

TESTIMONY

Dan Gibbs
Summit County Commissioner

Testimony for the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee hearing on S. 1875

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Thank you Chairman Landrieu, members of the committee. It is a great honor to come before you today. My name is Dan Gibbs; I'm a County Commissioner from Summit County Colorado and also a certified wildland firefighter.

This Committee has had the benefit of hearing from the U.S. Forest Service and the U.S. Bureau of Land Management to paint the larger picture regarding the wildfire budgeting system, and I'd like to share with you is how this current system impacts local Colorado communities.

The Summit County jurisdiction that I serve is a semi-rural resort community located in the heart of the Rocky Mountains. The permanent population of the county is approximately 30,000 people, but swells to over 160,000 during peak holiday seasons.

Summit County is home to extensive outdoor year-round recreation. It is comprised of over 80% federal lands and is home to the internationally recognized ski resorts of Breckenridge, Keystone, Copper Mountain, and Arapahoe Basin. All of these resorts are located in the White River National Forest, which receives more than 12 million visitors annually according to the most recent survey data. This is more visits per year than Yellowstone, Yosemite and Grand Canyon National Parks combined, and is the busiest Forest in the system.

The White River National Forest and our natural environment are the foundation of our local economy and enhance the quality of life that our citizens and visitors from all over the world enjoy in Summit County. We have a strong working relationship with local forest managers in working to provide the world-class recreation, clean water, and healthy forests our residents, visitors, and businesses rely on.

However, the current model for funding the response to wildland fires is extremely detrimental to our economy and quality of life. We have recently observed that Forest budgets supporting the work to maintain these characters have been significantly depleted, and are continuing to trend downward. Further exacerbating this situation is what is known as "fire borrowing," in which local Forest budgets are raided to fund the national response to wildfires across the country.

Last year our local Forest unit had over \$480,000 transferred from a range of resource programs to meet the wildfire response effort. As a result, we saw reductions in trail maintenance, recreation facility maintenance, forest health work, invasive species control, and fish and wildlife habitat restoration, all of which had detrimental impacts to our economy.

As these fires get larger and more destructive we cannot continue to have these costs come from federal land agencies as we will lose all the funding we could use to reduce the cost of these disasters at the front end through fuels reduction.

I also want to highlight that Summit County is at the epicenter of the massive mountain pine beetle epidemic in Colorado and the west that has left hundreds of thousands of acres of dead trees in its wake. For the last eight years we have worked cooperatively with the US Forest

Service, Colorado State foresters, local fire districts and private landowners to deal with the impact of this epidemic, and secure a forest condition that will be more resilient to catastrophic wildfires and future insect or disease outbreaks. This effort is so important to our community that in 2008, our voters overwhelmingly passed a referendum to fund \$500,000 annually to support creation of defensible space, resilient forests and support for other wildland fire mitigation efforts.

However, when funding to accomplish the fuel reduction and regeneration work we need is diverted to fight fires elsewhere, it perpetuates the threat we face in our own backyards.

Just last year, for example, a \$72,000 project to clear deadfall and conduct related trail maintenance in areas affected by the bark beetle epidemic was deferred. This had a significant impact on 50-100 miles of trails, with associated effects on recreation opportunities, outfitter-guide operations, and recreation-based community economies. We cannot afford to delay or defer this type of project that is critical to preventing potentially dangerous forest fires and this is why the Wildland Fire Suppression Cap Adjustment is so important to the residents and visitors to our state and county.

I appreciate the assistance that Congress has provided for land management and restoration activities – primarily through the passage of the Healthy Forest Restoration Act (HFRA) in 2003. This law, which came as a response to major forest fires that occurred throughout the west in 2002.

However, there is much more that can be done, and passage of S. 1875 the Wildland Fire Suppression Cap Adjustment would be an important step in ending the damaging practice of

raiding agency balances to fund fire suppression at the expense of such important activities as land management and restoration, fire preparedness, and capital improvement. I urge you to support this bill.

Thank you.

I would be happy to answer any questions.