors face both direct threats from wildfires and indirect risks from vegetation encroachment, making proactive management essential.

Utility vegetation management (UVM) contractors perform the majority of pre-inspection and hazard tree removal work for utilities, making them essential to wildfire prevention. However, as wildfire threats and liability risks grow, contractors are increasingly facing financial and legal challenges. Tree care companies, including TCIA members, face significant liability concerns due to their role in managing wildfire hazards. As the threat of wildfires and the associated liability for damage and injury escalate, the tree care industry grapples with high insurance rates and difficulties obtaining coverage. Insurance carriers that write coverage for vegetation management retain more risk and charge unsustainable premiums. Consequently, the number of carriers willing to provide coverage has significantly decreased, with many only offering policies with wildfire exclusions. These high costs and lack of coverage have made it increasingly difficult for contractors to afford and perform essential tree care work.

To address these challenges, TCIA urges the establishment of a minimum standard of care for pre-inspection of hazard trees in vegetation management plans. A federal standard—based on the ANSI A300 Industry Consensus Standard—would ensure consistency and accuracy in tree risk assessments, mitigating instances of utility-related ignitions and supporting sustainable risk exposure for contractors. Currently, no federal standard governs vegetation management pre-inspections, leading to inconsistencies, uncertainty, and increased legal and insurance risks. Without clear guidelines, vegetation management professionals face varying expectations, heightened litigation risks, and challenges in securing necessary insurance coverage, which discourages qualified professionals from working in high-risk areas. Establishing a minimum standard of care would provide uniformity and defensibility in pre-inspection programs while promoting a safer, more effective approach to wildfire mitigation.

Regulators in California have identified similar gaps. In its 2024 [*Policy Paper on Updating Vegetation Management Regulations and Industry Practices*](#), the state’s Wildfire Safety Advisory Board (WSAB) emphasized the need for clearer hazard tree definitions, standardized risk assessments, and stronger pre-inspection protocols—aligning with TCIA’s position. WSAB’s recommendations highlight the need for clearer hazard tree assessment protocols, strengthened pre-inspection processes, and alignment with industry best practices like ANSI A300 standards. While WSAB’s recommendations focus on California, they highlight a broader national need for consistent hazard tree assessment practices and well-defined responsibilities in vegetation management work.

As the Subcommittee reviews H.R. 471’s provisions on utility rights-of-way, we encourage a holistic approach to vegetation management that ensures clear roles and responsibilities for contractors, utilities, and property owners. In particular, any expansion of hazard tree definitions should carefully consider its impact on liability, workforce capacity, and the practical challenges of identifying and removing trees within an expanded risk zone.

To that end, we urge the Subcommittee to establish a federal standard of care for pre-inspection of hazard trees in vegetation management plans. Currently, no uniform standard exists, leading to inconsistencies in risk assessments, uncertainty in liability, and missed opportunities for proactive wildfire mitigation. A clear federal standard would set expectations and improve predictability for utilities, vegetation management companies, and insurers—ensuring that all stakeholders can plan and execute wildfire mitigation efforts more effectively.

TCIA appreciates the Committee’s leadership in addressing these critical issues and welcomes the opportunity to collaborate on solutions that enhance wildfire resilience. We look forward to working

with Congress to strengthen utility vegetation management policies and promote a safer, more sustainable approach to fire prevention.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "David White". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial "D" and a stylized "W".

David White, CAE
President & CEO, TCIA

For release only by the
United States Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry

**Statement of the
U.S. Department of Agriculture, U.S. Forest Service**

**To the Subcommittee on Conservation, Forestry, Natural Resources, and Biotechnology
United States Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry**

H.R. 471 – “Fix Our Forests Act”

March 6, 2025

Chairman Marshall, Ranking Member Bennet, Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for inviting the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Forest Service (FS), to discuss Fix Our Forests Act. USDA defers to Department of the Interior (DOI) on provisions pertaining to DOI.

H.R. 471, “Fix Our Forests Act”

H.R. 471 aims to “expedite under the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969 and improve forest management activities on National Forest System lands, on public lands under the jurisdiction of DOI, and on Tribal lands to return resilience to overgrown, fire-prone forested lands” through a variety of new programs and amendments to existing authorities. The bill compiles several separate bills related to wildfire risks, forest health, forest management, and other provisions included in the following titles and subtitles.

TITLE I—LANDSCAPE-SCALE RESTORATION

Subtitle A—Addressing Emergency Wildfire Risks in High Priority Firesheds

Subtitle A would provide for the designation of certain areas as fireshed management areas (Sec 101), provide for a publicly accessible Fireshed Registry including interactive geospatial data (Sec 103), and establish an interagency Fireshed Center (Sec 102). This subtitle would also direct USDA to carry out fireshed management projects in designated fireshed management areas and enter into a shared stewardship agreement with a Governor within 90 days of receiving a request from the Governor. These fireshed management projects are authorized under several permitting efficiencies. This subtitle would also increase the maximum project size under the existing categorical exclusions for forest restoration treatments and wildfire resilience to 10,000 acres, from 3,000 acres. It also would increase the area for conducting vegetation management activities to protect the greater sage-grouse or mule deer habitats to 10,000 acres, from 4,500.

USDA supports the use of fireshed data in helping set priorities for where resources are applied, recognizing that fireshed data is dynamic. USDA strongly supports streamlining procedures under NEPA and other permitting processes to reduce wildfire risk. USDA would like to work with the committee on technical changes to aid in their implementation.

Subtitle B—Expanding Collaborative Tools to Reduce Wildfire Risk and Improve Forest Health

Section 111 of Subtitle B would allow the Secretary to enter into a Good Neighbor Agreement with Special Districts in addition to States, Counties, and Tribes. This section would also allow the retained receipts by States, Counties, Tribes, and Special Districts to be used for certain construction of new permanent road and completion of new permanent road construction. Section

For release only by the

United States Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry

112 of Subtitle B would extend the maximum term for agreements and contracts executed under the Stewardship End Result Contracting Projects authority from 10 years to 20 years and would direct the Chief to pay a 10 percent cancellation or termination cost for any long-term agreements or contracts that are cancelled or terminated. Section 113 of this subtitle would direct the Secretaries to jointly establish intra-agency strike teams to address NEPA reviews, consultations under the National Historic Preservation Act and under the Endangered Species Act, site preparation work, and the implementation of fire management projects. Section 114 of this subtitle would raise the threshold at which timber sales must be advertised from a sale value of \$10,000 to \$55,000 and would direct the Secretary of Agriculture to increase this threshold annually based on the Consumer Price Index of All Urban Consumers published by the Department of Labor. This title also reauthorizes the Joint Chiefs Landscape Restoration Partnership Program (Sec 115) and the Collaborative Forest Landscape Restoration Program (Sec 116). Section 117 would direct the Chief of the Forest Service to develop a strategy to increase opportunities to utilize livestock grazing as a wildfire risk reduction strategy, including completion of NEPA reviews to allow permitted grazing on vacant grazing allotments during drought, wildfire, or other natural disasters; use of targeted grazing; increased use of temporary permits to promote fuels reduction and reduction of invasive grasses; and increased use of grazing as a postfire recovery and restoration strategy.

USDA supports each of these provisions in Subtitle B and would like to work with the Committee on technical changes to aid in their implementation.

Subtitle C – Addressing Frivolous Litigation

Section 121 of Subtitle C will prohibit a court from enjoining covered agency actions pertaining to fire management projects under this bill if the court determines that the plaintiff's claim is unlikely to succeed on the merits. Section 122 of this subtitle also pertains to Endangered Species Act (ESA) consultation, stating that the agency is not required to reinstate consultation under the ESA on a land management plan when a new species is listed, critical habitat is designated, or new information becomes available.

USDA supports the proposed fix to the problematic Cottonwood decision and wants to work with the Committee and our federal partners on technical changes to address this issue once and for all. USDA also supports the proposed judicial reforms found in subtitle C and would like to work with DOI, Department of Commerce and the Committee on technical changes to aid in their implementation.

TITLE II: PROTECTING COMMUNITIES IN THE WILDLAND-URBAN INTERFACE

Section 201 of the second title of the bill would establish an interagency program to support coordination in reducing the risk of fires in the wildland-urban interface. Section 202 of this title would also establish a program for the purpose of testing and advancing innovative designs to create wildfire resistant structures and communities. Additionally, Section 203 of this title would amend the Federal Lands Policy and Management Act of 1976 by increasing the required right-of-way for certain electric transmission and distribution facilities. Further, Section 204 of this title would establish a statutory categorical exclusion for certain electric utility line rights-of-way and related matters under the National Environmental Policy Act, as well as declaring these activities are subject to emergency procedures under ESA and the National Historic Preservation

For release only by the
United States Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry

Act. Finally, Section 205 of this title would require the development of an interagency strategy to enhance the domestic supply chain of seeds.

USDA supports each of the above provisions in Title II and wants to work with the Committee on technical changes to aid in their implementation.

In addition, Section 207 requires the standardization of reciprocal fire suppression cost share agreements. It directs the Secretaries of Agriculture and Interior to establish standard operating procedures related to fire suppression cost share. This is to ensure they are in alignment with Cooperative Fire Protection Agreements and that each agreement is reviewed and modified as necessary with State and local fire suppression organizations. The Forest Service already implements these requirements and has policy or handbook direction that accomplishes the elements of the bill. We remain committed to timely repayment of our state and local partners. In many cases, repayment involves a settlement process with our state and local partners, particularly where large, multi-jurisdictional wildfires are involved, that can last beyond the one-year requirement in this section. Overall, this section would reduce flexibility to update agency policy based on efficiencies or changing conditions of the CFPA program and partnership with State and Local government entities.

TITLE III: TRANSPARENCY, TECHNOLOGY, AND PARTNERSHIPS

Subtitle A – Transparency and Technology

Section 301 of the third title would establish a program for certain Federal agencies to enter into partnerships to carry out demonstration projects to support the development and commercialization of biochar. Section 302 of the title would require Federal agencies to publish an annual report on the number of acres on which hazardous fuels activities were carried out in the previous year. Additionally, Section 303 would establish a demonstration pilot program for new and innovative wildfire prevention, detection, communication, and mitigation technologies. Further, Section 304 would require the Government Accountability Office to conduct a study evaluating the effectiveness of Forest Service wildland firefighting operations and the suitability and feasibility of establishing a new Federal agency with responsibility for responding to and suppressing wildland fire on Federal lands. Section 306 would establish that the Secretary would not be in violation of the Forest and Rangeland Resources Planning Act of 1974 solely because more than 15 years have passed without revision of a land and resource management plan. This section would also require additional reporting to Congress regarding status of land and resource management plans and establishment of a central, publicly accessible website with information on the plans. Section 308 would require the Secretary to carry out a study on the infestation of pine beetles in the Northeast. Finally, Section 309 of this subtitle would allow the Secretary to provide permission to cut and remove trees or other vegetation from within the vicinity of distribution lines or transmission lines without requiring a separate timber sale.

USDA supports many of the provisions listed above in Subtitle A of Title III. We recommend that GAO review a broader range of options in terms of reorganizing programs to improve response and suppression of wildland fire on federal lands. We would like to work with the committee on technical changes to aid implementation of this subtitle.

For release only by the

United States Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry

Section 307 of this subtitle would require evaluation and reporting on the container aerial firefighting system (CAFFS) to assess the use of such system to mitigate and suppress wildfires. The agency, in coordination with National Interagency Aviation Committee, has previously studied this system and found significant operational and safety concerns to firefighters on the ground. While USDA appreciates the bill's intent to pursue new ideas in wildland fire suppression, USDA does not support the incorporation of containerized systems into our suppression response given firefighter safety and other operational concerns.

Subtitle B – White Oak Resilience

Subtitle B would establish activities to provide for white oak restoration including establishing a program to adopt a white oak restoration strategy, expand research on white oak, establish a formal USDA initiative on white oak restoration, and launch five pilot projects to restore white oak.

USDA supports this subtitle but would like to work with the Subcommittee on minor technical adjustments.

Conclusion

Chairman Marshall, Ranking Member Bennet, Members of the Subcommittee, as well as, Chairman Boozman, and Ranking Member Klobuchar, thank you for the opportunity to present USDA's views on this proposed legislation.

Karuk Community Health Clinic

64236 Second Avenue
Post Office Box 316
Happy Camp, CA 96039
Phone: (530) 493-5257
Fax: (530) 493-5270

Karuk Tribe**Administrative Office**

Phone: (530) 493-1600 • Fax: (530) 493-5322
64236 Second Avenue • Post Office Box 1016 • Happy Camp, CA 96039

Karuk Dental Clinic

64236 Second Avenue
Post Office Box 1016
Happy Camp, CA 96039
Phone: (530) 493-2201
Fax: (530) 493-5364

February 6, 2025

Chairman John Boozman
Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition &
Forestry
328A Russell Senate Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20510

Ranking Member Amy Klobuchar
Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition &
Forestry
328A Russell Senate Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20510

Re: H.R. 471 (Fix Our Forests Act) – Opposition to Chemical Treatments

Dear Chairman Boozman and Ranking Member Klobuchar,

In anticipation of the recently House-passed Fix Our Forests Act's pending referral to the Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition and Forestry, we, the Karuk Tribe, write to strongly urge the Committee to amend the Act to address the harmful and unnecessary inclusion of chemical treatments as fire-freshed management projects in Section 106, and particularly their authorization for use within an emergency context.

We appreciate the Act's Tribal provisions and the overall need to engage in more proactive stewardship to mitigate and prevent catastrophic wildfire, but believe this small change is critical to ensure this bill does not do more harm than good.

The Karuk Tribe is a federally-recognized Tribe with over 1.04 million acres of aboriginal lands in the middle Klamath Basin, and we are one of the largest Tribes in California, spanning into Oregon. Since time immemorial, Karuk People have subsisted on the bounty of the Klamath River and surrounding forests. Salmon, acorns, elk, deer, berries, and mushrooms are critical to Karuk culture. Our ceremonies celebrate the annual migration of salmon, and the stewardship, harvest and preservation of traditional foods, fibers and medicines are central to our culture.

Tribal people have used and continue to use lands now administered by federal agencies for food, fiber, and medicine since time immemorial. This is the case for 98% of our aboriginal lands. These lands are also the location of innumerable tribal cultural resources and ceremonial sites.

Section 106 of the Fix Our Forest Act offers environmental streamlining to a variety of "fire-freshed management projects" on lands administered by federal agencies, in order to reduce wildfire exposure and corresponding risk to communities, watersheds, and forests. Section 106(a)(2)(F) expressly includes chemical treatments in the list of potential projects. The inclusion of chemical treatments in this list will likely increase their use, while stripping away any opportunity for Tribes to raise concerns about their significant impacts through NEPA (the National Environmental Policy Act) or the NHPA (the National Heritage Preservation Act).

Chemical treatments, particularly herbicides, within the ancestral homeland of Tribes and Tribal people greatly increase the chances of accidental ingestion or exposure. Their use—particularly in areas of gathering and other activities—can cause or exacerbate many health conditions, including cancer and birth defects. Chemicals also have adverse effects on animals, plants, and entire ecosystems. For this

reason, many Tribes oppose the use of chemical treatments. We at the Karuk Tribe have banned their use with Karuk Aboriginal Territory within tribal law.

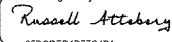
Instead of herbicide use, we promote the use of cultural and prescribed burning as well as manual removal, and other methods to control invasive plants and to foster species of interest. We also encourage co-management between Tribes and Federal agencies in order to support the use of time-tested Indigenous knowledge in the management decisions made about our homelands, and to foster their abundance, productivity, and resilience.

For this reason, we ask that the Senate take two steps to address this concern:

1. Remove chemical treatments from the list of fireshed management projects under Section 106(a)(2)(F).
2. Ensure that the environmental streamlining provided in the bill (particularly in Section 106(a)(3)), is available only for projects that have been identified through a fireshed assessment completed under Section 105 in conjunction with the relevant Indian Tribe.

Thank you for your time and consideration. If you have any questions or to discuss further, please contact Sara Clark at clark@smwlaw.com.

Yôotva (Thank you),

DocuSigned by:

85DCDEB4D77C4BA...
Russell "Buster" Attebery
Karuk Tribal Chairman



WILDERNESS WATCH
Keeping Wilderness Wild

P.O. Box 9175 | Missoula, MT 59807 | 406.542.2048 | wild@wildernesswatch.org | www.wildernesswatch.org

Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry
Subcommittee on Conservation, Forestry, Natural Resources, and Biotechnology
328A Russell Senate Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20510

Hon. Roger Marshall
Chair

Hon. Michael Bennet
Ranking Member

March 13, 2025

Dear Senate Agriculture Subcommittee:

Below is information on the Fix Our Forests Act (FOFA) submitted on behalf of Wilderness Watch. The Subcommittee held a hearing on this bill March 6, 2025. We respectfully request that you add this submission to the record because it contains necessary information to properly analyze and evaluate this proposed legislation. Information in this submission addresses the question about whether this bill can address the problem it proposes to address. While there are many concerning parts to this legislation, we limit our letter to address some high-level questions with focus on impacts to Wilderness.

Wilderness Watch is a national, grassroots organization dedicated to defending the nation's 112-million-acre National Wilderness Preservation System and keeping it wild. Wilderness makes up less than five percent of the United States, less than three percent of the Lower 48. Our work is guided by the visionary 1964 Wilderness Act, which was a nonpartisan piece of legislation. The Wilderness Act passed the Senate 73 to 12, and passed the House 374 to 1. Congress esteemed the designation of a Wilderness System as necessary, "in order to assure that an increasing population, accompanied by expanding settlement and growing mechanization, does not occupy and modify all areas within the United States and its possessions, leaving no lands designated for preservation and protection in their natural condition..." 16 U.S.C. §1131(a).

Fundamental to this nonpartisan Wilderness idea is that, once Wilderness is designated, it evolves as nature decides. Units of the National Wilderness Preservation System are untrammeled—i.e. unmanipulated—by us. What happens in Wilderness should be determined by the same evolutionary forces that have shaped these ecosystems for millennia, and not the short-term whims of politics.

Wilderness has scientific value. The Senate Committee on Interior and Insular Affairs, which recommended this legislation, recognized that Wilderness is a control group. Controls groups are part of experiments that do not receive the experimental treatment. For our public lands, Wilderness are the baseline control group in the experiment we call “land management” and by which we should be measuring the efficacy of management activities.¹

Bills exist to solve problems. The Fix Our Forests Act is no solution because it does not answer the relevant questions—the bill assumes activities like thinning and grazing will reduce wildfire risk. But these assumptions are not supported by the science, which supports an opposite conclusion. Allowing carte blanche on these activities with minimal environmental review, as the Fix Our Forests Act does, will 1) fail to solve the problem, and 2) potentially make the problem worse.

Before discussing how the bill fails to solve the problem, Wilderness Watch wants to distinguish the problem from a natural phenomenon. Fire in communities is the problem. Wildfires in forests, including high-severity wildfires, existed before the U.S. Forest Service started “managing” forests. For example, the Great Fire of 1910—before modern “forest management,” burned three million acres across Washington, northern Idaho, and western Montana in a couple of days.

High severity fire is good for forests

For Wilderness, and for nature, post-high-severity-burn forests are some of the most biodiverse places in the forest. Severely burned forests have smorgasbords of food for birds and nesting places, and, initially at least, less predators. “Far from destroying forests, [inevitable and largely unstoppable] fires touch off a frenzy of ecological activity—a tumult of new plants, mushrooms, insects, amphibians, birds, and mammals—that’s unlike anything that happens in the quiet shade of a green forest.” [Powell, Hugh. *Old Flames: The Tangled History of Forest Fires, Wildlife, and People* \(June 17, 2019\).](#) Dr. Hutto, who accompanied the author of this article, found early in his research days that birds seek out burned forests: “After visiting 34 burns in the first two years after the [1988] Yellowstone [National Park] fires, he found 15 species that were nowhere more abundant in the Northern Rockies than in young burns.” *Id.*

Severe fires have been around long before forest management. Black-backed woodpeckers, as their name suggests, camouflage into the bark of the trees where they dig out insects. [More mushrooms are more prevalent post-burn areas.](#) This Committee should follow Dr. Hutto’s thinking and ask, “If crown fires are an anomaly, a lapse of proper forest management...then how can there be so many examples of animals that over millennia have evolved ways to find and capitalize on them?” *Id.*

¹Senate Committee on Interior and Insular Affairs report on S. 4, “Establishing a National Wilderness Preservation System for the Permanent Good of the Whole People, and for Other Purposes.” Senate Report 88-109 (April 3, 1963).

Severe wildfires in forests are not the problem. The problem is fire in communities. To solve that problem, the Committee should understand what drives and spreads these severe fires, and what has proven most effective the community to the extent possible.

Weather and climate are the primary drivers of wildfire, but logging and grazing can enhance that risk as secondary factors

Severe wildfires are primarily climate and weather driven. Senator Booker and Senator Warnock correctly characterized the root of longer fire seasons, which is climate change. Senator Schiff correctly recognized that the 100 mile-per-hour winds in a California wildfire as an “irresistible force.” The Great Fire of 1910 was the product of little fires burning over the course of an uncharacteristically hot and dry summer whipped up over the course of a weekend by hurricane force winds. In September 2017, when the Eagle Creek Fire in the Columbia River Gorge National Scenic Area started, the fire took hold quickly because the area hadn’t had rain in 83 days. Wind strength caused the Eagle Creek Fire to jump the Columbia River. The fire jumped *water*. Thinning, prescribed burning, and grazing activities can’t create rain or stop winds, so even with anecdotal evidence, it is remarkable to accept the premise that such activities could “reduce” or impact fire severity or the wind force that spreads fires.

Beyond anecdotes, science supports that “vegetation management,” if it has any effect, will exacerbate fire risk. In one of the biggest studies of fire in the western United States, researchers compared areas of vegetation management against protected areas like Wilderness. Researchers found that, when compared to Wilderness, logged areas are likely to burn more intensely.² This means that when climate and weather are already present, the “forest management”—i.e., logging from thinning to more exploitative tree removal—so heavily promoted in the Fix Our Forests Act is a secondary driver that can increase a fire’s intensity.³

There is scientific support that more grazing will exacerbate fire risk. Invasive grasses are more flammable than native grasses across U.S. ecoregions.⁴ Logically, when invasive grasses outcompete native grasses, fire risk increases. Invasive grasses are inversely related to biocrust cover, which means when there is more biocrust—i.e., lichens, mosses, and cyanobacteria that form a crust on the surface of the soil—invasive grasses are less likely to occur. Biocrust prevents the fast seedling germination that cause invasive grasses to establish and spread. The

² Bradley et al. 2016. Does increased forest protection correspond to higher fire severity in frequent-fire forests of the western United States? *ECOSPHERE* Vol. 7(10) Article e01492, pp. 1-13, available at <https://esajournals.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1002/ecs2.1492> (The short answer is “No.”)

³ Intensely managed areas that have burned are dissimilar from protected areas because many trees, including the biggest, most mature (and coincidentally the most commercially valuable) trees have been removed. These places do not have an abundance of food or nesting spots for the insects and wildlife that would normally move in because there are no trees.

⁴ Fusco et al. 2019. Invasive grasses increase fire occurrence and frequency across US Ecoregions. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America*, Vol. 116(47) pp23594-99, available at <https://www.pnas.org/doi/abs/10.1073/pnas.1908253116>.

Fix Our Forests Act promotes increased grazing, however, which breaks up biocrust and causes the disturbance that allows invasive grasses to establish and spread.⁵ Because grazing creates the disturbance that reduces biocrust and allows for more flammable grasses, increasing grazing will increase fire risk. Grazing is an activity grandfathered into Wilderness, so the extent to which this bill might allow for increased grazing will indiscriminately enhance invasive grasses and fire risk in Wilderness.

Reducing the flammability of the home and immediate surroundings can protect structures, and preparedness planning for evacuation procedures can save lives

Anecdotal and scientifically, the Fix Our Forests Act is based on erroneous presumptions. The problem to be solved is not the severity of fire, but how communities can protect themselves. The answer, according to US Forest Service researcher Dr. Jack Cohen, is to focus on the home and its immediate surroundings. Dr. Cohen's research found the risk of structure loss in a fire is directly related to how flammable that structure is, so reducing home loss means reducing home ignitability and the ignitability within the first 40 meters around the home. "Homes with low ignitability can survive high-intensity wildland fires, whereas highly ignitable homes can be destroyed during lower-intensity fires."⁶

Because structure loss is directly related to structure ignitability, protecting people and structures must focus on the house and community out and not the wildlands in. Zoning and local ordinances—which is not Congressional jurisdiction—are important to force safer building practices (or restrict building) in wildland-urban interfaces. But, Congress may incentivize activities undertaken to enable homes to mitigate threats from fire.

There have been at least two bills introduced into the House that focus on more effective practices. The bipartisan H.R. 582 Community Protection and Wildfire Resilience Act is comprehensive and focuses on home hardening, defensible space, education, and evacuation plans. Another bill, H.R. 948, which was introduced by a Republican, would incentivize home hardening with tax credits, bringing the focus to making homes less flammable. At present, both of these bills are still in their assigned House committees.

Provisions on judicial review

The section of the bill that substantially weakens judicial review of agency actions is problematic for public lands and Wilderness. The administrative process and judicial review exist to prevent agencies from making mistakes or bad decisions. If this bill were to become law, consider the

⁵ Root et al. 2019. Grazing disturbance promotes exotic annual grasses by degrading soil biocrust communities. *Ecological Applications*, Vol 30(1), e02016, pp. 1-10, available at <https://esajournals.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1002/eap.2016>.

⁶ Cohen, J.D. 2000. Preventing Disaster: Home ignitability in the wildland-urban interface. *Journal of Forestry* Vol. 98(3), pp. 15-21, available at <https://research.fs.usda.gov/treesearch/download/4688.pdf>.

following example of how this provision might hurt a unit of the National Wilderness Preservation System. The U.S. Forest Service approves a categorical exclusion (CE) under this bill, but includes part of a Wilderness in the approved logging activities. The agency neglected to address public comment calling out this error (if the public was invited to participate under the Fix Our Forests Act). Even if the US Forest Service mistakenly authorized logging in Wilderness, for example by applying a FOFA Act CE that exempts Wilderness, a court will still use FOFA to review the agency action. That means a violation FOFA and the Wilderness Act must be brought within 120 days. The bill limits what can be enjoined, and if a plaintiff cannot satisfy that burden before litigating the merits of the claim, logging may commence and even continue during a remand. For a case where the authorized project did not comply with FOFA, Wilderness could be logged before the illegal agency action could be corrected with judicial review.

Wilderness Watch opposes this bill. Many of authorized activities would worsen wildfire, increasing the risk to communities. Beyond the erroneous premise upon which the measures in this bill are built, activities that encompass Wilderness will degrade wilderness qualities. Wilderness is exactly where natural processes like high-severity fire should be allowed to play its ecological role, and while this bill exempts Wilderness from some activities, it doesn't exempt Wilderness from all of them. Finally, the NEPA amendments in this bill prevents those who monitor our public lands from stopping would-be illegal management decisions and activities.

Thank you for your consideration. Please reach out to Wilderness Watch if you have any questions.

Regards,



Katie Bilodeau, M.S., J.D.
Legislative Director / Policy Analyst
Wilderness Watch
kbilodeau@wildernesswatch.org

Marko Bey, Executive Director
Lomakatsi Restoration Project
645 Washington Street
Ashland, OR 97520



March 3, 2025

Senator Adam Schiff
B408 Dirksen Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Senator Schiff,

Lomakatsi Restoration Project is a forestry operations and workforce development nonprofit organization with offices in Ashland, Oregon and Alturas, California. For 30 years, we have worked throughout Oregon and northern California to make forests healthier and reduce wildfire risk while creating jobs and sustaining local timber industries.

The vast majority of federally administered forests in western states are tremendously overly dense and at very high wildfire risk. These conditions have resulted in devastating impacts to adjacent communities in recent years. Lomakatsi brings substantial capacity, efficiency, and co-investment to partnerships with federal and state natural resource agencies, Native American Tribes, and nongovernmental organizations, providing leadership in all aspects of project development, planning, and implementation working across all lands. Our work has resulted in thousands of acres of ecologically based hazardous fuels reduction, millions of board feet of timber sent to local mills as the byproducts of forest health treatments, and potentially billions of dollars saved in avoided property damage and wildland firefighting costs.

Lomakatsi has scaled up our organization substantially in response to requests from federal, tribal, state, municipal, and industry partners for our leadership and capacity in building strategic, collaborative fuels reduction and forest health initiatives. Our unique model addresses the impacts of the wildfire crisis on communities across the West, utilizing a win-win approach that helps protect homes, critical infrastructure, valuable natural resources, and working agricultural landscapes while integrating workforce training and supporting local forestry service providers and timber operators. We currently have active stewardship and cooperative agreements with the U.S. Forest Service, Bureau of Land Management, U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, Bureau of Indian Affairs, Natural Resources Conservation Service, and National Park Service, covering thousands of acres of public, tribal, and private land.

LOMAKATSI.ORG (541) 488 0208 645 WASHINGTON STREET, ASHLAND, OR 97520

The current freeze of Bipartisan Infrastructure Law and Inflation Reduction Act funds impacts Lomakatsi's ability to continue this important work. We have already had to lay off 20% of our 95 FTE staff, including foresters, wildland fire professionals, and crew members, with potential further layoffs if the funding continues to be withheld. Our workforce development initiatives are now facing significant budget shortfalls, preventing vital job training and employment opportunities for rural and tribal communities throughout Oregon, California, and Idaho. We have been forced to issue stop work orders, halting operations on many of our active projects and associated contracts with local private contractors that are sustaining hundreds of additional jobs. Seven timber sales on National Forest System lands that we are co-administering through stewardship authority are also on hold, preventing millions of board feet from reaching the local mills and wood products manufacturing facilities that this work helps sustain.

The freeze has impacted pending awards as well as active agreements that are already putting work on the ground. The attached spreadsheet details the funding mechanism, initiative, and status of more than 30 separate grants and agreements totaling almost \$39 million that were frozen. These dollars would otherwise be supporting wildfire mitigation and economic opportunities for some of the most at-risk communities in the entire country. Some of these funds have become available since the initial freeze, but much of our work remains disrupted and halted as we await additional guidance.

A number of these projects take place in California. We completed over 2,300 acres of hand pile burning on the Modoc National Forest on a Wildfire Crisis Landscape and are preparing the first of a series of timber sales across 3,000 acres. We are currently awaiting reimbursement of over \$300,000 for this work from the Forest Service.

We appreciate your leadership in addressing the forest health and wildfire challenges facing our landscapes and communities. We respectfully request your prompt attention to this urgent situation that puts many people, communities, and forest resources within your district at risk, impacting jobs and the timber products industry. We would like to schedule a meeting or call with you as soon as possible to provide more information and discuss how we can work together to find solutions. Please let us know how we can support you in resolving this funding freeze to prevent any further delays to our critical work for the safety of many of the communities you represent.

Sincerely,



Marko Bey, Executive Director
Lomakatsi Restoration Project



Statement by
Maggie O'Knapp, Farmer Owner of Milkmaid Manor Farm
Director of The New Mexico Bison Restoration Network
Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition and Forestry
Hearing on Perspectives From the Field: Risk Management, Credit, and Rural Business
Views on the Agricultural Economy Part 3
March 11, 2025

Maggie O'Knapp, New Mexico

I started college in 2008, during the last global financial crisis. Despite earning a scholarship covering half my tuition for being in the top 2% of students in the University of California system, tuition began doubling each year starting in my second semester. My scholarship didn't increase, and like so many young people, I graduated with student loan debt despite working up to four side jobs while attending school full-time. Disillusioned with academia and struggling to find job prospects despite graduating *summa cum laude*, I resolved to do what I loved: farming. I enrolled in a rigorous regenerative farm school and committed myself to growing food for my community. I've been passionate about growing healthful local food for my community since I was 15. I have now grown food every season for the past 18 years.

After completing farm school, I worked on farms across the country, doing everything from milking cows, goats, and sheep to butchering poultry and livestock. I regularly started work at 4 a.m. with a headlamp, working ten-hour shifts to beat the 120-degree heat in northern California. I learned to run down the rows with the wheel hoe for four-hour shifts twice a day to get all the weeding done on a 100-acre organic farm, all while facing injuries and never having health insurance. Despite years of hard labor, I never made more than minimum wage, and there was no way I could have saved enough to buy my own farm. Like many first-generation farmers, I was unaware of USDA's Farm Service Agency (FSA) loan programs and struggled to access the resources I needed to build a viable farm business.

I was extraordinarily lucky to be able to purchase an old adobe house on two and a half acres in Santa Fe, New Mexico last year, using a life insurance payout. I had been renting the house for

two years prior, working to build up the soil, install irrigation, and practice dryland agriculture in an extremely challenging climate that is shifting rapidly due to climate change. While working full-time and farming on the side, I spent the last year writing grants to fund my vision. I was awarded a **\$250,000 Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) grant** and a **\$25,000 Western Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education (SARE) grant** for a bison reintroduction and rangeland restoration project focused on community food security and climate resilience. These funds would have allowed me to create a regional demonstration site for carbon sequestration, conduct scientific trials on virtual fencing for bison, and contribute to cooperative economic development in rural New Mexico.

Now, these grants—along with three additional urban farming and bison restoration grants I applied for—have been frozen due to the federal funding impasse. Every side job I applied for in the natural resource field has lost its funding as well. Meanwhile, I purchased my farm at a time of peak speculation on land prices, and **my property taxes and home insurance have both doubled in the past year alone.**

My experience reflects the systemic challenges young and beginning farmers face nationwide. The **2022 National Young Farmer Survey** found that **59% of young farmers struggle to access land**, citing high costs, competition from non-farm investors, and lack of available financing as primary barriers. The **2022 Ag Census** further confirms that **the number of beginning farmers is declining**, and that land consolidation continues to push out small-scale producers.

Nearly two decades after the 2008 financial crisis, which stunted economic opportunities for many in my generation, I am once again at risk of losing everything I have worked so hard to attain—just as I am finally in a position to grow food for my community. To farm, I have had to become **a scientist, a grant writer, a policy advocate, and an entrepreneur**, spending thousands of hours at a computer just to secure the resources needed to get back outside and farm. I even returned to school for restoration ecology to better understand how to farm and tend watersheds in an aridifying world rapidly losing biodiversity. Without native pollinators, we risk losing the ability to grow food altogether.

I have spent eighteen years cultivating the expertise to be able to reliably produce food under the increasingly dire and uncertain circumstances of drought, flood, wildfire, pollution, and economic uncertainty. When you commit your life to being a farmer, there aren't other jobs that you can readily get. It is a sacrifice, it requires devotion, and it is always only possible on a knife's edge. I had planned to rely on the income and capital infusion from my awarded grants to launch my farm commercially this year. The land requires significant investment to restore soil health, remove invasive tumbleweeds, and build organic matter. **Without those funds, I now face the possibility of losing my farm before I've even begun.**

In searching for alternatives, I looked into an FSA loan to refinance my costly mortgage, only to find that my land is ineligible for support. Because it was not previously farmed, I am prohibited from breaking new ground under FSA's highly erodible land classification—even though the soil

is already severely degraded and overtaken by tumbleweeds. I watch it erode further every day in the spring winds. While I understand the intent of these conservation protections, they fail to account for my 18 years of experience in regenerative agriculture and my degree in restoration ecology—expertise that would allow me to rebuild this land into a thriving, sustainable farm. I have spent years restoring degraded soil and studying how to farm in arid environments—one of the main reasons I moved to New Mexico. As farmland around the world rapidly aridifies, farmers must learn to adapt to these conditions. Yet, despite my expertise, **there are no exceptions in FSA's policies that allow me to secure a loan to turn severely degraded land overrun with tumbleweeds into a thriving organic farm and demonstration site that would benefit pollinators, birds, and wildlife.**

Additionally, because FSA Direct Farm Ownership Loans require three years of farm management experience and are inaccessible to farmers just starting out like me, I am unable to refinance my expensive mortgage through their programs. However, **the same FSA loans can be used to purchase a rural home or old farm without requiring the buyer to keep it in production—an inconsistency that discourages farmland restoration.** When I spoke with an FSA agent, I was told that to bypass the "no breaking new ground" rule, I would need to have farmed this site for three years before qualifying for assistance. But I cannot legally farm my own land because I **lack the required water rights** to use even my own domestic well for any "benefit"—a term that includes operating a nonprofit farm serving low-income communities in northern New Mexico.

Acquiring surface water rights in New Mexico is prohibitively expensive and complex, requiring approval from multiple state agencies and the local acequia association, which can still deny my usage even after purchase. **No FSA or federal funding exists to help farmers acquire essential water rights, making it nearly impossible to legally irrigate newly restored farmland.** A more viable and legally permissible option would be to recycle gray water, but gray water is not recommended for annual crops, and there is no funding—FSA or otherwise—to help farmers install the necessary infrastructure, which in my case would be costly.

For my bison restoration project, I explored the possibility of applying for FSA funding, but to qualify, I would need at least one year of tax records proving prior experience ranching bison. Once again, **FSA funding is inaccessible for starting a farm operation**, even though I have extensive experience managing herd animals for other farms and have worked with two goat cooperatives for the past three years.

To qualify, I would have needed to demonstrate existing access to credit and land—two of the greatest barriers young farmers face. Bison and land leases are both prohibitively expensive, yet FSA credit does not support farmers in overcoming these upfront costs. **The reality is that FSA loans are not structured to help farmers start new agricultural enterprises; they are only available to those who have already managed to get started by other means.** This fundamental gap in federal support leaves first-generation farmers like me without a viable path to launching a farm business.

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

MARCH 6, 2025



TO: U.S. Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry Subcommittee on Conservation, Forestry, Natural Resources, and Biotechnology
FROM: Matt Weiner, CEO, Megafire Action
RE: Questions for the Record Response - Legislative Hearing to Review H.R. 471, the Fix Our Forests Act, and Options to Reduce Catastrophic Wildfire
DATE: March 28, 2025

Senator Michael Bennet (D-CO)

1. If Congress were to pass the Fix Our Forests Act today, would the Forest Service and other land management agencies have the funding and staff needed to implement forestry projects as quickly as they were able to permit them?

At its core, the Fix Our Forests Act tackles two key challenges: permitting reform and technology adoption for improved decision making—both essential to scaling up effective wildfire mitigation. This legislation will not resolve the long-standing workforce and budget constraints that have plagued wildfire mitigation and response for decades, but it does represent a critical and necessary step toward a more proactive and science-driven approach to wildfire management and building resilience. This bill would help agencies focus resources on project implementation by reducing staff time spent on permitting, planning, and technology deployment.

Wildfire policy is only as effective as the workforce that implements it. Federal wildland firefighters are among the most dedicated public servants in the country, yet we continue to ask the impossible of them—longer fire seasons, grueling conditions, and life-threatening risks—all while failing to provide the pay, benefits, and stability they deserve. The Fix Our Forests Act's inclusion of casualty assistance for wildland firefighters in the Department of the Interior is a critical step in the right direction, but much more is needed in future legislation, including a solution for the break-in-service issue.

Without additional investment, workforce and budgetary reforms, even the best policies and technology will fall short. Congress should act swiftly to establish competitive pay, invest in resilience, improve benefits, and expand hiring to ensure we have the wildfire workforce necessary to meet the escalating wildfire threat.



2. What is the scale of investment necessary to make these strategies a reality?

Funding is essential, and fixing the way we approve and implement wildfire mitigation work is just as critical—otherwise, no amount of money will be enough to keep up with the scale of the crisis.

Megafire Action applauds Senator Bennet and others for introducing the Protect the West Act which would crucially invest in expanding wildfire resilience, restoring watersheds, and reducing fire suppression costs. The Fix Our Forests Act ensures that funding from standard appropriations and other introduced legislation such as the Protect the West Act actually gets put to work on the ground in a timely manner.

Importantly, the Fix Our Forests Act ensures that existing funding is spent efficiently and effectively by:

- **Cutting delays:** Currently, it can take years to approve fuels reduction projects—the Fix Our Forests Act ensures that existing resources can be deployed immediately in high-risk areas.
- **Scaling wildfire intelligence and mitigation:** The bill expands the Fireshed Center’s decision support tools, ensuring that federal, state, and local dollars are used strategically, not reactively.
- **Leveraging private and state investment:** By reducing red tape, the Fix Our Forests Act makes it easier for state, Tribal, and private partners to contribute to wildfire mitigation efforts, including through shared stewardship.

The Fix Our Forests Act creates new programs that have the potential to transform the way the federal government responds to wildfire with significant cost savings. To ensure these programs are effective, we recommend future, dedicated appropriations for several key initiatives.

Congress should look to appropriate dedicated funding to the Fireshed Center and should consider a dedicated wildfire technology fund to ensure that innovative solutions are outcome oriented, and not in competition with traditional IT priorities. In addition to annual appropriations, Congress should also view any disaster supplementals or other funding bills as an opportunity to jump start these critical



investments.

Dedicated funding for the Fireshed Center will help leverage the billions of dollars allocated annually for fuels management, fire suppression, R&D, and disaster recovery and maximize impact with technological decision support, ensuring high taxpayer ROI. A fully funded Center will break down silos and inefficiencies across agencies, enabling precise, data-driven coordination that maximizes outcomes and reduces wildfire risk. The Center will also serve as the hub for deploying cutting edge wildfire technologies across the US.

Existing deployments of innovative wildfire technologies have demonstrated their ability to increase the effectiveness of taxpayer-funded programs and are ready to scale nationwide. However, federal agencies lack the appropriate funding, authorities, and budgetary incentives for exploring cost-saving technologies due to the significant separation that exists between fire suppression budgeting and land management budgeting. By funding the Fix Our Forests Act's Technology Deployment and Demonstration Pilot Program, the federal government could deploy key wildfire technologies related to:

- Remote sensing, detection, and tracking
- Prioritization and decision support tools to maximize investments and report on ROI
- Hazardous fuels reduction treatments
- Common operating pictures or operational dashboards
- Autonomous suppression systems
- Grid resilience, community resilience, and home hardening
- Artificial intelligence applications for all the above functions

Immediate deployment of available solutions is essential to protecting communities, reducing suppression/recovery costs, and maximizing federal wildfire mitigation investments.

3. What is the role of Congress and the U.S. Forest Service?

Federal fire agencies often lack the appropriate acquisition authorities for acquiring cutting edge solutions from the private sector. These same agencies also lack appropriate budgetary incentives for exploring cost-saving technologies due to the significant separation that exists between fire suppression funding, forest and



rangeland management funding, and IT/technology budgeting. To help address these gaps, Congress may wish to authorize existing funding to be used for the acquisition of key wildfire technologies. The Committee should also consider looking at Forest Service’s procurement authority, which lags far behind agencies like DOD, NASA, NOAA and DOE when it comes to rapidly deploying technology to meet agency goals. We are happy to work with the Committee on strengthening the bill’s role in getting proven technologies to those who need them.

The U.S. Forest Service can continue to work with Congress and other agencies with wildfire mitigation and management responsibilities to implement the goals of the Wildfire Crisis Strategy utilizing the tools from the Fix Our Forests Act. Over a period of 10 years, the Wildfire Crisis Strategy calls for:

- (1) Treating up to an additional 20 million acres on the National Forest System in the West, over and above current treatment levels;
- (2) Treating up to an additional 30 million acres on other Federal, State, Tribal, and private lands in the West; and
- (3) Developing a plan for long-term maintenance beyond the 10 years

We are nowhere close to meeting these goals. In fiscal year 2024, the Forest Service treated 803,633 acres across the Wildfire Crisis Strategy landscapes—a record high for the agency—but still far short of what is needed. To truly get ahead of this crisis, we must go beyond the standard 2 to 3 million acres treated annually and scale up by millions more.¹

Senator Adam Schiff (D-CA)

1. Throughout the fires in the Los Angeles area earlier this year, fires burned rapidly across homes and communities. As we’ve seen in previous fast-moving, urban conflagrations, such as those in Hawaii and Colorado, the initial fuel is often grass, but high winds and fast-moving flames create structure-to-structure fires and urban conflagrations. What does the House-passed version of this bill do to guarantee that we reduce the risk of homes burning? How can Congress provide assurances that homes will be

¹ <https://www.fs.usda.gov/sites/default/files/Wildfire-Crisis-Implementation-Plan.pdf>



hardened and communities will be prepared, as is increasingly called for by experts?

Wildfire is no longer just a forest management issue—it’s a growing crisis in the built environment, where fires are destroying entire neighborhoods burning through houses but not the trees. We’ve seen devastating urban firestorms, from the Los Angeles fires to fast-moving blazes in Hawaii, Colorado and Texas, where embers spread from home to home just as quickly as they do through dry vegetation. Recent fires in California provide a sobering case study. The 2025 Fires in Los Angeles County destroyed over 56 percent of all properties in Pacific Palisades and nearly half of the properties in Altadena.² According to UCLA Anderson School of Management, total property and capital losses from these fires range between \$95 billion and \$164 billion, with insured losses estimated at \$75 billion, comparable levels of damage to major hurricanes like Hurricane Katrina.³ These fires claimed 29 lives, underscoring the deadly consequences of inadequate wildfire mitigation in the WUI. When homes become the fuel, traditional wildfire mitigation strategies alone aren’t enough.

The Fix Our Forests Act sends an important signal that work in the built environment is critical, and more can be done to ensure its success. The Fix Our Forests Act takes an important step in addressing wildfire risk in the built environment through the Community Wildfire Risk Reduction Program (CWRRP), which supports:

- **Home Hardening and Defensible Space** – fire-resistant materials, retrofits, and defensible space strategies to reduce home ignition risk.
- **Grid and Infrastructure Resilience** – Supporting grid modernization and fire-resistant infrastructure to prevent utility-caused ignitions.
- **CWPPs** – technical assistance for local governments to develop and update Community Wildfire Protection Plans

The Fireshed Center will provide support for Community Wildfire Protection Plans (CWPPs), wildfire smoke and air quality monitoring, and post-fire recovery efforts, including vegetation and watershed restoration, debris flow prevention, and flood

²<https://www.latimes.com/california/story/2025-02-21/real-estate-losses-from-palisades-and-eaton-fires-top-30-billion>

³ Ibid.



mitigation. All of these functions are important activities to prepare for, prevent, respond, and recover from wildfires.

CWPPs are a key tool in wildfire preparedness, but their current planning process is slow and resource-intensive. Los Angeles has been working on its CWPP since 2020 and has yet to finalize it—despite having significant resources and technical expertise.⁴ This means that Los Angeles, despite the highest concentration of wildfire risk across the country, didn't receive a cent of Community Wildfire Defense Grant funding.

For smaller, less-resourced communities across the country, this process is even more challenging. The Fix Our Forests Act helps address these barriers by providing technical assistance through the Fireshed Center and Community Wildfire Risk Reduction Program, ensuring all communities, regardless of size or resources, have access to the support needed to understand and reduce their wildfire risk. By equipping communities with better predictive tools, improved coordination, and access to real-time fire intelligence, the Fix Our Forests Act provides critical resources to help cities like Los Angeles—and fire-prone communities across the country—prepare for and mitigate the impacts of future wildfires.

Additionally, the Fix Our Forests Act strengthens the Joint Fire Science Program by incorporating a new research initiative focused on innovative designs for wildfire-resistant structures and communities. It also establishes a competition to drive innovation in resilient building practices, ensuring that emerging technologies and best practices are rapidly integrated into community planning efforts. Sen. Ben Ray Luján's Regional Leadership in Wildland Fire Research Act would build on this momentum by establishing regional research centers across the country.

The Committee should consider additional provisions to improve the bill's approach to community resilience including the creation of an accountability structure, such as an advisory body, to empower state and local governments in community hardening efforts. Furthermore, there should be an explicit focus on structure hardening to prevent home-to-home fire spread in urban firestorms.

⁴<https://www.npr.org/2025/01/15/nx-s1-5256348/los-angeles-fires-safety-evacuation-improvement-preparation>



The Committee should also consider improvements to the structure of Community Wildfire Defense Grants and Hazardous Fuels Management provisions within the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA) and the Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) to ensure that funds can flow not just to forested landscapes, but to other regions like Los Angeles. The definition of “at-risk communities” in the Community Wildfire Defense Grant Program could also be improved to ensure funds flow to the highest risk communities.

The IIJA and IRA included over \$5 billion for hazardous fuels management, but in Southern California, the impact of these investments was virtually nonexistent. For example, the federal government underinvested in treatment projects around Altadena in part because of a flawed, forest-centric funding model that overlooked the proven value of fuel treatments in chaparral landscapes within the Southern California Fireshed.

Advanced modeling from several firetech companies shows that a robust fuel break network could have made a difference in preventing a wildland fire from becoming a devastating structure to structure conflagration, and that \$9 million in mitigation work could have helped avoid \$40 billion in wildfire damage. The Fix Our Forests Act would directly address permitting delays that also prevented fuel breaks from being completed in time.

The National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) imposes lengthy environmental reviews that delay critical wildfire prevention work for years. In the case of the Eaton Fire, fuel break projects in its immediate burn path were held up for four years due to NEPA red tape.⁵ By the time work finally started in 2024, it was too late to make a difference.

⁵ <https://www.fs.usda.gov/project/angeles/?project=57599>

Agriculture Committee
Subcommittee on Conservation, Forestry, Natural Resources, and Biotechnology
*Legislative Hearing to Review H.R. 471, the Fix Our Forests Act, and Options to Reduce
Catastrophic Wildfire*
March 6, 2025
Questions for the Record
Mr. Frank Beum

Senator Michael Bennet

1. Pulling from your own decades of experience, how might recent firings and the reductions in force affect the agency's ability to respond to wildfires, manage visitation, or do forest management work this summer?

NAFSR Response: The sweeping, random staffing cuts of probationary employees, along with nearly 1,000 staff who took deferred resignations; implementation of additional voluntary authorities such as Voluntary Early Retirement Authority and Voluntary Separation Incentives Payments; and the likely additional Reductions in Force, threaten to hollow out the agency. While the Department was required by the Merit System Protection Board to re-hire the probationary employees for 45 days, their long-term status is unclear. As a result, there will be fewer staff to respond to wildfires, manage visitation, complete essential forest management work, and implement the Administration's priorities.

Many of these probationary employees are field-going employees essential to complete the work on the ground to reduce wildfire risk to communities through planned fuel reduction projects that will go uncompleted. Many have Red Card fire qualifications critical to supporting wildfire suppression efforts. Two of the most seasoned Forest Service leaders in Colorado vital to administering response to large-scale wildfires left the agency. Additionally, there will be fewer employees to conduct storm recovery, maintain campgrounds, clear trails, layout timber sales, and provide myriad other multiple use goods and services.

While we understand the need to reduce costs and improve efficiencies, the cuts thus far do not resemble a planned effort focused on the needs of the American people. The wide-spread scale of these cuts will have massive implications. It is a fallacy to think that more can be done with less at the scale being proposed.

2. The Fix Our Forests Act emphasizes cross-jurisdictional planning and forest resilience work in "firesheds" of roughly 250,000 acres each – and specifically, within those representing the top 20 percent of wildfire exposure and risk. Nationally, this equates to approximately 385 million acres of land. How much do you estimate it would cost to conduct wildfire resilience projects at this scale?

NAFSR Response: The roughly \$5 billion provided by the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law and the Inflation Reduction Act to address the wildfire crisis, while very significant, was always considered a down payment towards the full need. While we are unaware of an actual projection

for the full cost required to complete this work, it would not be an understatement to say the cost is likely many multiples of the initial investment of \$5 billion across many years of sustained effort. We defer to the agency for a more accurate figure.

3. Under the Fix Our Forests Act, a project can move from conception to completion without any public input. A project can be proposed as part of a Fireshed Assessment in a process led by state and federal government with no public input and with an explicit waiver from the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA). Once named in a Fireshed Assessment, the project can get underway using emergency authorities. The project would then be eligible for a Categorical Exclusion under NEPA no matter the specifics, in a process which has less public input than an Environmental Assessment or Environmental Impact Statement. If communities do have concerns, they will be shut out from the courts due to limitations on standing, including a requirement for litigants to have commented on an agency document that may not even have been published or noticed.
 - How do limitations on public engagement and environmental review pose risks for successfully completing forest management projects?
 - How could this bill better incorporate opportunities for local communities and their partners to weigh in on forest resilience projects?

NAFSR response: We agree that public involvement is a key feature of forest management, but we also recognize that the process can become so cumbersome as to make active management difficult and costly in terms of time and money. We defer to the agency to respond to possible changes in the legislation.

Senator Amy Klobuchar

1. Some estimates put the average cost of treating one acre for wildfire at over \$1,000. Costs can increase dramatically when closer to towns and critical infrastructure or on challenging terrain. Can you describe what contributes to the cost of forest thinning and prescribed burns? Do National Forests in Colorado and the surrounding states have the resources necessary to pay for more acres to be treated?

NAFSR Response: Wildfire risk reduction projects typically include two to three entries for full implementation, with follow-up treatments in ensuing years. The initial field work includes forest thinning, followed by pile burning of the downed material left behind, followed by broadcast burning to further reduce downed woody debris. Once the initial set of treatments is completed, additional monitoring and treatments are often necessary in future years to maintain these investments in community risk reduction. The costs include project design, environmental analysis, field layout, project implementation, and post-project monitoring. State forestry agencies typically have the technical ability to complete this work but may not have the staffing and financial resources available to complete the needed work at the necessary scale over time.

2. The Forest Service has many responsibilities, including improving recreation opportunities, conducting timber sales and protecting forests and water. Critically, the Forest Service must also protect communities and critical infrastructure from wildfire. Given your experience as Regional Forester of the Rocky Mountain Region, what are the greatest barriers to the Forest Service and its partners carrying out more hazardous fuels reduction projects to prevent wildfires?

NAFSR Response: The greatest barriers to carrying out more hazardous fuels reduction projects are available funding and staffing to plan and complete the work. In addition, excessive process and litigation can add delays. The agency and its partners know what to do and how to do this vital work of protecting lives and communities. The scale of the wildfire crisis is enormous and will take a long-term commitment of significant resources to begin to reduce the threat of wildfire to communities in the eastern as well as the western United States.

Senator Adam Schiff

1. Managing our forests as well as preventing and mitigating wildfires takes people and capacity. I have been very concerned to learn about actions of the Administration that impact these individuals protecting our forests, including firefighters. First, the federal hiring freeze has halted the hiring of essential firefighters. Second, federal government terminations have led to the firing of 3,400 employees at the Forest Service, including those whose responsibilities included wildfire prevention. Third, the federal funding freeze has led to a notable halt of hazardous fuels reduction and forest health efforts. All of this culminates in real impacts for real people and communities. Can you outline how not just firefighters, but non-firefighters at the Forest Service, contribute to forest management and wildfire prevention?

NAFSR Response: Most of the agency is comprised of people who are not full-time wildland firefighters. However, many of these employees have been trained in wildland firefighting and support roles, carrying Red Cards that display their qualifications. Employees at the field level certified as collateral-duty firefighters make up a significant portion of the wildland firefighting force. These are the employees whose primary job isn't fire. Their daily work may be in timber, wildlife, recreation, livestock grazing, or wilderness patrol. But when needed, they drop their primary work and respond to wildfire suppression. Additionally, many support prescribed fire to reduce the threat of wildfires to communities. Often, every employee on a ranger district will respond when needed to a wildfire, either as an on-the-ground firefighter or in a support role in dispatch, calling affected permittees or landowners, communicating with the public, staffing safety closures, delivering meals or ordering resources.

Agriculture Committee
Subcommittee on Conservation, Forestry, Natural Resources, and Biotechnology
*Legislative Hearing to Review H.R. 471, the Fix Our Forests Act, and Options to Reduce
Catastrophic Wildfire*
March 6, 2025
Questions for the Record
Mr. Tim Vredenburg

Senator Michael Bennet

1. Would more federal funding help the Cow Creek Band of Umpqua Tribe of Indians do more active forest management on their lands?

Answer: Yes, additional federal funding would significantly help the Cow Creek Band of Umpqua Tribe of Indians engage in more active forest management on their lands. Currently, the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) has not met its trust fiduciary responsibility by providing adequate yearly funding for managing the 17,519 acres of land conveyed to the Tribe through the Western Oregon Tribal Fairness Act (WOTFA). This lack of sufficient funding creates significant barriers to effective land management.

Furthermore, the Department of the Interior should ensure that lands placed into trust for the Cow Creek Tribe are funded at the same level as those managed by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) in western Oregon. Tribes, including the Cow Creek Tribe, have been doing more with far fewer resources for far too long. This inequity in funding has led to a range of challenges for tribal forest management, making it difficult for tribes to maintain healthy and sustainable forests.

Over the past four decades, reports from the Indian Forest Management Assessment Team (IFMAT) have consistently highlighted the significant funding disparity between tribal lands and lands managed by other federal agencies. For example, tribally managed lands receive only 40¢ for every dollar allocated to National Forest Service lands. This gap not only hampers forest management efforts but also limits tribes' ability to address critical issues such as wildfire prevention, habitat restoration, and sustainable resource management.

Key recommendations for addressing this funding gap include:

- Providing adequate yearly funding for the management of the 17,519 acres conveyed to the Tribe through WOTFA, as well as any additional lands held in trust by the Cow Creek Tribe.
- Aligning the funding levels for tribal forest management with those of lands managed by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) in western Oregon, ensuring fair and equitable support.

- Adjusting these payments to account for inflationary increases, while applying a multiplier to recognize the higher cost of managing smaller tribal units compared to larger federal agencies.
- Closing the \$96 million funding gap between federal support for tribal forest management and that provided to other federal forest and land management agencies.

In short, more federal funding would allow the Cow Creek Tribe to more effectively manage its forests, improve forest health, reduce wildfire risks, and contribute to sustainable resource management.

2. How much assistance does the Tribe receive from the BIA or other federal agencies for forestry?

Answer: The Cow Creek Band of Umpqua Tribe of Indians receives limited direct support from the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) due to its participation in the Indian Trust Asset Reform Act (ITARA) Demonstration. The ITARA, signed into law as Public Law 114-178 on June 22, 2016, aims to streamline and enhance the management of Indian trust assets, including tribal forestry programs and surface leasing.

Under Title II of the law, the Secretary of the Interior is authorized to establish a demonstration project focused on improving the management of tribal forestry and surface leasing. The Cow Creek Tribe is one of the few tribes involved in this demonstration, which allows for more direct management of their resources. While this initiative provides the Tribe with some autonomy in managing forestry resources, it also means they receive less direct financial or programmatic assistance from the BIA compared to other tribes not participating in the demonstration.

The ITARA Demonstration has the potential to be made permanent through an administrative process overseen by the Secretary of the Department of the Interior. This could offer long-term improvements in how tribal forestry programs are supported and managed.

3. What more can the federal government do to make good on its Trust responsibility?

Answer: The federal government's Trust responsibility to Native American tribes is a multifaceted obligation that extends beyond legal agreements to include meaningful support for the economic, cultural, and social well-being of tribal nations. This responsibility encompasses critical areas such as natural resource management, economic self-sufficiency, public safety, healthcare, and overall welfare.

To more fully fulfill this responsibility, the federal government must prioritize robust, consistent funding that supports the unique needs of tribal communities. This includes backing self-determination efforts by passing legislation like the Indian Tribal Administration and

Reorganization Act (ITARA), which would empower tribes to make decisions about their own governance and services.

Additionally, empowering tribes to co-manage ancestral lands is a crucial step toward honoring the Trust responsibility. Co-management can align federal policies with tribal values, enhance stewardship practices, and contribute to more sustainable land management. This approach is particularly vital in addressing the growing threat of catastrophic wildfires, which disproportionately affect tribal communities.

The passage of the **Fix Our Forests Act** represents a significant opportunity to strengthen this commitment. By expanding the Good Neighbor Authority and promoting collaborative land management, the Act would enable tribes to play a central role in wildfire prevention and resource conservation, directly supporting the well-being of tribal communities while also addressing national environmental challenges.

In short, to fulfill its Trust responsibility, the federal government must ensure adequate and sustained funding, support tribal self-determination, and promote co-management of ancestral lands to protect natural resources and safeguard tribal communities.

Senator Amy Klobuchar

1. In past Farm Bills I have supported improvements to the Good Neighbor Authority (GNA), and I supported allowing Tribes and counties to retain and use revenue generated under GNA for more restoration work. GNA and other partnership programs are needed to help the Forest Service reduce the risk of wildfires. How will recent improvements to the Good Neighbor Authority help the Cow Creek Band of Umpqua Tribe of Indians and other Tribes work better with the Forest Service?

Answer: Recent improvements to the Good Neighbor Authority (GNA) will significantly enhance the ability of the Cow Creek Band of Umpqua Tribe of Indians—and other tribes—to work more effectively with the U.S. Forest Service. Specifically, allowing tribes to retain project receipts and reinvest those funds into future forest restoration work is a critical step forward.

Without this reinvestment authority, it has been difficult to secure the sustained funding needed to carry out the full scope of restoration and wildfire mitigation work that needs to be done. The ability to retain receipts provides predictability in funding, which in turn enables us to plan and implement projects at a larger and more meaningful scale.

This predictability is not only essential for building and maintaining tribal capacity, but also for encouraging our partners to invest in the infrastructure required to support long-term forest health and fire resilience efforts. In short, this improvement to GNA creates a pathway for more strategic, efficient, and impactful collaboration between tribes and the Forest Service.

Agriculture Committee
Subcommittee on Conservation, Forestry, Natural Resources, and Biotechnology
*Legislative Hearing to Review H.R. 471, the Fix Our Forests Act, and Options to Reduce
Catastrophic Wildfire*
March 6, 2025
Questions for the Record
Hon. Jonathan Houck

Senator Michael Bennet

1. What is the value of the public land management agencies to rural communities like Gunnison County?

Public Lands make up 80% of the land in Gunnison County. Considering the county is 1.5 times the size of the state of Delaware high functioning, well staffed public lands management agencies are of the highest value to us. Ranching, recreation, mining, scientific research, oil and gas extraction, hunting & fishing and timber harvest are all activities that are taking place on public lands in Gunnison County and underpin our entire economy. Local and state governments are partners with the federal land management agencies but the current administrations actions are breaking them and in turn we are feeling the impacts already at the local level.

2. Can you provide specific examples of how staffing shortages, hiring freezes or the recent round of widespread firings are already affecting forest management and wildfire prevention?

With the firing of probationary employees, rescinding of seasonal contracts and the forced retirements, it is my understanding from talking to local forest service staff that they do not have the staff to mark this season's already approved timber sales which have been been through NEPA and ESA consultation. These projects would have helped lower wildfire threats, supply timber to the mill and support better ecological function. Additionally, many of those fired or not hired for the summer season are trained "red card" holders who are critical to prompt and prepared response to wildfires here in Gunnison County.

3. What role do seasonal workers play in land and fire management? What happens if we don't have those seasonal staff?

As stated above, these red card holders are trained to fill in critical roles in fire response. From logistical support to being on the fire line, the seasonal staff are often the backbone of a fire response. We are having a very low snowpack year (very much connected to climate change) and we will be in fire danger earlier than usual and will not have the standard workforce here, in place to be responsive when the worst happens not to mention the day in and day out work these seasonal employees take on.

4. How do funding cuts for public lands affect outdoor recreation and economies that rely on federal land management?

The recreation staff at our local forest service office was also completely gutted and recreation activities are one of Gunnison County's biggest economic drivers. Trail crews, some which are funded through state grants, were not hired due to the hiring freeze and so the work on the ground will not happen and will have significant impacts on many levels in Gunnison County.

Many businesses in our towns rely on a robust summer outdoor recreation economy to stay afloat. From May until September strong visitation of recreationalists enjoying our public lands is essential to our economy. Many businesses have to weather the rest of the year on the income they can generate during this crucial season. When resources are not managed, visitation goes down. We saw glimpses of this during the last prolonged government shutdown when restrooms were locked, campgrounds closed, and trash piled up. We are now facing the same potential and perhaps even worse outcomes because the firings and reduction in force measures look to be long term if not permanent.

Again, we are partners with the agencies and we are doing our part locally through non-profits (like local mountain bike, motorized travel and conservation orgs) and local governments working together on stewardship programs and on the ground trail work. The cuts by this administration has amounted to turning your back on local communities. We need a reliable partner.

Senator Amy Klobuchar

1. Recent executive actions have disrupted forest projects and wildfire mitigation work. This is felt around the country, including in Northern Minnesota, where wildfire mitigation work is critical to protecting towns and supporting forestry businesses. Are you aware of disruptions to Forest Service personnel and projects in your county or neighboring areas? If so, what has the impact been?

In speaking to forest service employees or former employees, they will be unable to do the groundwork to support already approved vegetation management projects that were scheduled for this summer's work season. Seasonal workers in the timber programs begin marking the timber sales in late spring/early summer so that the loggers contracted to do the work have clear delineation on the ground of what products have been approved for removal. Ultimately, the trees harvested, and the area treated lower fire danger, increase habitat needs for species, promote ecological function and supply timber to the only mill left in western Colorado. In speaking to the mill operators, they are very concerned that the actions of this administration in haphazardly firing and not hiring seasonals could tip the scales of their already precarious situation. These actions are not just impacting Gunnison County, but the 10 other counties connected to the GMUG (Grand Mesa, Uncompaghere, and Gunnison

National Forest) These counties range from conservative to liberal, red to blue on the political spectrum but are all echoing the same concern that the firings, forced retirements, rescinding of seasonal contracts and hiring freeze combined with what is being anticipated in further deep cuts with the reduction in force actions will possibly be the final nail in the coffin for our last remaining mill and put us further behind on treatments that are addressing wildfire threats.

2. **In past Farm Bills I have supported improvements to the Good Neighbor Authority (GNA), and I supported allowing Tribes and counties to retain and use revenue generated under GNA for more restoration work. GNA and other partnership programs are needed to help the Forest Service reduce the risk of wildfires. How will recent improvements to the Good Neighbor Authority help your county and others work better with the Forest Service?**

The Good Neighbor Authority (GNA) has been used very effectively in Gunnison County. We utilize the leverage of local resources and collaborative planning with the US Forest Service and the Colorado State Forestry Service and Gunnison County to increase the impact of projects by working “on both sides of the fence”, that being treatments on public and private lands that help create fire breaks, protect structures and harden spaces that are in harms way. By including tribes and counties in their ability to retain revenue generated under the GNA we can see more acres treated in a more efficient manner by reinvesting those dollars for restoration work.

Senator Peter Welch

1. **I am deeply concerned that the Fix Our Forests Act will fundamentally undermine environmental laws that govern federal forestry management projects. This bill proposes increasing the threshold for categorical exclusions from 3,000 to 10,000 acres, allowing projects under 10,000 acres to move forward without public involvement in environmental reviews. This is deeply concerning for Vermont, where many forestry projects are well below 10,000 acres in size. The 10,000-acre limit is an arbitrary number created to restrict public input.**
 - a. **Do you agree that expanding categorical exclusion from 3,000 to 10,000 acres could prevent communities from engaging in federal forestry projects, leading to potential harm to local communities and the environment?**

I do agree that increasing the allowable size of categorical exclusions (CE's) will create a significant barrier to public participation and will spur more legal challenges as that will be one of the only tools left for local governments and citizens to have their voice heard.

I will reiterate the following from my written testimony:

Today, the Forest Service categorically excludes about 87% of its projects from NEPA analysis. If the categorical exclusions proposed in the Fix Our Forests Act were enacted,

public participation and environmental analysis for vegetation management projects could effectively be excluded entirely. For reference, of the 20,515 total hazardous fuels treatments completed by USDA and DOI across Colorado since 1984, only 23—or about 0.1%—exceeded the 10,000-acre limitations of a number of the categorical exclusions proposed in the bill. This is despite the fact that the Wildfire Mitigation and Management Commission was “in general agreement that planning, including robust public engagement and effective analysis of environmental impacts, is critical to wildfire mitigation and management.” But to the contrary, categorically excluded projects generally exclude meaningful public participation in the development of the project.

2. **As a member of the House of Representatives, I was proud to have supported the Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) and the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law (BIL), which, taken together, made the largest investment in wildland fire management and resilience. I am disturbed by the Administration’s actions to halt funding for forest management programs in the IRA and BIL. It is deeply worrisome to me that the Fix Our Forests Act does not provide any additional resources to invest in the health of our forests.**

- a. **Do you agree that the Trump Administration’s decision to freeze funding for wildfire prevention programs in the IRA/BIL will harm forest health?**

Yes, I am in total agreement. Funding for landscape sized projects, planning and watershed management actions in Colorado will be severely impacted if the funding is halted by the current administration. I would like to place emphasis on your point that when you look at FOFA, it does not provide for more resources to invest in forest health and meaningful actions on the ground.

3. **I am gravely concerned by the approach President Trump and the “Department of Government Efficiency” (DOGE) are taking to fire critical government workers, including those who support forest health. In just the last month, the Forest Service lost about 10% of its workforce, deepening a pre-existing staffing crisis at the agency. While the Administration has been ordered to reinstate those USDA employees, I have yet to hear of any employees in my state being successfully reinstated. Many of these positions are critical for public safety and for managing our federal lands and waters responsibly.**

- a. **Do you agree that Forest Service employees and adequate staffing levels are critical to addressing wildfire activity?**

I agree and would further state, as I did in both my oral and written testimony, that anyone who was remotely paying attention to the staffing situation at the forest service has know that staffing levels were subpar before the most recent actions by the current administration. If efficiency was the true goal, we would be adding staffing and resources to the forest service at this time to get the needed work done on the ground. It is worth noting that overall, the Forest Service workforce declined nearly 30% since 1995.

- b. **If enacted, would this bill be able to effectively address wildfire threats while leaving the staffing crisis at the Forest Service unresolved?**

No, the staffing issue is the issue. For those of us that live in these public lands rich communities we see this every day. Hard working Americans that are at their absolute limits managing our public lands are being pushed beyond the breaking point and this most recent and indiscriminate reduction of the workforce will most likely break these agencies. It is my personal belief that this is by design and the current administration will use this opportunity to begin to socialize the idea that the disposal of our public lands is the answer.

Senator Adam Schiff

- 1. Increasingly, U.S. wildfire is characterized by longer fire seasons, bigger fires, and more acres burned each year. Wildfires in the wildland-urban interface are more frequent and threatening. California is especially susceptible to wildfires and is still reeling from the impacts of the fires around Los Angeles. It is clear that more needs to be done to decrease wildfire risk, but a number of concerns have been raised about provisions of this bill that I hope can be addressed. There is a concern that the bill the House passed doesn't support the needs of those implicated in forest management projects and those most at risk of fire. There are additional concerns about provisions that minimize upfront review of projects, reduce individuals' ability to provide public comment, and allow parties to continue the development of projects even when they are shown to be harmful. As a local leader in Colorado, can you describe how public involvement and input, prior to and during the development of forest management projects, are important to their development and implementation?**

As I stated during the Q&A part of the subcommittee hearing, up front public involvement and input is the quickest way to develop the social license. I define social license as the community's stamp of approval in not only understanding the actions being taken but also their support. In Gunnison County the Board of County Commissioners (referred to as Supervisors in CA) provides a key connection between the agencies and the community. We take seriously our role as a cooperating agency and elevate the communities concerns and desires that ultimately help drive plans and actions to a consensus based decision that includes public input, best available science and the agency goals as well.

FOFA as passed by the House would cut that community conversation and input out by allowing more actions under CE's and loosened standards for public participation. There are two vehicles for the public and local governments to be heard-stakeholder engagement up front or litigation on the backend when plans and actions have been developed or approved in darkness. We have been very successful by partnering up front and do not want to see that opportunity eroded as FOFA, in its current form, would do.

- 2. Managing our forests as well as preventing and mitigating wildfires takes people and capacity. I have been very concerned to learn about actions of the Administration that**

impact these individuals protecting our forests, including firefighters. First, the federal hiring freeze has halted the hiring of essential firefighters. Second, federal government terminations have led to the firing of 3,400 employees at the Forest Service, including those whose responsibilities included wildfire prevention. Third, the federal funding freeze has led to a notable halt of hazardous fuels reduction and forest health efforts. All of this culminates in real impacts for real people and communities. Can you outline how not just firefighters, but non-firefighters at the Forest Service, contribute to forest management and wildfire prevention?

Here in Gunnison County, the majority of those who work for the forest service or BLM are ‘red card’ holders. Simply put, they have some level of training to be re-deployed when a fire response is needed. They might be trained to work on the fire line as part of a hand crew, be trained in logistics or some other type of technical support for fire response. They are often pulled from their primary job (range, recreation, timber, engineering, etc) and are assigned fire duty as per their training. The current administration states that they have not cut fire staff but that is misleading. Those whose primary assignment is fire were spared in the initial cuts and firing but the truth on the ground is the actual personnel that fight fires have been decimated.

3. Can you speak to what the U.S. Forest Service *does* need to better manage forests and prevent fires? What from Congress would be helpful?

Invest in its workforce and programs to do the work on the ground. It is really this simple. It has been well documented that the last 30 years have seen a significant decrease in staffing. The Forest Service workforce declined 20% between 1995 and 2017. From my written testimony:

The workforce crisis has been well-documented, including by the recent report by the national Wildfire Mitigation and Management Commission, which was chartered by Congress to make recommendations to Congress “to improve Federal policies relating to (1) the prevention, mitigation, suppression, and management of wildland fires in the United States; and (2) the rehabilitation of land in the United States devastated by wildland fires.” Although the Commission was not specifically tasked with addressing workforce issues, it—on its own initiative—identified building a comprehensive workforce as a “cornerstone” for successfully confronting the wildfire crisis.

4. Throughout the fires in the Los Angeles area earlier this year, fires burned rapidly across homes and communities. As we’ve seen in previous fast-moving, urban conflagrations, such as those in Hawaii and Colorado, the initial fuel is often grass, but high winds and fast-moving flames create structure-to-structure fires and urban conflagrations. What does the House-passed version of this bill do to guarantee that we reduce the risk of homes burning? How can Congress provide assurances that homes will be hardened and communities will be prepared, as is increasingly called for by experts?

I could not ascertain from my reading of the bill that there are specific actions and deliverables that will reduce the risk of homes burning. As far as assurances, again it will take a workforce and robust funding of programs to address the backlog of treatments that desperately need to be done. The current administration actions are moving us further from those needs and its inability to acknowledge and address climate change will continue to accelerate the threats of wildfire.

Agriculture Committee
 Subcommittee on Conservation, Forestry, Natural Resources, and Biotechnology
*Legislative Hearing to Review H.R. 471, the Fix Our Forests Act, and Options to Reduce
 Catastrophic Wildfire*
 March 6, 2025
 Questions for the Record
Mr. Robert Gordon

Senator Michael Bennet

1. How could the federal government support individual actions like home hardening to materially reduce wildfire risk to communities?

APCIA strongly encourages federal support for wildfire “mitigation that matters” (home hardening and defensible space), coordinated government education of property owners about wildfire practices and programs, and targeted federal wildfire grants and tax incentive for improving resiliency and mitigating wildfire losses. Wildfire conflagrations cannot be prevented solely by individuals, communities, or government, but need responsible mitigation actions by all three that the federal government can help facilitate.

Insurers, through the research and demonstrations of the Insurance Institute for Business and Home Safety (IBHS), advocate for ‘mitigations that matter’ – which are a combination of home hardening and defensible space activities that when taken together can provide evidence-based protection to prevent or reduce loss of structures from wildfires. The IBHS launched their Wildfire Prepared Home program¹ in 2022 based on over a decade of wildfire research, which includes establishing a 5-foot ignition-resistant zone through fire resistant materials and defensible space. Homes that achieve a certification are recognized as having a reduced risk of wildfire, which may contribute to greater access to insurance and potential discounts in states where the program is available. The program includes two levels of resilience for wildfire: Wildfire Prepared Home, which helps protect homes against ember attacks, and Wildfire Prepared Home PLUS, which further protects against ignition from direct flames and radiant heat. Additionally, IBHS is working to introduce a Wildfire Prepared Neighborhood program² to address community-scale risk reduction.

The federal government can help to educate homeowners and property owners on best practices and programs for mitigating wildfire risk. Federal wildfire mitigation education and programs can be greatly enhanced by better coordination and streamlining through the creation of an interagency Community Wildfire Risk Reduction Program (as

¹ The IBHS Wildfire Prepared Home is a designation program that enables homeowners to take preventative measures for their home and yard to protect against wildfire. <https://wildfireprepared.org/about/>

² <https://wildfireprepared.org/wp-content/uploads/Wildfire-Prepared-Neighborhood-Standard-2025.pdf>

proposed by section 201 of the Fix Our Forests Act). Enhanced and coordinated federal financial support could also greatly improve wildfire mitigation, through grants or tax incentives -- such as wildfire mitigation tax credits, excluding state and local wildfire mitigation grants from federal income taxes, and establishing tax-deductible disaster savings accounts that individuals can use for wildfire disaster mitigation.

The Wildfire Partners program in Boulder, Colorado, is an example of effective local leadership educating and supporting property owners about actions to harden their buildings and landscapes to reduce ignition risk. This program offers individual wildfire risk assessments of structures/property and provides rebates and grant awards for mitigation actions. Federal support could help programs like Wildfire Partners expand their wildfire mitigation efforts in high-risk areas in Colorado and other wildfire prone states.

APCIA supports several bipartisan bills proposed in the 119th Congress that would provide support to home and property owners to carry out mitigation activities to reduce wildfire risk. For example, APCIA supports S. 336, the Disaster Mitigation and Tax Parity Act of 2025, which you cosponsored. This legislation excludes from gross income, for income tax purposes, any qualified catastrophe mitigation payment made under a state-based catastrophe loss mitigation program. In the House, APCIA supports H.R. 1105, the Disaster Resiliency and Coverage Act, introduced by Rep. Mike Thompson (D-CA). This bill creates a grant program, administered by state governments, providing households in designated disaster-prone regions with up to \$10,000 for disaster resiliency work. The bill stipulates that payments from state-run disaster resiliency programs and payments from various federal emergency agricultural programs are not considered income for federal tax purposes. And it provides a 30 percent tax credit for qualified disaster risk mitigation activities conducted by individuals or businesses. The credit is meant to complement the resiliency grant program by providing meaningful assistance to larger property owners for whom mitigation activity costs would far exceed \$10,000.

Senator Adam Schiff

1. **The House-passed version of this bill focuses primarily on fuels management. It does not include substantive language to address the risk of structure ignition. Will focusing on fuels management, without addressing the risk of structure ignition, be sufficient to protecting Californians and Americans against wildfire? Will a focus on fuels management alone make financial protection solutions like insurance more accessible and affordable?**

Reducing the risk of structure ignition is important to reduce wildfire losses for homeowners, businesses, communities, and insurers. In recent years, devastating wildfires have resulted in tens of billions of dollars in insured losses -- an unprecedented level. And the number of people and homes in at-risk areas keeps growing -- putting more communities in harm's way -- largely without adequate risk reduction measures in place. The availability and affordability of insurance has become a concern in wildfire prone areas due to these demographic trends combined with increasing costs of record high building materials and labor inflation (impacting rising costs of home construction, replacement costs, and overall home values), more severe weather and climate conditions, and increasing regulatory and legal system abuse costs.

Too many communities particularly across the west have experienced large, destructive fires that involved forested areas, fine fuels that ignite easily (e.g., grass and shrubs), and other vegetation burning which then spread into communities, igniting homes and infrastructure. Recognizing this increasing threat of wildfires, as part of the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act, Congress established the Wildland Fire Mitigation and Management Commission ("Commission") to review and develop federal policy recommendations. In its final report to Congress,³ the Commission noted an essential connection for policymakers, which is that actions taken to reduce risk must encompass both the built and natural environment.

The Commission's final report identifies policy recommendations to reduce risk in the natural environment such as removing excess fuel loads and safely restoring beneficial fire to the landscape. It also highlights the need to better manage fine fuels, such as through expanding the use of grazing and other treatments that can play a critical role in reducing fast moving fires. These recommendations are important to restore balance in the natural environment and reduce the risk of catastrophic fires.

Adapting communities to be more resilient to wildfire is also imperative. The most destructive, deadly, and costliest wildfires are often "fast fires," which ignite and rapidly spread during severe wind events overwhelming fire protection resources resulting in urban conflagration. We must modify fuel sources to slow the spread of fire and prevent

³ The Wildland Fire Mitigation and Management Commission released its final report to Congress on September 27, 2023. <https://www.usda.gov/sites/default/files/documents/wfmmc-final-report-09-2023.pdf>

transition from the natural environment into the built environment where conflagration may occur. This is critical to preventing loss of life and property and is also crucial in reducing harmful environmental contaminants from the combustion of buildings and their contents. Wildfire is a unique risk from other catastrophic perils in that to effectively reduce a property's risk, mitigation requires both structural adaptation (i.e., home hardening) as well as management of fuels around the property, the latter of which must be done on a recurring basis. Also, this mitigation must be done for individual properties as well as the surrounding community. With these factors in mind, the Commission also developed recommendations to drive mitigation within the built environment, including promoting incentives for improvements to land-use planning, building codes, and defensible space.

Commission recommendations also focused on continued investments in hardening utility infrastructure, as a growing number of utility-involved ignitions across multiple western states during high wind events are resulting in the costliest and deadliest losses in history. A 2024 report⁴ from Stanford University noted "events such as California's Napa-Sonoma Fire Siege in 2017, Woolsey and Camp Fires in 2018, Oregon's Labor Day Fires in 2020, Colorado's Marshall Fire in 2021, Hawaii's Lahaina Fire in 2023, and Texas' Smokehouse Creek Fire in 2024 have made it clear that areas across much of the Western United States are exposed to substantial wildfire hazard, potentially to a much greater extent than utilities and their regulators, investors, and customers have understood them to be in the past".

Of the top 20 costliest insured loss events due to wildfire, globally, over half (11 fires) were due to utility-involved ignitions in the United States. These events have collectively resulted in \$50.6 billion in insured losses (in 2024 dollars) and 232 deaths. The recent fires in Los Angeles may further add to these tragic losses if equipment owned by Southern California Edison is proven to be a cause of the Eaton and Hurst fires.

APCIA is supportive of the Fix Our Forests Act's provisions to accelerate fuels reductions and encourage utilities to perform greater vegetation management and removal of hazardous trees within their federal rights-of-way. We also support the bill's creation of an interagency Community Wildfire Risk Reduction Program, which was recommended by the Commission to serve as an "umbrella" program to support a coordinated suite of actions that reduce wildfire risk at the individual parcel level and community scale.

The bill's language to establish the Community Wildfire Risk Reduction Program (Sec. 201) identifies five core purposes of the program, including: advancing research and science; supporting local adoption of code and standards; supporting local efforts to address wildfire impacts including property damage as well as air and water quality; encouraging public-private partnerships for fuel reduction; and providing technical and financial assistance to communities. It also requires the USDA, DOI, and FEMA to create a unified and simpler application and portal for financial or technical assistance. This

⁴ https://woods.institute.stanford.edu/system/files/publications/Woods_CEPP_Wildfire_White_Paper_FINAL.pdf

would effectively combine the application process for many of the current community-based wildfire grant programs. APCIA encourages Congress to expand this language to provide roles and responsibilities for federal agencies and to provide input from the private sector and other stakeholders who have experience and expertise in reducing wildfire risk.

Commission members recognized that federal efforts and agencies focused on wildfire are currently very fragmented, which in turn makes it difficult for states and communities to navigate and access federal resources. A federal interagency partnership could help transform these fragmented efforts by creating a more integrated, effective, and science-based approach. These principal agencies would then coordinate and align with state agencies, local departments, and tribes for various aspects of the program.

APCIA continues to urge policymakers to focus greater attention and investment to protect homes and infrastructure through pre-disaster mitigation. Increasing mitigation and resiliency in the face of severe wildfires is a top priority. Stakeholders must focus on reducing excess fuel loads in WUI regions across the U.S., re-examining land use policies in high-risk regions, including adoption and enforcement of building codes and defensible space standards, and mitigation to help strengthen existing homes, businesses, and communities to become more resilient to wildfires. Although building codes and zoning decisions are made at the state and local level, the federal government can support adoption of stronger building codes and standards through technical assistance and capacity building for localities.

The Commission recommended additional assistance to state and local levels to support land-use planning, building codes, and defensible space. Adoption and enforcement of codes that mandate the use of ignition-resistant construction materials, maintenance of the vegetation around a structure, and community design and planning are critical. State, local, and federal financial incentives should be aligned to help address risk reduction within a state's existing housing stock. California has already established a wildland-urban interface (WUI) code for building design and construction, California Building Code Chapter 7A (Chapter 7A). Chapter 7A requirements include several wildfire mitigation actions that collectively reduce the risk of home ignitions from the embers, flames, and radiant heat of wildfires.

APCIA encourages California to support the rebuilding of the Los Angeles area communities to this code to improve resilience to future wildfire threats. However, Chapter 7A only applies to certain areas within California, based on the fire hazard severity zone (FHSZ) maps developed and maintained by CAL FIRE. Unfortunately, while Chapter 7A applies to the Pacific Palisades and will shape its rebuilding, it does not apply to most of the destroyed homes and neighborhoods in Altadena. APCIA recently joined with the IBHS, fire services organizations and others in a letter to California leaders - Governor Newsom, Senate and Assembly leaders, Los Angeles Mayor Bass, Supervisor Kathryn Barger and the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors - urging

them to take action to ensure the rebuilding process incorporates the 7A construction requirements that will reduce wildfire risk.⁵

The letter also calls on policymakers to speed up implementation and enforcement of the Zone 0 Defensible Space regulations and apply them to the Los Angeles rebuilding process. Zone 0 is the first five feet around a home, and removing combustible material is among the most critical mitigation actions a homeowner can take. This will reduce the risk that wind-blown embers igniting a home via burnable material like fences that connect to structures, vegetation, or trash cans, and it breaks connective fuel pathways that allow wildfire to spread from home to home during conflagrations.

California enacted Zone 0 in 2020 and mandated the Board of Forestry and Fire Protection to promulgate defensible space regulations by January 1, 2023. However, these have not been implemented. Governor Newsom recently directed the Board of Forestry and Fire Protection to complete the rule-making process for the Zone 0 requirements no later than the end of the year (Executive Order N-18-25). We urge local leaders to move expeditiously to support this work and in the interim existing homeowners should not wait to get these actions done.

The federal government plays an important role in wildfire risk reduction and should take a proactive approach and focus attention and investment on pre-disaster mitigation. Pre-disaster mitigation investment can yield positive results through decreased loss events, safeguarding of lives, properties, and infrastructure, while also preserving local and state tax bases, and protecting watersheds. Federal investment through federal grants and/or tax parity of state or local based rebates and grants could help expand this work in wildfire prone states.

APCIA supports federal resiliency and mitigation funding programs through FEMA's Hazard Mitigation Assistance programs to provide funding for eligible activities that reduce or eliminate long-term risk to people and property from future disasters through pre- or post-disaster actions. These include the Pre-Disaster Mitigation program, the Building Resilient Infrastructure and Communities (BRIC) program, the Hazard Mitigation Grant Program, and the Safeguarding Tomorrow Revolving Loan Fund Program which provides capitalization grants to eligible jurisdictions to establish revolving loan funds that provide hazard mitigation assistance for local governments to reduce risks from natural hazards and disasters.

Several bipartisan bills have already been introduced in the 119th Congress that would provide support to home and property owners to carry out mitigation activities to reduce wildfire risk. For example, APCIA is supportive of S. 336, the Disaster Mitigation and Tax Parity Act of 2025, which you cosponsored. This legislation excludes from gross income, for income tax purposes, any qualified catastrophe mitigation payment made under a state-based catastrophe loss mitigation program. In the House, APCIA also

⁵ APCIA joined with the IBHS, fire services organizations and others on a letter to California state and local leaders on February 13, 2025. <https://ibhs.org/stronger-la-rebuild/>

supports H.R. 1105, the Disaster Resiliency and Coverage Act. This bill creates a grant program, administered through state governments, through which certain individual households in designated disaster-prone regions are eligible for up to \$10,000 for specified disaster resiliency work on their homes. It also stipulates that payments from state-run disaster resiliency programs and payments from various federal emergency agricultural programs are not considered income for federal tax purposes. And it provides a 30 percent tax credit for qualified disaster risk mitigation activities conducted by individuals or businesses. The credit is meant to complement the grant program by providing meaningful assistance to larger property owners for whom mitigation activity costs would far exceed \$10,000.

Implementing the Commission's recommendations and the bipartisan wildfire mitigation legislation, including reducing the risk of structure ignition, would save lives and reduce wildfire losses for homeowners, businesses, communities, and insurers.

