

Wildfire and Forest Management

Witnesses:

PANEL I

Doug Lamborn (R-CO)

Scott Tipton (R-CO)

Paul Gosar (R-AZ)

Ann Kirkpatrick (D-AZ)

PANEL II

Jim Hubbard

Deputy Chief, State and Private Forestry, U.S. Forest Service

James Douglas

Acting Director, Office of Wildland Fire, U.S. Department of the Interior

Phil Rigdon

Deputy Director, Yakama Indian Nation Department of Natural Resources

Joe Duda

Deputy State Forester, Colorado State Forest Service, Colorado State University

Christopher Topik

Director, Restoring America's Forests, The Nature Conservancy

Chuck Roady

Vice President & General Manager, F.H. Stoltze Land & Lumber Company, Federal Forest Resource Coalition

Committee Members Present:

Rob Bishop (R-UT), Subcommittee Chairman

Raúl Grijalva (D-AZ), Subcommittee Ranking Member

Doc Hastings (R-WA), Full Committee Chairman

Doug Lamborn (R-CO)

Scott Tipton (R-CO)

Paul Gosar (R-AZ)

Ann Kirkpatrick (D-AZ)

Steve Daines (R-MT)

Tom McClintock (R-CA)

Peter DeFazio (D-OR)

Mark Amodei (R-NV)

On July 11, 2013, the House Natural Resources Subcommittee on Public Lands and Environmental Regulation held an oversight hearing on wildfire and forest management. The hearing focused on the need for fuels reduction in national forests and on options for overcoming the barriers to active forest management.

In their opening statements, Subcommittee Chairman Rob Bishop (R-UT), Subcommittee Ranking Member Raúl Grijalva (D-AZ), and Full Committee Chairman Doc Hastings (R-WA) emphasized the need for active forest management, which has historically included both timber sales and prescribed burns, to reduce the fuel available to wildfires. Grijalva highlighted the importance of stewardship contracting and good neighbor authority in forest management. These programs provide federal land managers with collaborative tools for fuel reduction on federal lands and neighboring private lands.

In the hearing's first panel, four representatives testified about the impacts of wildfires in their states and discussed options for reducing wildfire risk. Doug Lamborn (R-CO) and Paul Gosar (R-AZ) highlighted barriers to fuels reduction, including insufficient funding for forest management on U. S. Forest Service (USFS) and Bureau of Land Management lands. Lamborn added that lawsuits frequently prevent the USFS from harvesting timber, and Gosar recommended streamlining the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) review process required for forest management decisions. Gosar highlighted his proposed legislation, the Catastrophic Wildfire Prevention Act (H.R. 1345), while Scott Tipton (R-CO) touted his Healthy Forest Management and Wildfire Prevention Act (H.R. 818). Both bills aim to decrease wildfire risk by reducing the barriers to fuels reduction in federal forests. Ann

Kirkpatrick (D-AZ) described the Four Forest Restoration Initiative in Arizona as an example of a highly effective collaboration between federal, state, and local governments, environmental groups, industry representatives, and other stakeholders, which she views as “a model for helping our forests and our local economies.”

In the second panel, Jim Hubbard, USFS Deputy Chief for State and Private Forestry and James Douglas, Acting Director of the Department of the Interior’s Office of Wildland Fire, stated that wildfire impacts are worsening due to the combination of population expansion into wildland areas and the lengthening and increased severity of fire seasons. Phil Rigdon, Deputy Director of the Yakama Indian Nation Department of Natural Resources, highlighted the imbalance in funding for tribal forests as compared to national forests. Christopher Topik, Director of Restoring America’s Forests for The Nature Conservancy, stated his belief that collaboration between government, industry, conservation groups, scientists, and other stakeholders is essential to reducing wildfire risk, and described the successes of the Collaborative Forest Landscape Restoration Program. He also discussed the Fire Adapted Communities Coalition, which works to assess and mitigate communities’ wildfire risk.

Representatives and panelists highlighted benefits of active forest management, with a particular focus on timber sales on federal lands. Representatives Tipton, Gosar, and Tom McClintok (R-CA) highlighted the economic benefits of timber sales, in addition to the benefits active management can provide in preventing the spread of fire and disease. At Gosar’s encouragement, witness Chuck Roady, Vice President and General Manager of F.H. Stoltze Land & Lumber Company, described the success that many western states have had in funding schools through revenues from timber harvesting on state lands.

Many questions for the panel centered on barriers to active forest management and ways to overcome those barriers. Topik emphasized that collaborative agreements are the most effective way to move forward with timber harvesting. However, Steve Daines (R-MT) and Roady agreed that even collaborative agreements are frequently litigated, undermining their effectiveness. Gosar and Bishop asked Rigdon how tribal forests are managed effectively on a much lower budget than federal forests, and Rigdon responded that a streamlined NEPA process and restrictions on litigation are key factors.

In response to a question from DeFazio, Topik and Hubbard expressed interest in a streamlined NEPA review process, which could decrease the time and expense needed for fuels reduction projects. Topik added that a change in NEPA law is not needed, but rather innovative applications of NEPA. DeFazio and Amodei additionally emphasized the need for sufficient funding for fuels management, and Amodei criticized the USFS for not requesting more fuels management funding in the agency budget.

Representatives suggested a range of solutions to address current forest management challenges. Tipton and Bishop criticized the Department of Agriculture’s plan to use \$40 million for the acquisition of additional land, and Bishop suggested that Congress should enable that money to be used to manage currently-held lands instead. DeFazio suggested that Congress allow the USFS to enter into longer, 20-year stewardship contracts, which could provide a greater incentive to companies to enter into the contracts and could result in companies charging less per acre to do the work. Gosar suggested that local forest management authorities should be created, modeled after the successful Power Marketing Administrations in the energy sector, and Topik agreed that such a model could be helpful. Gosar additionally recommended the use of small unmanned aircraft to collect data that could speed up collaborative agreements and improve trust between parties. Witnesses strongly supported the extension of stewardship contracting and good neighbor authority in any future legislation.

Opening statements and witness testimony, as well as a video archive of the entire hearing, is available from the committee web site