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To the Members of the Subcommittee on Public Lands, Forests, and Mining:

My name is Mark Boshell and I am the Deputy Director of Utah's Public Lands Policy Coordinating Office, a Division within the Utah Department of Natural Resources. Our office is tasked by the Utah Legislature to coordinate and promote the State's interests in public lands. Prior to my work with the Department of Natural Resources I was a Bureau of Land Management wildland firefighter. I am also the son of a retired Forest Service employee who spent an entire career working on our national forests in wildland fire fighting. Forest management and wildfire are topics very important to me both professionally and personally. As such, it is an honor to address this subcommittee with this written testimony.

Recent drought and uncharacteristically large wildfires have not only raised concerns of public safety and loss of property, but also for the need for water conservation and improved air quality. Over 100 years of fire suppression in fire-dependent ecosystems coupled with a lack of active management have created high fuel loads and overstocked, unhealthy forests. Watersheds continue to be impacted by natural and human-caused stressors statewide, leading to unhealthy conditions. The West's rapidly growing population only adds more complexity to this already delicate situation.

Utah, like other states throughout the West, is wholly dependent on the healthy watersheds found in national forests to meet our basic water needs. Wildfire affected watersheds is a topic that is becoming increasingly important for the State and its cities and towns. My small hometown of Panguitch, in Southern Utah, sits in a mountain valley surrounded by the Dixie National Forest. For years, the city feared that its water system and supporting watershed were at risk of wildfire. Despite years of formal requests for proactive management and thinning, one of the State's largest wildfires burned significant portions of the municipal watershed. Subsequent flooding led to a broken and contaminated municipal water system, temporarily cutting off access to city's drinking water. To fix the damaged system, the city had to clean its water tanks, replace spring boxes and drill a new well at the cost of nearly 2 million dollars; a tremendous cost to a small community.

This small-scale, yet highly impactful incident highlights both the unhealthy state of our forests and the increased risk it poses to more densely populated cities throughout the State and the West. Increased demand for water and a prolonged drought only increases the risk of catastrophic fire.

The State of Utah is being as proactive as possible to better manage its forests by partnering with the United States Forest Service through its Shared Stewardship program. The Shared Stewardship program commits to protecting communities and watersheds (that provide our drinking water) by addressing the threat of catastrophic wildfire on National Forest Systems lands in Utah. A priority area identified by State and Forest Service officials through the Shared Stewardship program was the canyons east of Salt Lake City, managed by the Uinta-Wasatch-Cache National Forest Salt Lake Ranger District.

Maintaining the resilience of our drinking water is imperative when faced with the challenges of drought, rapid population growth in the Salt Lake Valley, and fire suppression over the last hundred years. Suppressing fires has resulted in heavy accumulations of dead surface fuels (e.g. things that will carry a fire such as dry leaves and twigs, trees, or grass), and unnaturally dense stands of mature trees. Additionally, over the last few decades, trees have died from various diseases and insects such as spruce beetle, mountain pine beetle, and others. These dead and dying trees increase the potential for severe fires that may impact drinking water and other values we care about, like recreational opportunities, wildlife habitat, infrastructure, and human life.

Senate Bill 2132 titled the "Catastrophic Wildfire Prevention Act of 2023", if passed, would be a step towards improved management of our forests. The proposed pilot program outlined in the bill is intended to facilitate collaboration between the Forest Service and State Forest management agencies to identify areas to study and research "pre-fire suppression stand density" which would help drive important management objectives and benchmarks for better management of our forests. Stand density index is an important parameter for wildland fire management in forests in the West, particularly when working to reduce wildfire risk and establish appropriate thinning/density levels on various sites to promote healthier forests while reducing the risks of fires and associated negative impacts.

Senate Bill 2151 would add Utah to the Southwest Ecological Restoration Institute which is currently made up of three western states: Colorado, New Mexico and Arizona. Utah's Division of Forestry, Fire and State Lands currently collaborates with the Institute through several state programs. Specifically, our Forest Products & Businesses Program has been working with the institute on several efforts to strengthen our mutual capacity for infrastructure and workforce development in the forest products sector aimed at better finding markets for wood products in order to reduce the costs to thin the forests. Our Forestry, Fire and State Lands Division has also engaged with the same state forestry agencies and universities to conduct research and develop initiatives for post-disturbance reforestation. Utah could greatly benefit by more direct involvement in the Southwest Ecological Restoration Institute with one of our very own State universities acting as Utah's lead participant.

The Catastrophic Wildfire Prevention Act of 2023 is a forward-looking, comprehensive solution that addresses the immediate and long-term challenges posed by wildfires. It represents a responsible and effective approach to wildfire management that will benefit both our environment and our communities.

I applaud the Subcommittee on Public Lands, Forests, and Mining for considering this critical legislation and encourage its passage. Our nation's future depends on proactive measures like those proposed in Senate Bill 2131, and 2151 to protect our lands, forests, and communities from the devastating impact of wildfires. Thank you for your time and attention to this important matter. I urge you to support these bills, and I am ready to assist in any way possible to ensure their success. Thank you.