



**WOLF CREEK**

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## INTRODUCTION

Chairman Bennet, Ranking Member Boozman, and members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you on Tuesday, November 5<sup>th</sup>, 2013 to share my thoughts about the spruce beetle outbreak, the ensuing fires, and my perceptions of the US Forest Service and their ability to adjust to these changing conditions.

The West Fork Complex Fire, which included the West Fork, Papoose, and Windy Pass Fire, burned nearly 110,000 acres and shut down U.S. Highway 160 over Wolf Creek Pass for over a week.<sup>1</sup> This federally funded scenic byway is the economic lifeline of southwest Colorado, averaging 3,200 motorists per day.<sup>2</sup> Whether for wildfire, rockslide or avalanche, shutting down Wolf Creek Pass has a devastating effect on the surrounding towns. In this corridor alone, public and private values adjacent to thousands of acres of forest lands are still at risk from extreme fire behavior.

Wolf Creek Ski Area (WCSA) operates within this well funded and critical highway, and is a symbiotic member of the Pagosa Springs and South Fork communities. Wolf Creek believes its role is to support the needs and long-term sustainability of the surrounding communities by offering a recreational amenity that attracts tourists to these businesses in which they sleep, eat and shop, as well as providing locals with employment during the winter months. Wolf Creek Ski Area is the largest seasonal employer in Colorado's historic San Luis Valley with an annual payroll of over \$4.6 million dollars for the 2012 fiscal year.

Like many ski areas throughout the West, WCSA is suffering from the impacts of the spruce bark beetle. Since 2002, Wolf Creek has spent over \$100,000 dollars annually removing beetle killed trees via helicopter. This past summer, we removed one million pounds of fuel within the 1,581 acres of our Special Use Permit, 20% of which is considered construction grade lumber. We estimate the total loss of standing trees to be around 100,000, of which 40,000 trees need to be removed in the near future.

Over the past decade, the cost of federal wildfire protection and suppression has averaged more than \$3 billion annually.<sup>4</sup> The West Fork Complex Fire alone cost taxpayers \$33 million.<sup>5</sup> By all indications, these numbers will continue to rise. Investing a portion of this cost upfront would most likely minimize

<sup>1</sup> McEvoy, John. "WFCF Costs \$33 Million." *The Mineral County Miner* 8 August 2013: 12A.

<sup>2</sup> Hildner, Matt. "Wolf Creek Pass to Open." *The Pueblo Chieftain* 27 June 2013. Web. 17 September 2013.

<sup>4</sup> McEvoy, 12A.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

the overall cost of responding to fires on public land and protecting the wildland-urban interface. There is a general consensus among professional firefighters that a proactive approach to fuel reduction is a far better use of funds. For example, a contracted helicopter will cost over \$15,000 a day when responding to fires.<sup>6</sup> This three month contract will cost \$1,359,000 whether the ship flies or not. Our average cost for hazard tree removal and fuel reduction is \$1,000 per acre. Therefore, it is possible to treat 1,359 acres of forest surrounding critical infrastructure at the same cost of securing a helicopter for 90 days and having it sit idle, and our approach addresses the problem for years to come.

Businesses and visitors alike must accept the incurred risks of living near forest; however, it is no longer a viable option to let it all burn because of the values at risk. Wolf Creek Ski Area advocates a proactive, multipronged approach to restoring health in the surrounding beetle kill forests while protecting assets.

## **PUBLIC OUTREACH**

One of the most important ways to minimize the economic burden of the spruce beetle invasion is to initiate a public information campaign which identifies the spruce beetle outbreak as a natural process, and accepts that a dramatic change to our existing forest is unavoidable.

In my state, the Tourism Office should address the spruce beetle outbreak, and frame it as such. This is part of a greater acceptance of our changing landscape on a timeline faster than we're used to. We should encourage tourists and locals to walk through beetle kill forests and look about themselves: abundant sunlight is streaming through open canopies above, and saplings are rapidly sprouting from healthy forest floors below.

## **ALLOW NATURAL PROCESSES**

Some tree stands should be left untreated; there are some trees too difficult to extract and there are environmentally sensitive areas that should remain untouched. Foresters should consider which trees will best facilitate regeneration. Some standing dead should be left in order to provide shade and wind protection for saplings. These largely untreated stands will revert back to a spruce/subalpine forest as they are the most shade-tolerant species, whereas an aggressive treatment could change the natural forest trajectory.

It is also necessary to identify and protect wildlife habitats when reducing fuels. Some snags contain dens and bird habitats, while other standing dead trees provide critical shade for populations that depend upon them.

## **FUEL REDUCTION**

Reducing ground fuel loading and crown fire potential is a core component of reducing wildfire potential.<sup>7</sup> Arborists should identify hazard trees, and decide which ones need to be removed, and

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<sup>6</sup> "National Exclusive Use Large Fire Support Helicopter Services." US Department of Agriculture Forest Service, 4 April 2008. Web. 17 September 2013,

<sup>7</sup> "Mineral County Fire Protection District Community Wildfire Protection Plan." Land Stewardship Associates, LTD. April 2009. Web. 12 February 2013.

which ones can be laid down to fortify the regeneration of the understory. This will include the necessary removal of hazard trees along the highway corridor and those surrounding critical infrastructure.

Felled trees can be repositioned in a manner that decreases erosion and increases snow retention. Spring is a good time to remove trees, using snow cover to skid over environmentally sensitive areas, thus reducing impact to saplings, ground cover and topsoil. Once the snow melts, skidding trees should cease until conditions dry out. Helicopters can be used in environmentally sensitive and roadless areas.

A healthy forest will protect the watershed by preventing erosion, enhancing ground storage, reducing flooding, and filtering contaminants.<sup>10</sup> Unlike beetle infested or standing dead trees, a healthy tree intercepts, slows, absorbs and stores water through normal functions.<sup>11</sup> By removing dead and dying trees and fostering the growth of saplings, it will improve the quality of water being filtered at the headwaters of the Rio Grande and San Juan Rivers. This type of forest management can reduce the risk of a catastrophic wildfire in these high-priority watersheds.

## **ENERGY DESIGN**

Products from fuel reduction treatments can also be used for renewable energy. Biomass boilers are already being installed in northern Colorado, which burn wood chips for heating buildings, rather than relying on natural gas or propane. Wood chips come from forest fire mitigation projects and are therefore a renewable resource. Biomass energy also produces significantly fewer overall emissions than either natural forest fires or prescribed burning.<sup>12</sup>

## **CONTROLLED BURNS**

There are over 3.6 million acres in the surrounding San Juan and Rio Grande National Forests. It is not feasible to restore forest health solely through fuel reduction and timber sales. When conducted thoughtfully and under the correct conditions, controlled burns can greatly reduce the catastrophic impact of a wildfire. This can be done without closing US Highway 160 and the economic centers that depend upon it. The San Juan and Rio Grande forest staff should identify which areas may sustain a healthy burn without undo economic impact. This would accompany a site specific review of existing structures and communities that would be impacted by such a prescription. Controlled burns that create firebreaks between large swaths of standing dead timber could potentially keep a natural wildfire from becoming unstoppable.

## **LIMITED TIMBER SALES**

Below-cost timber sales are a persistent problem for forests, particularly in the Rocky Mountain Region

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<sup>10</sup> "Colorado Statewide Forest Resource Strategy." Colorado State University, 2009. Web. 12 February 2013.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> "CSU Biomass Boiler Fact Sheet." Colorado State University. Web. 19 August 2013.

where high costs and modest timber values are prevalent.<sup>8</sup> When deciding to conduct a timber sale, forest administrators should be thoughtful of road maintenance costs, timber sale planning and administration, and replanting and restoration expenses which often times made such sales unprofitable.

Professional foresters should first identify the small percentage of high quality timber that can be harvested in a practical and efficient manner. This limited timber sale must be conducted in a timely matter in order to harvest high value wood among the pervasive stands of low grade beetle kill. The sale should also be within the existing logging road infrastructure. Building roads in this rugged and rural landscape is tremendously expensive and will negate the positive economic impact of a timber sale. Harvested timber should be made available to local sawmills and businesses in order to directly benefit these communities.

## **CONCLUSION**

Once the imminent threat of the West Fork Fire Complex passed and firefighters were leaving the ski area, there was a collective “see you next season” from the crew. Another wildfire in southern Colorado is inevitable if conditions remain the same. When looking at the millions of acres of dead trees, we should resist simply seeing a chainsaw. Public outreach, timber sales, fuel reduction, controlled burns and energy design should be used in conjunction to create an economically and environmentally sound forest health prescription that protects asset values on Wolf Creek Pass. Living and working in a dynamic forest, I understand there will continue to be forest mortality and fire, but it doesn’t have to be catastrophic.

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<sup>8</sup> Gorte, Ross W. “Below-Cost Timber Sales: Overview.” CRS Report for Congress, 20 December 1994. Web. 17 September 2013.