

STATEMENT OF
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AND
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BEFORE THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
COMMITTEE ON RESOURCES
SEPTEMBER 5, 2002

Chairman Hansen and Members of the Committee:

We appreciate the opportunity to meet with you today to discuss the President's Healthy Forests Initiative and legislation that will improve fire management and forest health on our public lands.

We would like to provide for the record written comments on the legislation that is being heard today. Our Departments are reviewing these bills and evaluating how they compare with the Administration's proposals. We want to commend the Committee and particularly, Subcommittee Chairman McInnis, for his active attention to the issue and the energy he has put into drafting a legislative proposal. We would also like to thank Representatives Rehberg and Shadegg for their proposals. There are common themes in our legislation and we look forward to working with you as the legislation moves through the process.

The need for a plan to restore our forests and rangelands to long-term health has never been greater. Today, the forests and rangelands of the West have become unnaturally dense and ecosystem health has suffered

significantly. When coupled with seasonal droughts, these unhealthy forests, overloaded with fuels, are vulnerable to unnaturally severe wildfires. Currently, a 190 million acres of public land are at increased risk of catastrophic wildfires. It is in this context, and during this severe and ongoing wildland fire season, that we discuss President Bush's recently introduced Healthy Forests Initiative and legislation designed to promote efficiency and timely and more effective implementation plans to restore and sustain healthy forests and rangelands.

The nation is experiencing one of the worst wildfire seasons in modern history. The Hayman fire in Colorado, the Rodeo-Chediski fires in Arizona, the McNally fire in California and the Biscuit fire in Oregon have come in sequence over the last several months. These incredibly fast moving, destructive fires have resulted in catastrophic environmental, social and economic impacts. They have been the worst in each state's history. These infernos, along with over 60,000 other wildfire starts, have burned over six million acres so far this year, matching the pace of the previous record-setting 2000 fire season and doubling the 10-year average. Based on current fuel conditions and weather predictions the potential for more fires remains high through the fall. The cost of fighting these fires has been staggering. Firefighting costs for the Forest Service alone will exceed \$1.25 billion. Hundreds of communities and thousands of people have fled their homes, and, most tragically, 20 brave firefighters have lost their lives.

Our firefighters are more effective than ever, controlling over 99% of all fires on initial attack. Yet, as the severity of the season demonstrates, even our best firefighting efforts are not enough without an effective strategy to reduce the risk of catastrophic wildfire. In May of this year, working with the Western Governors' Association and a broad cross-section of interests including county commissioners, state foresters, tribal officials and other stakeholders, we reached consensus on a 10-Year Comprehensive Strategy and Implementation Plan to reduce fire risks to communities and the environment. The plan sets forth the blueprint for making communities and the environment safer from destructive wildfires. The plan calls for active forest management focusing on hazardous fuels reduction both in the wildland-urban

interface and across the broader landscape. Active forest management includes: thinning trees from over-dense stands that produce commercial or pre-commercial products, biomass removal and utilization, and prescribed fire and other fuels reduction tools. We want to thank Representative Pombo and the members of the House of Representatives for initiating and passing House Concurrent Resolution 352 endorsing the Collaborative 10-Year Strategy. We take seriously our responsibilities under the Implementation Plan. For example, within five weeks of signing the Agreement, we completed detailed work plans to address the 23 implementation tasks identified in the Plan.

Timely and strategically placed fuels treatment projects are effective in preventing or stopping fires. A recently published study by the Western Forest Fire Research Center concluded that treated stands experience lower fire severity than untreated stands that burn under similar weather and topographic condition. This report was released in March before this fire season, but we have many examples from this summer including the Squires Fire near Medford, Oregon, where untreated forest burned intensely while fire dropped to the ground in the treated areas giving firefighters the chance to attack the fire safely. On the Rodeo-Chediski and Cache Mountain Fires, damage to forest stands was minimized in areas treated to reduce hazardous fuel 3-5 years earlier.

In order for the 10-Year Implementation Plan to succeed, the Forest Service and Interior agencies must be able to implement critical fuels reduction and restoration projects associated with the plan goals in a timely manner. Too often, however, the agencies are constrained by procedural requirements and litigation that delay actual on-the-ground implementation. A June 2002 Forest Service study, *The Process Predicament*, identified three factors most contributing to project delay: 1) excessive analysis; 2) ineffective public involvement; and 3) management inefficiencies.

The situation in this country has reached a point where the roadblocks which prevent agencies charged with the responsibility for forest health to implement management decisions must change. On August 22, 2002, President Bush announced Healthy Forests: An Initiative for Wildfire Prevention and Stronger Communities. The Healthy Forest Initiative will implement core components of the 10-Year Implementation Plan, enhancing and facilitating the work and collaboration agreed to in that document. The Healthy Forests initiative directs the agencies to improve regulatory processes to ensure more timely decisions, greater efficiencies and better results in reducing the risks of catastrophic wildfires by restoring forest health. The President's initiative directs us, together with Council on Environmental Quality Chairman Connaughton, to: improve procedures for developing and implementing fuels treatments and forest and rangeland restoration projects in priority forests and rangelands in collaboration with local governments; reduce the number of overlapping environmental reviews by combining project analysis and establishing a process for concurrent project clearance by Federal agencies; develop guidance for weighing the short-term risks against the long-term benefits of fuels treatment and restoration projects; and develop guidance to ensure consistent NEPA procedures for fuels treatment activities and restoration activities, including development of a model Environmental Assessment for these types of projects.

In accordance with the Healthy Forests Initiative, we have submitted to the Congress for consideration a legislative proposal designed to accomplish more timely, efficient, and effective implementation of forest and rangeland health projects. The intent of this proposal is to significantly increase and improve forest and rangeland health and to prevent the damage caused by catastrophic wildfires.

The first section would expedite implementation of fuels reduction projects, where hazardous fuels pose the greatest risk to people, communities, and the environment, consistent with more targeted legislation passed in July. In implementing projects under this section, the highest priority will be given to wildland urban interface areas; municipal watersheds; and forested or rangeland areas affected by disease, insect activity, or wind throw; or areas susceptible to catastrophic reburn.

Section 2 would authorize agencies to enter into long-term stewardship contracts with the private sector, non-profit organizations, and local communities. Stewardship contracts allow contractors to keep forest products and other vegetative material in exchange for the service of thinning trees and brush and removing dead wood. Long-term contracts provide contractors the opportunity to invest in equipment and infrastructure needed to productively use material generated from forest thinning to make forest products or to produce energy.

Section 3 would remove a rider contained in Section 322 of the Fiscal Year 1993 Interior and Related Agencies Appropriations bill that imposed extraordinary procedural requirements on the Forest Service that are not required of any other Federal agency. The goal of meaningful public participation and consensus building will be better served through pre-decisional public notice and comment rather than through post-decision appeals.

The fourth section would address standards of injunctive relief for activities necessary to restore fire-adapted forest and rangeland ecosystems. This section is designed to ensure that judges consider long-term risks of harm to people, property and the environment in challenges based on short-term risks of forest health projects.

In addition, the Administration will work with Congress on legislation to supplement the Agriculture and Interior Departments effort to fulfill the original promise of the 1994 Northwest Forest Plan.

President Bush's proposed Healthy Forests Initiative is based upon a common-sense approach to reducing the threat of catastrophic wildfires by restoring forest and rangeland health. Our goal is to ensure the long-term safety and health of communities and ecosystems in our care. Our responsibility is to ensure the long-

term health of our forests and rangelands for the use, benefit and enjoyment of our citizens and for generations to come. These are goals and responsibilities that we take seriously and we fully commit ourselves, our agencies and the resources you have provided us with to fulfill them. We appreciate the continued bipartisan support we have received from the Congress, and we look forward to working with you on these legislative proposals.