

*U.S. Congressman Denny Rehberg
Opening Statement / Talking Points
H.R. 5214 – the National Forest Fire Prevention Act
Committee on Resources
1324 LHOB, 9:30 a.m.
September 5, 2002*

Mr. Chairman, I thank you for scheduling this hearing today to consider the National Forest Fire Prevention Act, my legislation to expand the Daschle rider so it applies to fire-prone National Forest lands across the nation, not just those in the Black Hills of South Dakota. My bill is supported by many of my colleagues on this Committee, evidence that it is time to change the system.

Many of America's public lands have become so overgrown and neglected that they are now powder kegs just waiting to erupt. We all have watched the wild fires rage across the forests - destroying homes, property, and the environment in their wake – and it is time to stand up and address the problems facing America's forests.

Montana experienced total forest devastation during the summer of 2000, when 655,000 acres of the Bitterroot National Forest burned. I have personally witnessed the devastation wrought by wildfires. Just this past week, Montanans asked me, as their voice in Washington, to push for sound forest management that reduces fuel loads and prevents fires from ruining the lives of those caught in their deadly path.

Forest fires are not Democrat or Republican issues. They are public safety issues. Mother nature has already unleashed the awesome power of fire throughout the West this year and burned more than 6 million acres - an area the size of New Hampshire.

This year's fires alone have driven tens of thousands of people from their homes, destroyed more than 2,000 structures, and caused the deaths of many firefighters. These fires have also killed hundreds of millions of trees, devastated habitat, and severely damaged forest

soils and

watersheds for decades to come. Though such devastation can hardly be quantified, the total cost of these fires is already more than a billion dollars.

We must do something to improve the process to give forest managers the tools they need to manage for a healthy ecosystem and treat the forest to prevent further devastation.

That is why I introduced legislation, the National Forest Fire Prevention Act, to address this serious situation. My legislation takes the common sense policy, originally outlined by Senator Daschle, and extends its benefits to the rest of America. The National Forest Fire Prevention Act simply allows forests facing the most serious public safety threats to be treated by the Forest Service, without waiting for the full completion of lengthy and burdensome bureaucratic processes.

The bill does not overturn NEPA or NFMA, though it will no doubt be inaccurately characterized as doing so. There is no language in the bill to overturn those laws and is not an intended consequence of the legislation.

A healthy forest makes for a healthy community. We can't lose sight of that. But a delicate balance must be struck. We must have strong laws to protect the environment, there's no question about that. Yet those same laws should not be so burdensome that they prevent local forest managers from implementing common-sense land management solutions.

I'm encouraged by the President's plan - it's certainly an important step toward improving the health of America's forests. We simply must implement some regulatory streamlining so we can clear out the dead, dying, bug-infested timber that is making our forests unhealthy and prone to wildfires.

I look forward to hearing the testimony on my bill, and the proposals introduced by my

colleagues Mr. Shadegg and Mr. McInnis, as well as the President's Healthy Forests Initiative. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, for bringing us all together to consider each of these proposals today.