

DROUGHT AND FIRE IN OUR NATION'S FORESTS

The SPEAKER pro tempore (Mr. KLINE). Under the Speaker's announced policy of January 7, 2003, the gentleman from New Mexico (Mr. PEARCE) is recognized for half the time until midnight as the designee of the majority leader.

Mr. PEARCE. Mr. Speaker, I appreciate the opportunity to address this body tonight. My colleague, the gentleman from Nebraska (Mr. OSBORNE), has addressed the concept of the drought and what it means in the West, and again I would draw the attention of our audience to the areas that are affected by the drought.

Now, many of us do not necessarily make the connection of what the drought means to us in our everyday lives, what it means to the Nation, but let me just take one example of what the drought means and how it plays out.

We can see here that the drought is mostly concentrated in the West. In the last several years, we have seen a precedent, kind of a first-time precedent, of our forests, and national forests, burning to the ground. Many people wonder, well, why have I not seen that previously in my lifetime. I have not really seen it. I will tell you, Mr. Speaker, that there are several things that have converged at this particular time in history.

First of all, we decided about 100 years ago to manage our forests in such a way that we put out every single fire. Now, the tree rings give us a very good history, and the tree rings in the arid States of the West will show us that about every 8 years a very hot fire would burn through, and it would burn the low-lying brush and the small diameter trees that had not yet reached maturity. Fire by that mechanism then kept our forests clean.

In New Mexico, for instance, the general tree density was between 30 and 50 trees per acre. If one looks at photographs from 100 years ago, they will find that there was a savannah with widely-spaced trees through much of New Mexico, whereas today we have a tree load per acre not of 30 to 50 trees per acre but instead we find that there are anywhere from 1,500 trees per acre to about 2,500 trees per acre.

Now, this tree density, this tree load, this fuel loading has been occurring for the past 100 years without much substantial negative impact. The situation in the West in the 1950s was that we had an extremely dry period. But even in that period of the 1950s, we had not yet reached the median drought indicator. So as dry as it was, we were not yet to the historic drought median line.

Through much of the rest of the 1960s, the 1970s, the 1980s, the 1990s, and on in to the 2000-year period, most of the West had historic wet periods. If we look at a 2,000-year summary of moisture in the West, and especially in New Mexico, we will see that same thing

verified; that in the past 2,000 years there have been droughts of up to 200 years, sometimes more. And yet in our lifetimes we have had an unprecedented history, an unprecedented time of very high moisture levels. So the tree loads, these 1,500 trees per acre, really did not cause many great difficulties because there was enough water to dampen down the effects.

Now, when you get too many trees per acre, more than nature would have allowed to grow, more than nature would allow if the fires had been allowed to clean out naturally our forests, then you would find that if the tree loads increase, then there are three risks: The first risk, of course, is fire; the second risk is insects; and the third risk is disease. Trees that do not have enough water or nutrients are going to be subject to all three of those problems.

We are finding in New Mexico and throughout the West that that exact situation is occurring. We find that the area around Santa Fe, New Mexico, the estimates are that we have lost 1 million trees in that area because of disease. The trees were weakened through a lack of moisture and through a lack of nutrients because they were overcrowded, sucking up too many nutrients and not allowing enough per tree. But we are also finding through the West that hundreds of thousands of acres of our prime forest land is simply burned up.

Now, these are not fires that burn the timber from the ground up. They are fires that began in the brush, maybe by lightning, maybe by some other means, maybe a campfire, but the fire begins and soon it uses the small diameter trees that are struggling to reach the sunlight. These small diameter trees are at the height of the mature trees, and the fire uses those small diameter trees as kindling to get a fire that is burning up in the cap of the trees, the cap of the forest, and that fire then begins to sweep across the forest much like many of us have seen our Christmas trees burn if we would throw them out after the Christmas season.

The trees are stressed by drought, they are stressed by a lack of nutrients, they are small in diameter, and they are easily consumed by fire, so the fire begins to build and rage across our forests. These trees are then killed because the top part, the green part, is burned, but the stand, the tree itself, is left standing and the timber in that tree is actually still good for a period of time for harvest.

What we are finding is that our forests are going to be damaged and destroyed by fire, by pests, or by disease. There are not many other options. But the Forest Service, in its policy of putting out all fires in the last several decades, has also had a policy of not cutting trees. There is a community of extreme environmentalists in this Nation who say that to cut one tree is bad, and so we have in the West the drought, accompanied by the over-

crowding, the overpopulation, the over-density, whatever terminology you would like to use, and we have conditions where not only are we not using our national natural resource of our forests and the timber in it, but we are also committing those same resources to be squandered due to pests, fire, and disease.

Mr. Speaker, I think that anyone who would look at it with a common-sense view would say that this is impractical and it is not good stewardship of our resources. Yet we find ourselves today where we have passed the Healthy Forest Initiative, which tells the Forest Service to begin to thin, to do a common-sense balance, a thinning program in our forests; to take some of the small trees, take some of the large trees out and get the tree density, the tree loading back to where nature would have sustained itself in many areas.

We have much natural forest in the Southern District of New Mexico, and in many areas we find that the people on the field understand the need to cut the trees, the need to begin to thin them out. But many times their supervisors upstream are discouraging or even not allowing those common-sense thinning processes to occur.

Now, there are a couple of results of that. Number one is, as long as the drought continues, and we see this 2004 chart of the drought, but as long as the drought continues, then we have no choice, we are going to continue to squander this tremendous resource that we have all because of an ideological position that says no tree will be cut, ever, out of our national forests. And we have many people in the Forest Service itself who, as managers, have adopted that simple philosophy.

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We can see the destructive results of it, but one thing that is rarely seen by members of a State is that an entire industry infrastructure begins to decay and finally go away.

There were in excess of 20 lumber mills in New Mexico at one point, and today there are two left, and both of those are in my district near a town called Alamogordo. We as a congressional office have been asking the Forest Service a very commonsense question: will you please cut enough timber to keep these mills in business otherwise we have no one who will take logs at some point to process them.

The Forest Service has taken 3 years to give us an answer. Now the mills have told us they are getting quite a lot of timber from the Indian reservation, the Mescalero Indian Reservation, but they need an additional 12 million board feet per year. In the Lincoln National Forest, which is in close proximity to the lumber mills, we are growing 50 million board feet per year.

It took 3 years for the government agency to find out if they could make a decision about cutting that much timber. Now, I was in the district for

the August recess when we met with the Lincoln National Forest forester. We met there with the supervisor of that particular forest and a couple of his staff members. They indicated after 3 years of study the regional office in New Mexico had finally said we could cut 9 million board feet. We needed 12 to maximize the capabilities of the mill, and about 85 jobs are involved in my district.

We took 3 years to get an answer, to find out we are growing 50 million board feet. We needed to cut 12, and yet the answer was we could cut 9 million board feet. I asked the next question, which was approximately what value does that 9 million board feet bring to the Federal Government. The amazing answer from the gentleman who is the supervisor of the forest was he did not know the value of 9 million board feet. It has been so long since we have cut timber in many of our forests he simply did not know that.

I pulled out my calculator and we began to do calculations, and determined that the approximate value of 9 million board feet was \$54,000. Now \$54,000 worth of timber is a very modest amount. That same Lincoln National Forest has an annual budget of \$13 million. They have not cut timber recently, so they have a timber department that is funded at about half a million dollars, for a timber-cutting department that does not cut timber and does not seem to know how much 9 million board feet represented. Again we calculated and came up with a response that was \$54,000, but the thing that happened next stunned me.

I asked what would be required to cut this 9 million board feet. I was thinking in terms of what would be required in the manpower, what would be required in the time to get the permits and the time to get approval to cut this. But I was stunned at the response. The supervisor of the Lincoln National Forest said it would take \$11 million to cut that 9 million board feet. That is \$11 million to generate \$54,000 worth of income. Any 9th grader would know that is not a very good return on investment, and yet this forester declared that was as good as it could get and we could not cut it cheaper.

At some point we must have a national discussion on the value that is added by a department that is so engrained in this bureaucracy they would require \$11 million to cut \$54,000 worth of timber.

My wife and I were in business for 14 years. We had to make a payroll every week for 14 years. We had to pay the bills. We had to pay the expenses; and yet our government bureaucracies, they simply do not understand that kind of thinking any more. They simply say we need more money to do those things that we have to do.

That same forest has half a million dollars in a department already that is appropriated for the tree-cutting department, and yet the stunning response was we need \$11 million more to

cut \$54,000 worth of timber. Needless to say, I simply said I do not think we are going to get that. I am now worried that we are going to continue to send more jobs overseas.

Many times our friends on the other side of the aisle complain about sending jobs overseas; and yet if we follow the progression from our policies down to the field level down to a job level, we will see that possibly 85 more jobs are going to go overseas to where they do not have such restrictions on the cutting of timber.

If we were saving the timber for a future generation, we might argue that it is justified. But again because of the drought situation, I would remind the House that it is not that we are saving these trees for future generations. We have been burning millions of acres per year for the last several years. We are not saving them. Because of the weakened nature of our national forest based on the drought and the overcrowding of our trees, we are going to donate these trees to insects, disease, and fire.

So the offshoot is we find fewer jobs every year in America; we find the infrastructure completely gone in many areas. In New Mexico, we are down to two mills. We find the infrastructure is completely gone, and we look at each other and wonder why. And our friends on the other side of the aisle declare that it is evil corporations who are moving out of America, when the truth is many times our policies are starving companies out of America; and I am using this example of our forests and tree products.

We had a hearing several months ago where members of the union that cuts trees and makes pulp wood and paper came in, and they expressed dismay that jobs were going overseas because of policies that said we are not going to cut trees out of our national forests. These are professionals. These are people who understand the industry. They were union members were asking their friends on the other side of the aisle, Why?

The best answer that could be given was you get jobs in the hospitality industry. The answer was the same you or I would give. It was a measured anger that said we do not want jobs in the tourism and hospitality industry. We want our good, high-paying jobs in the timber industry where we are cutting trees that are going to burn or be destroyed by pests. We are doing a service to our country, and yet we are being told that our jobs are going to go overseas and you, in the grace of Washington, are going to give us jobs in the hospitality industry.

I was offended that we would consider sending those jobs overseas and that we would consider policies that would be so restrictive as to not allow an industry to operate in the United States; and yet we see that same mentality playing out in the oil and gas industry, in the farming industry, in mines. Every industry is under assault

from these extremists on one side who say we are not going to do any of that kind of production in this country, but the mines, gas and oil, agriculture and timber are respectful positions.

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Those are respected jobs that have a place in this Nation. When we begin to overregulate, when we begin to adopt policies that cause these industries to lose their infrastructure and to go away, then we need to understand that we ourselves are going to suffer in the long term. For instance, the shifting of our agriculture production overseas, many people say, what does it matter; but I will tell you that we restrict chemicals and insecticides in this Nation because we do not want our consumers to eat things that are put on our row crops, our vegetables, and yet we will allow imports to come in that do not have any of the restrictions for the application of those pesticides, none of the restrictions for the herbicides that we find in this Nation. So it is an unfair competitive playing field. But in the end, the American consumers pays because they are consuming products that we as a Nation have declared to be banned for use inside this country but that we tolerate if the products are imported into this country.

Mr. Speaker, as a previous business owner, my attempt is always to bring some common sense to the discussions about how we are going to treat the national forests, how we are going to treat the production of food, how we are going to treat the industries in this country that provide us with our energy, with our minerals, with our lumber, and with our food. Again, I remind our viewers and our listeners that we have extreme drought conditions that are affecting all of these.

The final bad outcome of the way we have managed our forests is that the water supplies are greatly diminished in the West. In New Mexico, we have approximately, the estimates by specialists are that because of management of our forests, about 1 billion trees too many in New Mexico. Estimates range as to how much water one tree uses. The lowest estimate is a gallon per day. Higher estimates are up to and including and exceeding 100 gallons per day.

But just for discussion purposes, if we accept the lower figure, one gallon per day, a billion too many trees, then every day 1 billion gallons of water are being used by trees, transpired into the atmosphere, and that water is being sucked out of the ground, water that should be percolating into our aquifers, recharging our streams and being water that is available for development, water that is available for drinking in our towns, for watering lawns, water for life as we know it and appreciate it in America.

But because of our mismanagement, we are finding that not only are our trees at risk but even the resource of

water itself. Water is life. Water is development. Water is our future. Without water, water being the most strategic of all resources, without water we cannot have industry, we cannot have

growth and jobs and continue the lifestyle that continues as we know it.

Mr. Speaker, we find that a very simple policy transcends into very disastrous results, disastrous results for our forests, for our future, for our water

and for job situations in the current time and in future times.

Mr. Speaker, I think this is an important issue that we as a Nation must continue to talk about.