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U.S. House of Representatives

Committee on Natural Resources

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Opening Statement of

Chairman Tom McClintock

Subcommittee on Federal Lands

On Tuesday, March 24, 2015

1324 Longworth House Office Building

Oversight Hearing on "Examining the Spending Priorities and Missions of the U.S. Forest Service and the Bureau of Land Management in the President's Fiscal Year 2016 Budget Request."

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The Department of the Interior will generate \$13.8 billion next year and consume only \$13.1 billion. This is as it should be. The public lands under its jurisdiction – and under the Department of Agriculture with respect to National Forest land – represents vast resources upon which our economic prosperity partly depends.

We should note, however, that this operating surplus is largely due to energy leasing that was approved many years ago. In fact, \$10.2 billion of the \$13.8 billion the Department will generate is because of OCS and onshore mineral leasing done under previous administrations.

Sadly, energy production on public lands has been largely discouraged by this administration. And a chronic decline of other resource management has been ongoing during this and previous administrations. This has devastated local economies, denied taxpayers the efficient use of its assets, and with respect to forest policy, has devastated the environment.

We have seen an 80 percent decline in timber harvested out of the national forests during the past 30 years. During the same period, we have suffered a proportional increase in forest acreage destroyed by fire. As a forester warned years ago, "all that excess timber comes out of the forest one way or the other. It is either carried out, or it is burned out. But it will come out."

When we carried it out, we had healthy forests and a thriving economy. But since we consigned our forests to a policy of benign neglect, we have seen them devastated by fire, disease and pestilence, as stressed-out trees now fight for their survival in catastrophically overgrown conditions and hundreds of square miles of critical habitats are literally incinerated.

Road closures – often over the intense opposition of local governments – have radically restricted public access to the public lands. Last year I visited the command center of the massive King Fire on the day they thought they would lose the entire towns of Forest Hill and Georgetown. The most bitter complaint of the firefighters is that they could no longer

get to the fire on the ground because government land managers had abandoned the forest roads.

Increasingly restrictive access policies and heavy-handed enforcement have reduced the tourist appeal of the public lands. Draconian permit fees have caused the cancellation of annual community events upon which many mountain communities depend.

Rampant land acquisitions are devastating tax bases. Fire chiefs in the Tahoe basin recently complained to me that the Forest Service is rapidly buying up lots destroyed by the Angora Fire – permanently denying these agencies the property taxes they depend upon to operate – to the point it is creating critical funding shortfalls. Ninety two percent of Alpine County in my district is now occupied by the federal government. The federal government only occupies 25 percent of the District of Columbia!

Grazing, mining and cabin permit fees have been raised far beyond market rates, resulting in lost revenue to the government and lost economic activity to the communities as productive enterprises are forced off the land.

I have five national forests in my district – and the devastating impact these policies have had on once thriving local economies is heart-breaking. The only reason our communities desperately rely on Secure Rural Schools Funding and PILT funding is because their own federal government has systematically laid waste to their local economies.

I appreciate the assurances from our land managers that all is well, but those who live and work in these communities know better.

I would propose three new management goals for these agencies:

First, the public has a right, in the words of the Yosemite charter, to the USE, RESORT and RECREATION of these lands with the fewest restrictions compatible with sustainable management.

Second, the public has a right to expect the public lands will be properly managed to assure the prosperity and enjoyment of both the current generation and those who follow. This is particularly true of our national forests that have been devastated by years of misfeasance and nonfeasance.

Third, the federal government needs to defer to the local governments in all matters in which their welfare is impacted by the federal lands. The federal government needs to become a good neighbor once again.

Congress has sole constitutional authority to oversee and manage the public lands, and we will be doing everything we can to restore these principles. We look forward to working with these agencies to accomplish this in the coming years.