

Committee on Resources

Subcommittee on Forests & Forest Health

Witness Testimony

STATEMENT OF
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Before the
Committee on Resources
Subcommittee on Forests and Forests Health

Concerning the Community Protection and Hazardous Fuels Reduction Act of 1998

February 9, 1999

Madam Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee:

Thank you for the opportunity to provide the views of the American Forest & Paper Association on the Community Protection and Hazardous Fuels Reduction Act. I am Mary J. Coulombe, Director of Timber Access and Supply for the Association. I am presenting my testimony today on behalf of the Association's member companies, associations, and allied groups. AF&PA members include forest land owners, manufacturers of solid wood products, and producers of pulp and paper products. Our members own about 14% of the forest land in the United States, some of which is in the wildland/urban interface or abuts it.

Chairman Chenoweth, we are pleased to see your continued commitment to addressing the wildland/urban interface fuels issue through reintroduction of this bill in the 106th Congress. This bill addresses a part of the very serious situation of hazardous fuels buildup on national forest lands due to a variety of factors. The wildland/urban interface area is part of a much larger area of forest-land that is at risk of tree mortality from insects and disease and catastrophic wildfires. The Forest Service has previously testified that they believe over 40 million acres of national forest lands are at such serious risk. We believe that this is a conservative estimate and the number of acres at significant risk will continue to climb because of a lack of appropriate forest management on federal lands. By appropriate management, I mean the ability of the Forest Service to plan and conduct forest management projects in a timely and efficient manner in order to deal with serious forest health situations. The gridlock that has brought the Forest Service timber program to a standstill now affects its ability to adequately manage the national forests and ensure healthy, vigorous forests for future generations.

There are many examples in our history when we as individuals or as a society have ignored serious situations, only to ultimately endure a catastrophic event before we are willing to take action. That is the situation today. The buildup of hazardous fuels in the wildland/urban interface threatens lives, homes, commercial properties, as well as water, wildlife, recreation opportunities and scenic qualities. And, as we saw with the catastrophic fires in Florida last year, this is not just a problem in the West.

The American Forest & Paper Association is very supportive of direction that the Chief of the Forest Service

has outlined in words regarding restoring and maintaining the health of the forest lands managed by the Forest Service. We are concerned though, that the programs of the Forest Service are not matching these words.

If we know what the fuels and fire conditions are in these interface areas and what the threats are to private and public properties and values, why can't the Forest Service do the necessary forest management activities to reduce the risks and threats of wildfire? Our Association believes that it is irresponsible to follow the course of zero-cut extremists who would rather risk people's lives, their homes and the forest, instead of managing forests for healthy conditions. This is akin to those who insist that its better to let other countries spoil the environment rather than responsibly managing our own renewable resources.

Chairman Chenoweth, we are pleased that this legislation includes some innovative ways to finance the projects needed in the wildland/urban interface area. One feature of this legislation that we think is particularly attractive is the opportunity for the Forest Service to share in the costs of a forest management project, using funds from the programs that most benefit from the project. With innovation and will, these projects can represent a win-win situation. A win for the environment and a win for local communities who may benefit from the opportunities this legislation will provide.

We also believe that this legislation is complementary to the pilot stewardship contracting projects authorized in the 1999 Omnibus Appropriations Bill. Its language authorizing the expansion of contracting authorities will add to the "tool kit" for vegetation management to meet multiple objectives and obtain desired future conditions.

We do have one concern, not with the Legislation, but with the capacity of the Forest Service to implement this legislation. The Forest Service has lost a great deal of forestry and contracting expertise, through retirements and downsizing. We are concerned that the Forest Service would spend a considerable amount of time in writing regulations, training forest service people, planning the projects, doing the environmental analyses and meanwhile the wildfire risk on the interface lands will continue to grow. We are not suggesting that the Forest Service short-cut any required processes, but the Forest Service must make these projects the highest priority at all levels of the organization, or they will not happen.

Thank you for taking the leadership on this important issue, Chairman Chenoweth. I'll be happy to answer any questions from you or other members of the subcommittee.

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