

Testimony of Tyson Bertone-Riggs, Coalition Director for the Rural Voices for Conservation Coalition

U.S. Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee

Hearing to Consider Pending Legislation

October 21st, 2021

Chairman Manchin, Ranking Member Barrasso, and Members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony regarding the forestry related legislation pending before the committee, and to speak to the important need to increase the use of prescribed fire on our public lands to reduce the risk of uncharacteristically severe wildfire.

I am happy to serve as the Coalition Director for the Rural Voices for Conservation Coalition. RVCC is a west-wide coalition and learning network dedicated to place-based, collaborative conservation that benefits the land and rural communities. We strive to advance both local efforts and national policy that results in ecologically sound land management. Our participants represent groups that implement restoration projects, including prescribed fire, and help to convene collaborative planning efforts for national forests. We focus on nonpartisan, practical, durable solutions to land management problems and that means understanding an issue from as many angles as possible. Our coalition offers a unique opportunity to track how federal policies play out on the ground and I thank you for the opportunity to share some of those reflections with the committee today.

I would like to speak with you today about the importance of increasing the use of prescribed fire for forest restoration and to decrease the risk of wildfires, and how Congress can accomplish this through workforce development, collaborative, inclusive place-based planning, and increased funding.

My comments today focus primarily on prescribed fire and do not address other important aspects of wildfire risk reduction, such as home hardening and land use planning. Those are important tools to keep communities safer from uncharacteristically severe wildfire, but prescribed fire is unique in serving to reduce the risks associated with wildfire, maintain treatments over time, and help restore ecological function in natural systems.

The Problem Before Us

The 193 million acres of national forest managed by the US Forest Service provide irreplaceable services including clean drinking water, wildlife habitat, and economic opportunities for rural communities. But past management practices as well as climate change have left both human and natural communities vulnerable to fast moving, high severity fire.

High severity fire that kills most of the trees in a stand has always been an important component of the natural fire regime of some western forests.¹ But prior to the beginning of fire suppression policies, seasonally dry forests that are widespread across the western U.S. were characterized by frequent, low intensity surface fire that maintained open stands of older trees.² Today's dry forests have abnormally high tree density, surface fuel loading, and fuel continuity.³ The sustained failure to allow low severity surface fire to remove fuels under moderate weather conditions means that when fire escapes control, usually because of extreme weather conditions, fast-moving fires leave large patches where most trees are killed, with significant negative impacts to old-growth trees, water quality, and wildlife.⁴

Human communities are also increasingly vulnerable to high severity wildfire. For instance, the state of California lost an average of 2,800 structures a year from wildfire from 2000 to 2018, and losses from wildfire in California in 2018 alone totaled approximately 150 billion dollars, or 1.5% of California's gross domestic product.⁵ Smoke from wildfires has significant negative health effects, including altered immune function, increased susceptibility to respiratory infection, and worsening of asthma, pulmonary disease, and cardiovascular disease. Smoke from wildfires may also be more toxic than the same dosage from other sources.⁶

Doubling down on fire suppression is no longer a viable option, either ecologically or economically. Firefighting costs are ballooning at an unsustainable rate. Between 1985 and 1990, Forest Service fire suppression expenditures averaged \$257 million per year. Suppression expenditures between 2015 and 2020 averaged \$1.9 billion a year, a 630% increase.⁷ Firefighting expenses currently account for between 52% and 55% of the Forest Service's total annual budget and are expected to account for 67% of the agency's annual budget within the next three years.⁸ And while fire suppression costs spiral, the Forest Service's budget for vegetation, watershed, and hazardous fuels management that allows the agency to get in front of the fire problem with thinning and prescribed fire has shrunk by 25%.⁹ States also bear an increasing burden of wildfire costs—fire suppression currently accounts for 2% of California's general fund expenditures and costs continue to rise.¹⁰

Solutions

Fortunately, there is a near consensus among scientists that prescribed fire, coupled with mechanical treatments, works to reduce the risks of wildfire, and restore forest ecosystems. In other words, the way to fight fire is with fire.

However, treatments are not keeping pace with need. And while we have seen Congressional investment in, and agency prioritization of mechanical treatments, use of prescribed fire has remained flat or declined for most federal agencies for the last two decades.¹¹ While mechanical thinning is an important part of overall fuels reductions, it has often taken precedent over finishing treatments with prescribed burning. Prescribed fire is the final, necessary, and long-neglected ingredient in fuels reduction projects.

We have the means, however, to increase the use of prescribed fire to meaningful levels. The problem is multi-faceted but has four key components.

First, we need to make sufficient investments in prescribed fire and forest restoration to get ahead of the rising problem of wildfire. Prescribed fire does not pay for itself and should be seen as an investment in reduced suppression costs in the future.

Second, we will need to grow the prescribed fire workforce. That means increased training, partnership, and workforce development opportunities. The wildland firefighting workforce is already stretched thin, and many more people will be needed to meet the scale of need.

Third, we need to recognize the importance of – and financially support – inclusive, collaborative, place-based planning. This is particularly critical because although the Forest Service – and increasingly legislation – build on the inclusive, place-based planning efforts collaboration, funding is an uncertain patchwork of sources with little federal support.

And finally, we need to modernize the Forest Service business models – including performance measures and targets that currently hinder application of prescribed fire. Although the bills before the committee today offer limited changes to Forest Service business practices, eventually we must modernize

performance measures and move from annual output targets to more meaningful, multiyear outcomes-based measures.

Congress can reduce fire risk and increase forest ecosystem resilience by acting on some of the bills before the committee today.

The National Prescribed Fire Act would, for the first time, provide dedicated funding for the important work of prescribed fire. It would also provide funding for workforce training and development, including establishment of a prescribed fire training center and improved pathways for employment for former convicts. And would set the table for state-level reform of liability standards.

The Wildfire Resilient Communities Act would increase funding for hazardous fuels reduction projects, including prescribed fire while funding proactive community planning to prepare in the event of wildfire. The bill would also permanently reauthorize the wildly successful Collaborative Forest Landscape Restoration Program.

I would also like to highlight a part of the Wildfire Emergency Act that will provide financial support to collaborative planning efforts so vital to developing social license and local support for projects.

I urge the committee to act quickly to address the needed investments and policy changes that will keep our communities safe and our forests healthy and resilient.

Thank you again for the opportunity to appear before you today.

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For additional information on how Congress can act to increase the use of prescribed burning and decrease the risk of wildfire, please see the recent RVCC white paper *Fighting Fire with Fire: policy options to increase the use of prescribed fire on national forest*, available at our website:

https://static1.squarespace.com/static/562e839ee4b0332955e8143d/t/616db185b465ed04a0380192/1634578833647/Fighting+Fire+with+Fire_Final.pdf

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³ Abella, S.R., W. W. Covington, P.Z. Fulé, L.B. Lentile, A.J.S. Meador, and P. Morgan. 2007. Past, present, and future old growth in frequent-fire conifer forests of the western United States. *Ecology and Society* 12(2); Hessburg, P.F., and J.K. Agee. 2003. An environmental narrative of Inland Northwest United States forests, 1800–2000. *Forest Ecology and Management* 178:23–59.

⁴ Jones, G.M., R.J. Gutiérrez, H.A. Kramer, D.J. Tempel, W.J. Berigan, S.A. Whitmore, and M.Z. Peery. 2019. Megafire effects on spotted owls: elucidation of a growing threat and a response to Hanson et al. (2018). *Nature Conservation* 37:31; Sankey, J.B.,

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- ⁵ Keeley, J. E., & Syphard, A. D. (2019). Twenty-first century California, USA, wildfires: fuel-dominated vs. wind-dominated fires. *Fire Ecology*, 15(1), 1-15; Wang, D., Guan, D., Zhu, S., Mac Kinnon, M., Geng, G., Zhang, Q., ... & Davis, S. J. (2021). Economic footprint of California wildfires in 2018. *Nature Sustainability*, 4(3), 252-260.
- ⁶ Aguilera, R., Corringham, T., Gershunov, A., & Benmarhnia, T. (2021). Wildfire smoke impacts respiratory health more than fine particles from other sources: observational evidence from Southern California. *Nature communications*, 12(1), 1-8.
- ⁷ National Interagency Fire Center (<https://www.nifc.gov/fire-information/statistics/suppression-costs>).
- ⁸ From <https://www.fs.usda.gov/sites/default/files/2015-Fire-Budget-Report.pdf>
- ⁹ Schultz, C. A., Thompson, M. P., & McCaffrey, S. M. (2019). Forest Service fire management and the elusiveness of change. *Fire ecology*, 15(1), 1-15; USDA Forest Service (2015). The rising cost of wildfire operations: the effects on the Forest Service's non-fire work (<http://www.fs.fed.us/sites/default/files/2015-Rising-Cost-Wildfire-Operations.pdf>).
- ¹⁰ Cattau M E, Wessman C, Mahood A and Balch J K. (2020). Anthropogenic and lightning-started fires are becoming larger and more frequent over a longer season length in the U.S.A *Glob. Ecol. Biogeogr.* 29 668–81; Cook, P. S., & Becker, D. R. (2017). State funding for wildfire suppression in the Western US. *College of Natural Science, University of Idaho, Moscow, Idaho, United States*.
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