



Written statement of

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Supervisor
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On behalf of the National Association of Counties

U.S. House Committee on Natural Resources
“Conservation in a Crown Jewel: A Discussion About Wildfires and Forest Management”

August 11, 2023

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Chairman Westerman and members of the U.S. House Committee on Natural Resources, thank you for holding this hearing to discuss wildfires and forest management in one of the crown jewels of our nation's conservation legacy.

My name is Miles Menetrey, and I have been a member of the Mariposa County, California Board of Supervisors since 2017. I am a native Californian and have lived in Mariposa County since being displaced by the 1989 Loma Prieta Earthquake. I operated my own construction business here in Mariposa County until I was sworn in as a County Supervisor. I currently serve as a Board Member for the National Association of Counties' (NACo) and on NACo's Public Lands Steering Committee. I offer my testimony today on behalf of NACo.

Mariposa County has a population of 17,000 people and serves as a gateway to the Sierra and Stanislaus National Forests, and of course, Yosemite National Park. Life in Mariposa County is tied to our federally owned lands. More than one-third of all employers in Mariposa County are directly related to tourism and recreation. These businesses are responsible for more than 60 percent of the local property, sales, and transient occupancy taxes.

Mariposa County is directly and significantly impacted by the federal lands in our county. Over half our county is federally owned and therefore exempt from taxes and the development that could generate revenue to support the services provided for these areas. We are caught in limbo when it comes to financing essential county government services because the Payments In Lieu of Taxes (PILT) program is substantially less than our local property taxes would require and subject to the annual discretionary appropriations process. The Secure Rural Schools (SRS) program will expire in September, forcing counties to consider making cuts to critical services like search and rescue operations. We are excited to see the inclusion of one year of full funding of PILT in both the House and Senate Interior Appropriations bills, as well as the introduction of three-year SRS reauthorization legislation in both chambers. We respectfully request that Congress act on both vital programs to ensure continuity in public lands county budgets. Without these commitments, the County will not be able to deliver essential services to the people in our community.

In addition to the budgetary constraints caused by federal land ownership, the management decisions made by federal lands agencies directly impact Mariposa County's environment, economy and quality of life. While counties work closely with federal agencies to manage our natural resources, we are constrained in our ability to influence outcomes. Unfortunately, policies determined in Washington have left our forests overcrowded, unhealthy and fire prone.

Active forest management will reduce the threat of wildfire in the West. Reducing fuel loads on federal lands will reestablish healthy, thriving landscapes, watersheds and communities. Healthy forests managed through practical, scientific practices purify air and water, increase biodiversity, are less susceptible to catastrophic fire and support economic growth. Increasing commercial timber harvests

where appropriate, expanding the use of mechanical thinning and controlled burns in coordination with state and local governments, and reducing red tape to get through the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) process will ameliorate forest health, spur economic activity in rural communities and improve the experience of those public lands visitors on which our county relies.

Impacts of Fires in Mariposa County

Landscape-scale catastrophic wildfires have a disproportionate effect on our environment and communities in Western states. Wildland fire managers no longer talk in terms of “fire season” but instead refer to the “fire year.” Increased wildfire suppression costs in money and man hours rob our federal lands agencies of necessary personnel for approving land management projects, deprive federal and state agencies of funds that could be used to improve landscapes and the visitor experience, and redirect county efforts from the services our community needs and expects to supporting federal emergency response and mitigating impacts for evacuees and others who have been unnecessarily impacted.

So far this year, over 1.3 million acres have burned nationwide. While precipitation levels broke records last winter, the current hot, dry summer, combined with decades worth of fuel buildup leaves us vulnerable to a catastrophic conflagration at any moment. Since 2017, more than 325 square miles have burned in Mariposa County. This is about a quarter of the total land area of our county. If the burned area could be arranged in a straight line a mile wide, it would extend from Yosemite to Los Angeles.

The 2018 Ferguson Fire, which burned 97,000 acres entirely on federal land, resulted in the death of two firefighters and cost nearly \$300 million in damages and suppression efforts.¹ In the middle of a housing crisis, we have lost more than 200 homes to wildfire, including 127 burned during last year’s Oak Fire which also incinerated 20,000 acres of mostly federal lands. Most of those who lose homes are uninsured or underinsured and private insurance companies have canceled thousands of policies in zip codes where fires may occur, regardless of individual home hardening or property maintenance.

Wildfires also have a detrimental effect on local public health. In 2017, Mariposa County, which has very limited private therapy or mental health service options, experienced a 300 percent increase in requests for counseling and mental health support, including 500 new requests from children in local schools. In the wake of the Oak Fire, 55 percent of our population reported worsening depression or anxiety. Some of those who lose everything in a wildfire experience thoughts of suicide.

As smoke billows into the air, everyone breathing that air is impacted—especially children, those with pre-existing medical conditions, and the elderly. Warm daytime air lifts smoke into the atmosphere, but when cooler weather sets in at night, the smoke descends back into our communities, workplaces, and homes. The charred post-fire landscapes leave hazardous trees and the threat of potential mudslides which can cause further damage to our environment, water sources, lives, and our private property.

¹ <https://cpaw.headwaterseconomics.org/project/mariposa-county-california/>

Addressing Wildfire Threats

While the causes of catastrophic wildfires are complex, inaction exacerbates a dangerous situation. This problem can be solved if federal agencies forge strong partnerships with states, counties, tribes, industry, residents and conservationists.

Counties across the United States are ready to engage in collaborative efforts to address the forest health crisis. Counties have a long track record of working in good faith to build consensus and implementing effective and collaborative projects with our federal partners. Projects developed through consensus-based collaborative processes should be approved expeditiously to increase the number of acres treated. Furthermore, the U.S. Forest Service and the Bureau of Land Management are legally required to coordinate forest or resource management plans with county land management plans to reduce conflicts. By engaging counties early and often, federal agencies will find willing, eager partners to reduce the catastrophic fire threat.

Mariposa County and our government and nonprofit partners are implementing our award-winning Community Wildfire Protection Plan by constructing fuel breaks, seeking grants to support fire mitigation projects, and providing grants for fuel reduction projects. We have recently purchased nearly 300 acres adjacent to the town of Mariposa to build mosaic fuel breaks and prevent catastrophic wildfire loss.

It is not enough. There is so much more to do.

Congress can help improve forest management in several ways. First, Congress should treat counties and tribes as genuine partners under a Good Neighbor Agreement (GNA), which allows the U.S. Forest Service to enter into agreements with other governmental entities to conduct necessary restoration work on our national forests. States can reinvest 25 percent of revenues generated from GNA projects in further forest restoration work. We ask Congress to give counties and tribes the same ability to reinvest 25 percent of GNA project revenues by passing the *Treating Tribes and Counties as Good Neighbors Act*. We applaud bipartisan leaders in both chambers for sponsoring this legislation.

Similarly, stewardship contracting proves that a market-driven approach to forest management projects can work to achieve both environmental goals and increased forest production. Counties support and are active partners in stewardship contracting initiatives across the United States, but again, cannot benefit from the revenues they generate. Counties support expanding stewardship contract receipt sharing to allow counties and tribes the same authority as states to reinvest receipts in management projects.

NEPA should be reformed by requiring the costs and benefits of a proposed forest management project to be weighed against the consequences of doing nothing to address wildfire threats, disease and insect infestation, and potential impacts to local water supplies, air quality and wildlife habitat. The choice not to manage our national forests is a management decision that will continue to lead to catastrophic results.

Federal agencies should also more actively attack wildfires at the ignition source. We encourage reform to the Wildland Fire Decision Support System for more aggressive wildfire management suppression and project management through evaluation of economic and environmental impacts to communities and other jurisdictions. The initial reaction to a new ignition should be to develop a suppression plan if it poses a threat to communities, landscapes or watersheds, rather than taking the default action of monitoring a new fire to determine if it meets management objectives.

Finally, the federal government needs to focus extensively on infrastructure and workforce development improvements in public lands counties. Oftentimes private industries, which can be some of our strongest partners in forest management, find that federal forests lack the necessary infrastructure to profitably remove fuel loads and take small diameter trees to processing facilities. The federal government must also invest in a strong, well-trained workforce that can expeditiously conduct NEPA analyses for specific projects and develop resource management plans. Federal agencies should also ensure staff are not frequently moved to different positions in new communities, which will allow for better relationship building between the federal government and local officials. Agencies must also create innovative intergovernmental partnerships for affordable housing to attract and retain quality personnel.

Conclusion

Chairman Westerman and members of the Committee, thank you for the invitation to testify. Counties urge Congress to enact policies to reduce the threat of catastrophic fire to our forests, communities, public health and rural economies. I appreciate the opportunity to tell our story and offer some ideas for improving the quality of federal public lands.