

TESTIMONY BEFORE THE U.S. SENATE
COMMITTEE ON AGRICULTURE, NUTRITION & FORESTRY
Wildfire: Stakeholder Perspectives on Budgetary Impacts and Threats
to Natural Resources on Federal, State and Private Lands
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Mr. Chairman and Committee Members:

Thank you for the opportunity to address the growing challenges posed by wildfires and the associated suppression efforts to wildlife conservation on our nation's federal public lands and nearby state and private lands.

The current dedication of approximately 50% of the United States Forest Service (USFS) budget to combat these natural disasters is significantly affecting the ability of the agency to meet wildlife-related and other forest plan objectives and public expectations. Common-sense solutions, such as targeted categorical exclusions, to redundant project planning requirements are essential. Likewise, fiscally responsible funding protocols to ease the financial burden on the USFS and other federal land management agencies from wildfire suppression costs would enhance the ability of these agencies to succeed in their efforts to conserve our nation's wildlife and secure our nation's hunting heritage.

We must work to increase the diversity of forest wildlife habitats on our National Forests across the nation. National Forests in the eastern United States have consistently failed to meet minimum goals for young forest and other early successional habitats as outlined in existing forest plans. National Forests throughout the east have accomplished on average only 24% of the minimum forest plan goals for young forest habitats. This failure has resulted in substantial declines in populations of game and nongame wildlife that depend upon these important habitats. This failure is in part a result of wildfire-related demands on USFS financial and personnel resources. These demands can limit the ability of the agency to implement the sustainable timber harvests and other forest habitat management practices that are required to ensure that young forest habitats and the wildlife they support remain viable components of our forest landscapes.

The ruffed grouse is the most popular upland game bird in the eastern United States. Over half a million sportsmen and women pursue ruffed grouse each year and associated expenditures are vitally important to many rural communities, particularly in the Great Lakes states and the Northeast. Unfortunately, declines in young forest habitats due to a lack of active management on National Forests and surrounding landscapes throughout much of the east have led to concomitant declines in ruffed grouse populations. Indeed, the ruffed grouse has been all but extirpated from the Chattahoochee National Forest in Georgia, the Hoosier National Forest in Indiana, the Sumter National Forest in South Carolina and the Wayne National Forest in Ohio.

Deer hunting is both a foundation of our nation's hunting heritage and a huge economic engine. According to the United States Fish & Wildlife Service (2011), approximately 11 million sportsmen and women hunt deer each year and this activity accounts for a substantial portion of the \$34 billion contributed annually by hunters to the United States economy. The lack of young forest habitats on the George Washington – Jefferson National Forest in Virginia has dramatically reduced white-tailed deer hunting on the Forest. Since 1994, hunter participation and harvest on public land west of the Blue Ridge Mountains in Virginia (primarily National Forest) has declined by 30%, and 57%, respectively. According to the Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries, "...the National Forest deer habitat can be considered suboptimal or marginal from a deer management perspective." In an assessment of white-tailed deer management in Wisconsin, Kroll et al. (2012) state: "...National Forest management policy has had a dramatic impact on deer herd productivity..." Unfortunately, that dramatic impact has been distinctly negative.

Many nongame species that require young forest habitats are experiencing population declines as these habitats decline on National Forests and surrounding landscapes throughout the eastern United States. In 2007, the American Bird Conservancy classified young deciduous forests in the eastern United States as one of the nation's 20 most threatened bird habitats. Breeding Bird Survey data from the United States Geological Survey show that across the eastern United States, 59% of the songbird species that use these young forest habitats for breeding are declining, while only 11% are increasing. Conversely, only 29% of the songbird species that breed in mature forest habitats are declining, while 31% are increasing.

Forest stewardship projects and other collaborative efforts between USFS and public and private partners throughout the West are essential for the development of young forest habitats where elk, deer, moose and other game and nongame wildlife prosper. Delays and cancellations of these projects due to wildfire-suppression related financial and personnel limitations can cause a perverse outcome – they only increase the susceptibility of local landscapes to the very natural disasters these projects are intended to protect against.

Relieving "analysis paralysis" thru targeted categorical exclusions and providing some degree of budgetary certainty to federal land managers would greatly aid in addressing the many challenges posed by seemingly ever-increasing wildfires.

Because we have and continue to fail to lock the barn door, we are forced to address the consequences as the horses run amuck.