Hearing on the Colorado Emergency Wildfire and Insect Infestations Response Act of 2006

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Chairman Walden and members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony on this important topic, the *Colorado Emergency Wildfire and Insect Infestations Response Act of 2006(HR 5756)*. My name is Lyle Laverty, current Director of Colorado State Parks. Before taking this position I served as the Associate Deputy Chief for the US Forest Service responsible for the implementation of the National Fire Plan. Prior to that assignment, I served at the Regional Forester for the Rocky Mountain Region of the US Forest Service, encompassing nearly 24,000,000 acres in Colorado, Wyoming, South Dakota and Nebraska. I am a registered professional forester in California and a Society of American Foresters (SAF) Certified Forester®. As a side note, I serve on the SAF National Council, representing more than 1,500 forest managers, researchers, academics, and private consultants in the 10 intermountain states.

In Colorado, our forests are in a crisis state. Over the past decade, beetles of various types have killed more than 10 million conifers, mostly lodgepole pine, pinyon pine, and spruce. The combination of aging, unnaturally dense forest stands and several years of severe drought has allowed the mountain pine beetle epidemic to reach record levels in both ponderosa and lodgepole pine forests.

We know from intensive surveys that mountain pine beetles attacked 1.3 million trees on 500,000 acres in Colorado last year. Additionally spruce beetles infested 1.2 million trees on nearly 120,000 acres last year and appear to be poised to launch the next big bark beetle epidemic. The implications of these attacks are significant if not catastrophic. These lands are critical watersheds, important not only to Colorado, but the entire western United States.

As a land manager embracing nearly 45 years of service, my experience covers a variety of ecosystem types in the west and intermountain west. As a line office I have personally experienced the impacts of catastrophic fires, floods, and windstorms. As the Director of Colorado State Parks I have a very deep and personal interest in actively managing and ensuring healthy forest conditions on state park lands. The system of parks in Colorado is unlike many state park systems in the country and dramatically different than the National Forest Systems land in this great country.

The distinguishing factor is ninety percent of our operating budget comes from user fees. People are willing to pay for quality service and quality settings. The importance of healthy forests for Colorado State Parks is all about business. Our visitor base would be severely impacted if we were to experience catastrophic fire or if insects were to decimate our stands.

We have taken a very proactive approach to ensuring healthy forest conditions on the lands entrusted to our care by the people of Colorado. I'd like to share with you the approach we have taken to reduce the risk of catastrophic fire and do all we can to ensure our forest stands remain healthy.

2002 Black Mountain Fire

While the 2002 fire season continued to set records in Colorado, Colorado State Parks initiated an aggressive multi-year fuels reduction project to reduce wildland fire threat as well as improve elk habitat and the resistance of forest stands to insects and disease. While mop-up was still continuing on the Black Mountain Fire, we realized that our $4.6 million dollar investment in a new park in Jefferson County was at risk. The Black Mountain Fire burned on the Pike National Forest in May within 1.5 miles of the park boundary. The communities surrounding the park were concerned about actions agencies were taking to reduce the risk and impact of wildfire in the Front Range.

In early June I invited the communities to an information meeting to discuss our plans to reduce the park's dense stands of pine and fir, stands similar to those burned in the Buffalo Creek and High Meadow fires in 1996 and 2000. We coordinated our proposal with the Pike National Forest.

Staunton State Park is a 3,700 acre undeveloped tract adjacent to the Pike National Forest in the rugged Front Range of Colorado in western Jefferson County. The park is in the heart of the "red zone" an area representing both high risk to catastrophic fire and high values of both life and property.

Following the June community meetings we conducted a forest inventory and fuels assessment of park. The inventory revealed opportunities to improve the health of the park‘s forest resources while reducing the fuel hazard. Our environmental analysis and Fish and Wildlife consultation was completed mid summer. The initial phase of the project prescription was treatment of 250 acres in dense ponderosa pine. Marking was completed by the Colorado State Forest Service during the late summer with the contract offering made in mid fall. By Thanksgiving, the first phase was under contract. From our first community meeting to contract award, the works was completed in less than 120 days.

Working with the Colorado State Forest Service we were able to utilize stewardship contracting principles for the Staunton Project. Using these principles we were able to reduce the project costs from a planning estimate of $800 per acre to approximately $200 per acre. We were able to capture a high degree of utilization, removing merchantable commercial logs, post and poles, and firewood.

In addition to this initial phase using mechanical harvesters and skidders, we thinned areas where mixed conifers had suppressed aspen growth. Theses thinning operations were completed by the Colorado Youth Corps forestry teams. While slightly more expensive, this method of hand treatment allowed us to treat areas inaccessible, protect private property and provide significant employment opportunities for Colorado youth.

The benefits of the Staunton project are significant. Through working partnerships we have effectively reduce the risk of wildland fire to communities, adjacent landowners, and National Forest lands.

We have dramatically improved the habitat for the 200 head of elk that winter in the park and the sustainability of the park resources. While protecting and enhancing the watershed values we have entered this project with the deep understanding of the importance of the scenic values associated with the park. Finally I am confident we have substantially reduced the risk that will ensure future visitor and firefighter safety.

Fuel treatment and forest health projects are now in progress at Cheyenne Mountain, Eldorado Canyon, Golden Gate Canyon, Steamboat Lake, Lory, Mueller, State Forest, and Lone Mesa State Parks.

In contrast to what we’ve been able to do on State Park lands, the Pike National Forest has been unable to implement a project on the lands adjacent to Staunton State Park. I believe an encumbered planning process has influenced the agencies ability to be responsive. Mr. Chairman, I have no doubt that HR 5756 would help federal land managers get projects done in a timelier manner, at less cost to the taxpayer while still retaining the environmental integrity of the land and the public participation in the process. I know because on State Park land, we are able to accomplish this with a much shorter and less cumbersome environmental review process and still, we have millions of visitors every year who enjoy actively managed forests. In fact, we were able to complete our environmental review and public involvement in just 120 days —the same timeframe stipulated in the bi-partisan Forest Emergency Recovery and Research Act (HR 4200).

Many have noted the need for additional federal resources to get work done in Colorado’s national forests. I’m sure every national forest in the country could get more work done with more resources. Every national forest in the country could also get more work done by minimizing expensive and time consuming bureaucratic hurdles the federal land managers must tackle and instead, applying scarce resources to real on-the-ground work. Mr. Beauprez’s bill would help accomplish this in Colorado. While I have a particular bias towards Colorado, I know there are other areas in the country that would benefit from a shortened process—it shouldn’t apply to just Colorado. HR 4200—the Forest Emergency Recovery and Research Act--already passed by the House, would apply expedited environmental processes nation-wide to forest recovery projects including insect infestations. It would help reduce the amount of resources spent on process and focus work and funding on fixing the problems in forests across the U.S. In addition, the funding mechanism in the bill will provide much needed resources for recovering forests, reducing reliance on appropriated funds.

In conclusion, a number of bills out there including Mr. Beauprez’s bill, Chairman Walden’s bill, and others will help get forest managers out of the office and into the woods. Congress must take action to make these ideas reality.

Mr. Chairman, thank you for your leadership on this important issue. I’m happy to answer any questions you might have.