

TESTIMONY
Presented to the
Committee on Environment and Public Works
U.S. Senate
by
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RE: *Wildfire Prevention and Mitigation Act of 2017*

Distinguished members of the Committee; the Wyoming Farm Bureau Federation would like to provide comments on the *Wildfire Prevention and Mitigation Act of 2017* being considered by this Committee.

The Wyoming Farm Bureau Federation represents over 2,600 farmers and ranchers within the state of Wyoming as well as approximately 11,000 associate members who have an interest in a strong agricultural sector. Our agricultural members are family ranchers and farmers who utilize private and federal land to produce food and fiber utilized by the citizens in this nation.

Wyoming's land ownership is a mixture of private lands and federal lands. The eastern side of our state is predominately (approximately 50 percent) private lands with smaller in-holdings of federally managed lands. On the western side the pattern reverses itself with more federal lands and the private lands along water sources. These water sources can be utilized to grow livestock feed during the short growing season which is used to support and supplement forage consumed on federal lands through Forest Service (FS) and Bureau of Land Management (BLM) grazing. Generally speaking the private irrigated areas have greater amounts of forage per acre than the federal lands. Roughly 48 percent of Wyoming's surface estate is managed by the FS or BLM. Private and federal land in the western half is intermingled. Both livestock and wildlife utilize these lands with the private lands providing important forage sources during winter months.

Wildfire prevention and mitigation are important for both private and federal lands. Wildfires have no respect of property lines. Efforts to mitigate fuel buildups help reduce resource damages by fires and benefit both private and federal lands.

Fire can be used as a tool to reduce fuel loads in forests, but it is a dangerous tool which frequently grows beyond it's intended purpose. Less volatile tools are needed which are easier to control. Unfortunately, the use of these tools are restricted by litigation an issue this bill seeks to address.

Both the FS and BLM are beset with "paralysis by analysis", but the FS has been particularly subject to this problem. Revitalizing and implementing tools which can help alleviate wildfire potential, enhance wildlife habitat, protect private property and reduce costs associated with wildfire control makes sense.

The need for a federal land management agency to respond to natural disasters is paramount. Often times the window for measures to be taken by private industry in order to mitigate or enhance our landscapes after a significant event, such as a bark beetle epidemic, or high altitude tornado, is short. This is where the paralysis by analysis works against good management practices. In Wyoming we've seen hundreds of thousands of acres of trees killed by bark beetles. This has resulted in many of those areas becoming unusable for many previous uses such as recreation, hunting or hiking. It has increased the danger to livestock which can utilize the fringes of these areas. Many of these trees which could have been utilized by the private sector, if they had been harvested shortly after they were killed. Unfortunately, the window for this was a narrow two to three year period before the trees began to rot to the extent they could not be useful. Delays in implementing salvage timber sales has resulted in very few of these dead tree's being used.

Once the trees begin to rot there are basically two outcomes. The first would be catastrophic fires. The impacts on the environment , adjacent communities and users from this outcome can be significant. The second outcome is trees decomposing to the extent they fall into an impenetrable mass which will ensure many wildlife species cannot utilize these areas as they have in the past. In arid areas like Wyoming it will take decades, if not centuries, for these trees to decompose enough for these areas to once again be utilized by wildlife.

In the case of the first alternative, wildfire; being able to respond with effective habitat restoration efforts can prevent future problems. This same ability to respond in the forests is also necessary on range lands. After any fire on both forest and range lands, the concern of invasive species invasion is a manager's greatest fear. Being able to effectively, efficiently and proactively address these possible invasions is paramount in ensuring we have a recovered landscape that supports natural species. If not we risk having a landscape that is a natural species desert.

On range lands, the prime example of this is invasion by a non-native grass we call cheatgrass (*Bromus tectorum*) which has taken over millions of acres in the Great Basin region of the western U.S. This species has created its own ecosystem, which in turn has impacted the Greater Sage-grouse and other native species.

Addressing these problems – particularly after a fire, requires quick action. The cost of addressing these problems can be significant too. Therefore, anything which will reduce those costs can only result in more acres being treated in a more timely fashion.

What are some of these actions which can help?

Utilization of a Categorical Exclusion, or CE, on those actions would provide a faster beginning for mitigation measures. In areas where CEs are not appropriate, utilization of Environmental Assessments or EAs would be beneficial. The appeals process which has beset NEPA documentation has been a major contributor to the paralysis by analysis syndrome. A mechanism to allow for quicker action is sorely needed. Whether an arbitration process is the answer is difficult to assess, but the conditions of million's of acres of federal lands argue that some solution must be sought. This may be the answer, or it may not, but something has to be tried.

Ability to access impacted areas. In areas where access to perform mechanical treatments is important, adequate roads to get access to those areas will contribute to decreased costs and greater efficiency. More dollars to more environmental enhancements will help mitigate the impacts.

Because of the scale of the problem, cost effective processes need to be used. No one tool will address the problem. There are very few silver bullets, if any, which can be utilized in this process. Both the BLM and FS are limited by their ability to address problems because of budget constraints.

Vegetative manipulation needs to be utilized, not only on areas which have had a catastrophic event, but more importantly, in areas which **haven't** had a catastrophic event.

An Associated Press article in the *Casper Star-Tribune* on Sunday, October 22 talks about a process which has been utilized in Oregon in timbered country, where groups representing various interests came up with a process to thin and remove brush mechanically which saved homes from wildfires (see *Casper Star-Tribune*, October 22, 2017 page C4 “*Project saved homes from fires, but can it be duplicated?*”).

The size of these problems will only grow if actions aren't taken today to address them. Costs continue to escalate, leading to fewer feasible solutions to on-the-ground problems. Our members, who use these areas, are directly and increasingly impacted when these problems are not addressed.

In conclusion we urge the Committee to support these efforts. Time is not our friend when it comes to addressing these issues, so action to seek solutions is critical. Action to address the problems is even more critical – one which Congress can address by this proposed legislation.

Thank you for the consideration of our comments.