

Thank you Chairman Cochran for holding this hearing on what I view is crucial legislation.

HR 1904, the Healthy Forests Restoration Act, is a bi-partisan bill that passed the House of Representatives with overwhelming support.

The wildfire seasons of 2000 and 2002 were the largest and most destructive in fifty years. The fires destroyed property, degraded air and water quality, and damaged fish and wildlife habitat. They cost billions to fight, and even worse, cost the lives of firefighters. The damage to the environment was severe and the cost to communities untold.

If any good can come out of the fires it is that Congress now recognizes that the status quo will not suffice and we must act to address the growing crisis.

Yet, this bill is about more than forest fires. It is about the very health of our forestlands. Fire risk is an indicator of a stressed ecosystem, as are insect infestations, disease outbreaks, and the encroachment of invasive species. They are all indications of an ecosystem that must be restored.

I would like to raise an example that strikes close to home.

Elk City, Idaho is ground zero in regards to the healthy forest bill. Unmanaged forests have resulted in a tremendous insect problem that has resulted in a potential wildfire problem.

A couple of weeks ago, I toured the Red River Area and saw first-hand the threat. 80 percent of the trees surrounding the community are infested by Mountain Pine beetles--millions of trees have died. With even-aged stands and rampant bug kill, the Red River drainage is poised for a catastrophic fire.

With only one road into Elk City, the people there are understandably concerned.

The drainage is also significant for its important fish and wildlife habitat--including habitat for threatened and endangered species. The ecosystem is being degraded because the lands are not being managed and the forest is dying. If there is a fire it will not only kill the species, but devastate their habitat even further. Areas where every human action has been governed by the endangered species act and clean water act will be wiped out by a fire that cannot be held accountable to those laws.

What is so frustrating to the community is that while millions of trees are rotting in the forests, while wildlife habitat is being degraded because of lack of management, and their very safety is threatened, the economy is also being devastated.

I disagree that protection of economies and the environment are mutually exclusive. Allowing the Forest Service to move forward with appropriate silvicultural techniques would address the threat and could help this rural economy.

Unfortunately this is not an isolated example in Idaho or the nation.

Last year, Senator Lincoln held a hearing on the Red Oak Borer epidemic facing much of the

Southeast. I was struck at the similarities with the beetle problems we face in the Pacific Northwest.

That hearing reinforced what many already knew, forest health is not just a Western issue.

The bill that came out of the house reflects that fact. It addresses conditions, across the country, that threaten forested lands.

While modest--compared to the 190 million acres of land managed by the U.S. Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management that are at unnatural risk to catastrophic wildfire --this bill will lead to real results that will protect communities, air quality, water quality, and wildlife habitat. One criticism of the bill is that it addresses only a small fraction of our at-risk public lands.

Despite its narrow focus, I strongly support this legislation.

We need to move forward.

I agree with Dale Bosworth, Chief of the Forest Service, when he says we need to move the focus from what we take, to what we leave. As the Chief has identified, too many are looking at this as a zero-sum game. They seek someone to blame for forest health problems or argue that logging is inherently bad.

We need to get beyond that zero-sum argument and realize that what is important is restoring a healthy ecosystem: an ecosystem that allows for a natural fire regime to exist without threatening our watersheds, wildlife or communities.

Advocates for this bill, me included, do not purport that it will fire-, insect-, or disease-proof our forests. That is not its goal. The purpose of the legislation is to provide the Forest Service with the tools they need to do the work on the ground necessary to restore our forests to health, and reduce the threat of catastrophic wildfire to our communities and forest ecosystems.

The bill includes key points that are necessary to effectively meet its goals.

It addresses the analysis paralysis that is one of the greatest obstacles to getting real forest management work done on the ground.

It recognizes that the problem goes beyond fire; that there are other threats to our nation's forest lands.

It recognizes that these problems affect both public and private lands--throughout the country.

And, that collaboration is vital. The bill codifies the public input and participation process outlined by the bi-partisan Western Governor's 10-year strategy. Robust public participation is key to the success of any effort.

I hope we can build bi-partisan support for this bill in the Senate and move forward quickly. As Oregon Governor Ted Kulongoski stated last week at the Western Governor's

Association's Forest Health Summit, "there are no Republican forests or Democrat forests. There are only American Forests--that need our protection, stewardship, and collective thinking."

I appreciate the witnesses for taking the time to be here with us today. I know the committee will find the information you present helpful as we move forward to consider the legislation.

I look forward to your testimonies and an informative hearing.

Thank you.