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The risk of catastrophic wildfire continues at a record high on the Kenai Peninsula. Increased residential development in rural areas adjacent to and within fuel-loaded forests has significantly expanded the wildland-urban interface. Known as WUIs, the egress from many of these rural areas is marginal, adding logistical challenges during fire-response evacuations.

The historic spruce bark beetle infestation combined with response to large wildfires became the catalyst for developing the 1998 Spruce Bark Beetle Task Force which was followed by an interagency committee that included Federal, State, Borough, Native and local land managers. The committee developed the 2004 All Lands All Hands plan, which identified goals based upon fuels reduction and restoration within WUIs throughout the peninsula. The plan emphasized fuel treatments to be completed over a five-year implementation schedule and called for revision of the action items every five years.

Over the past 17 years the borough has received ~\$20M in federal funds, significantly aiding in project outcomes that directly impacts wildfire management - a reality that Senator Stevens envisioned as an investment. We have experienced great returns on that investment including public awareness and education, cooperation among agencies and stakeholders and preventative actions that aided in recent fire suppression efforts. Projects were based upon the taskforce and interagency recommendations, action items from Community Wildfire Protection Plans, and forest harvesting prescriptions scientifically designed to restore insect or fire damaged ecosystems. Completed projects include implementing the Firewise education and actions program, the removal of hazardous fuels along right-of-ways, utility lines, within subdivisions, around school perimeters and within city and state parks in addition to the planting of almost two million spruce seedlings to reestablish forested habitat.

Today, public land managers face many challenges to effectively respond to the intense demands that correspond with our desire for quality recreation opportunities, management of and access to fish and wildlife resources, the economic opportunities associated with tourism, and the security of our homes and businesses from the threats of wildfire.

The peninsula is a premier destination, and our communities are as diverse as the visitors. Tourism provides many benefits and is largely supported by accessible public lands and waters. At the same time, tourism increases not only the number of stakeholders to fire risk, but also the number of potential fire start sources. Ninety percent of all fire starts are human-caused.

Fish and wildlife resources are not only prized, but are dependent on our stewardship to ensure healthy populations and habitats. Healthy forests provide an array of benefits including clean water for fish, habitat for animals to thrive and a variety of other uses depending on resource management decisions. Healthy forests also tend to regulate the intensity of fire events.

Recreation is embedded in our diverse culture. It is a major reason why many of us live here and it is a tremendous form of economic capital. Recreation is the word that we use to describe people actively engaging their public resources, and it is an enterprise that is integrated throughout almost every public land policy. Policies that often become restrictive when planning fuel breaks or prescribed fires on federal lands.

We know that it is important that future fuel reduction projects must balance WUI protection with healthy forest ecology, while recognizing the need to invest in public infrastructure projects through federal lands. In addition to identifying timber and non-timber products or improving wildlife habitat, successful project outcomes require collaboration with all land managers to ensure the holistic management of natural resources that may be impacted on the peninsula. The interagency committee made up of Federal, State, Borough, Native and local land managers continues to work together, planning and completing projects that are based upon this balance.

As we look at one of our most pressing needs of wildfire management, we see that no one can do it alone. With the benefit of our experience and partnership structure of the All Lands All Hands, we offer one possible set of actions. The All Lands All Hands plan must be regarded as a springboard that successfully launches land managers into the next phase of responsible management of hazard fuels reduction, forest rehabilitation, community assistance and accountability of all natural resources. The next phase requires an inclusive, interagency forest management plan and the funding to complete identified projects. In order to provide effective management, an inventory of vegetation and landscape dynamics needs to be conducted through multi-spectral aerial mapping. The aerial imagery products become the primary resource to update CWPPs, which in turn, provide key inputs and objectives necessary for creating a unified, interagency forest management strategy.

Targeted project outcomes will include: creating a comprehensive WUI strategy, reducing fuel complexes in grasslands through strategic reforestation, constructing phased fuel breaks that include maintenance cycles, predictive services that aid firefighting and all-hazard responses, and providing the availability of timber and non-timber products that support secondary industries.

Future actions should strive to ensure integration between forest management and habitat quality, which is especially significant since land use patterns overlap ownership boundaries and can affect economic development, recreational usage or subsistence hunting and fishing on federal lands. I believe that federal agencies should be supported and encouraged to come to the table, putting aside federal wilderness regulations, in order to consider how projects may be completed that are otherwise shutdown under the guise of federal regulations.

How does this all relate to the stated purpose of this hearing: “to evaluate the impact of federal regulations and fire management on tourism, recreation, and wildlife”? Here is what we see: As we gather around the table with federal managers, they are at times constrained in what they can consider. This may be due to designations such as “wilderness” or be otherwise limited in their authorities; therefore, a great many conversations can never start. Take for example the reality that we are experiencing a significant forest to grassland conversion, and that with the isolation of the peninsula we have effectively no stock of grass grazing animals such as bison, elk or caribou in these areas - animal species that are adapted to eat grass and contribute to an important ecological cycling of grassland and further a natural balancer for fire. Conversely, implementing strategic reforestation in grasslands is difficult to consider given the regulatory constraints. Federal managers may not be empowered to carry that conversation, limited in their ability to consider to the point of recommendation, either for or against on ecological principles, due in part to federal regulations surrounding the designation. In effect, a collaborative and consensus building process is constrained by ever evolving regulatory strictures.

Our suggestion, if possible, is that the U.S. Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources invite federal managers to consider, more broadly, adaptive management. For this committee to

support federal managers in a way that enables them, not to disregard their agency mission, but to identify policies, practices and tools that are responsive to changing landscapes and social concerns within communities. And then, to go that next step and invite those federal managers to come back to this committee and address this important question with insightful and effective recommendations, justified by due consideration of all options in the spirit of their missions. Regardless of how this idea is perceived, we want to continue to work with federal managers to the maximum extent, because we are dependent on each other to protect the public during wildfire suppression efforts as well as to complete successful wildfire mitigation projects - a continued investment to protect and to enhance our natural resources.

Enclosures (2):

Maps

Photos