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Committee on Environment
and Public Works Washington, D.C.

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FOREST MANAGEMENT TO MITIGATE WILDFIRES: LEGISLATIVE SOLUTIONS

Wednesday, September 27, 2017

United States Senate

Committee on Environment and Public Works

Washington, D.C.

The committee met, pursuant to notice, at 10:05 a.m. in room 406, Dirksen Senate Office Building, the Honorable John Barrasso [chairman of the committee] presiding.

Present: Senators Barrasso, Carper, Inhofe, Boozman, Fischer, Rounds, Ernst, Merkley, Gillibrand, Booker, Markey, and Harris.

STATEMENT OF THE HONORABLE JOHN BARRASSO, A UNITED STATES
SENATOR FROM THE STATE OF WYOMING

Senator Barrasso. Good morning. I call this hearing to order.

So far, in 2017, as all of our guests of the panel know, in 2017 fires have burned more than 8 million acres in the United States. We need to find solutions to address this threat to our communities and to wildlife.

Today the Committee is going to hear testimony on three bills related to catastrophic wildfires burning across the West. Senator Daines has introduced Senate 605, the Litigation Relief for Forest Management Projects Act, which would address conflicting circuit court decisions and prevent costly delays in forest management as a result of duplicative consultation requirements.

The Committee will hear testimony on Senator Hatch's bill, S. 1417, the Sage Grouse and Mule Deer Habitat Conservation and Restoration Act of 2017. S. 1417 would allow for removal of pinyon and juniper trees, which are invasive species that lead to wildfires and compromise habitat for mule deer and sage grouse across the West.

We also have Senator Thune's bill, S. 1731, the Forest Management Improvement Act of 2017, which provides the Forest Service with a series of tools to address the ever-growing

wildfire threats of forests filled with dead and dying trees.

Each of these bills addresses a different, but important part of forest health and fire prevention.

Decades of fire suppression and a rapid decline in active management have led to overly dense forests susceptible to disease and to pest outbreaks. Pests or disease leave thick stands of dead trees, which are poor habitat for iconic species such as elk, lynx, deer, and other wildlife that depend on vibrant forest ecosystems. The dead trees affect watersheds, as well, as there are no longer leaves or needles to hold snow to build winter snowpack.

In addition, these dead forests are much more prone to catastrophic fires. These hot, fast-moving fires are unpredictable and cause significant damage to the ecosystem and surrounding communities. There are the obvious impacts from these fires, and we have a poster board to show Bambi running away from a wildfire. Wildlife that flee too slowly are burned, homes and habitat are lost, and smoke billows into the air.

Smoke and ash travel for miles, spreading fear among those who already face respiratory challenges, as this poster shows. Looks like a woman and her child walking with masks over their faces because of the impact of the smoke from the fire. It is not uncommon to see people, including children and the elderly, wearing face masks. Coughing, sneezing, and watery eyes leads

people to ask, is all that wildfire smoke damaging my health?

On September 11th, a National Public Radio article highlighted these concerns, and I will submit a copy of the article for the record.

[The referenced information follows:]

Senator Barrasso. In 2017 alone, schools in Oregon, Montana, and even Florida have canceled classes to keep children inside and away from the smoke.

While smoke and falling ash disburse relatively quickly, other impacts remain for years to come. After a catastrophic fire is extinguished by brave wildland firefighters or by early snows, forest ecosystems lose their topsoil. Hot fires sterilize the soil and, without a strong root system to hold that soil back, these landscapes experience massive erosion. Dirt, sand, and other silt quickly accumulates in creeks and streams, devastating aquatic life and clogging municipal water systems. High sediment levels raise water temperature and can be also a cause of widespread fish kills.

What is most egregious is that our Federal land managers could mitigate a significant portion of these risks. Fire is a historically important part of an ecosystem, but these large, unnatural, catastrophic wildfires are not. In order to address this threat, we need to actively manage forests with excess dead wood. Large stands of dead trees need to be removed in a timely fashion so we are not facing another 8 million acres of burned lands.

We must act quickly to address the risk to human health, infrastructure, and valuable ecosystems. There are millions of acres of Federal land, forestland in dire need of thinning,

restoration, and other attention. Last year, the Forest Service estimated that up to 100 million acres are at some risk of wildfire.

Today we will hear about bills that address bureaucratic processes that prevent or delay proactive fire prevention and ecosystem management; bills that can save lives, property, and protect our forests' diverse wildlife.

So, before we move to the sponsors and cosponsors of the bills for their remarks, I would turn to Ranking Member Carper for his remarks.

[The prepared statement of Senator Barrasso follows:]

STATEMENT OF THE HONORABLE THOMAS R. CARPER, A UNITED STATES
SENATOR FROM THE STATE OF DELAWARE

Senator Carper. Thanks, Mr. Chairman. Thank you for pulling this all together.

Welcome to our colleagues.

I am delighted to be holding this hearing; it is an important one for all of us, whether we are from the great northwest or a little State on the east coast. Our Country has experienced, as we know, a number of significant natural disasters this year, increasingly destructive hurricanes, catastrophic wildfires, and these disasters disrupt and endanger people's lives, their homes, their health, their safety, and their livelihoods. Wildfires and hurricanes, for that matter, also destroy habitat and imperil our wildlife.

I agree with the Government Accountability Office that climate change contributes to making these disasters more severe. They are becoming more common, more destructive, and exponentially more expensive with each passing year.

As we know, at the start of every Congress GAO publishes something called their High-Risk List. They do so to call attention to areas within the Federal Government that pose a high risk due to their vulnerabilities, and also lead to spending a lot of money. Once again, in 2017, GAO noted that climate change presents a significant financial risk to the

Federal Government, and we are seeing that across this Country, from the fires out West to the devastation in Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands in the last week.

As our Federal budget deficit for this year climbs passed \$700 billion and headed higher, among other things, we need to ensure we help reduce the risk of future disasters and plan for response costs.

When it comes to planning for severe weather events, an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure.

Today I look forward to hearing, we look forward to hearing from our colleagues, and then our witnesses, how best to manage this serious threat posed by wildfires. We need to make sure we that we are taking appropriate steps to prevent wildfires from occurring. We must also ensure that our first responders, our Federal agencies, and local governments have the tools that they need to combat faster, longer, and more frequent wildfires.

I agree with my colleagues that environmental laws should be nimble, not unduly impede our preparation for and our response to these unprecedented wildfires. However, I do not believe that environmental laws are to blame for their occurrence. Many factors contribute to the severity of wildfires. They include homes and other developments located near forestlands, along with climate change, as I have mentioned, and other factors as well.

As I have said before, we need to be very careful about making sweeping changes to the National Environmental Policy Act and the Endangered Species Act, particularly when existing authorities, more targeted changes, and adequate funding can help to address our challenges.

We must also adopt budgets that provide for proactive forest management and firefighting activities. Budget constraints may actually be preventing the Forest Service from using existing authorities to more efficiently respond to fires and mitigate their risks, and the problem is getting worse.

In 1995, only 16 percent of the U.S. Forest Service budget was dedicated to fire suppression. Sixteen percent in 1995. Since 2015, the Forest Service has been spending more than half of its annual budget, over half of its annual budget fighting fires. According to Secretary Perdue, firefighting activities will likely consume two-thirds of the Forest Service budget by 2021.

I hope today's hearing will lead to even more thoughtful discussions and to a growing bipartisan consensus in the Congress in the days ahead on how to build greater resilience that will enable us to cost-effectively address the increase in enormously expensive natural disasters that we have been witnessing in our Country in recent years.

In closing, I ask unanimous consent to enter, Mr. Chairman,

several letters and documents from concerned stakeholders into the record.

And, again, we thank all of our colleagues for joining us today.

[The prepared statement of Senator Carper follows:]

Senator Barrasso. Without objection, they will be ordered.

Thank you very much, Senator Carper.

[The referenced information follows:]

Senator Barrasso. We are fortunate to have joining us today Senator Hatch, Senator Thune, Senator Tester, and Senator Daines. I am looking forward to your comments and your statements. I know you have very busy schedules, with additional commitments, so once you have had a chance to share information about your bills, those of you that have sponsored or cosponsored, welcome you to get to the remainder of your schedule.

So, Senator Hatch, we would like to start with you.

STATEMENT OF THE HONORABLE ORRIN HATCH, A UNITED STATES SENATOR
FROM THE STATE OF UTAH

Senator Hatch. Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. Today I would like to speak in support of the bipartisan Sage Grouse and Mule Deer Habitat Conservation and Restoration Act.

This particular legislation would streamline important vegetation management projects to conserve and restore the habitat of sage grouse and mule deer in a way that carries an added benefit of reducing fuel modes for catastrophic wildfires.

I was eager to join Senator Heinrich in introducing this badly needed legislation because, across the West, especially in our home States of Utah and New Mexico, and elsewhere, wildlife populations are suffering from the dangerous encroachment of invasive pinyon and juniper trees. And, what is worse, these burgeoning forests increase the risk of wildfire, threatening homes, property, and human lives. Because sage grouse and mule deer share similar habitats, Senator Heinrich and I worked together to create a solution that would help restore sagebrush habitat and support these iconic western species.

As the Fish and Wildlife Service would agree, invasion of pinyon and juniper trees destroy sage grouse habitat and provides artificial nesting sites for predators of sage grouse. In the face of this challenge, responsible tree removal helps curtail this damaging expansion and carries widespread

ecological benefits. In fact, wildlife managers in the West have long worked to convert pinyon and juniper stands to sagebrush because doing so increases forage and soil water availability, which improves wildlife carrying capacity, reduces wildlife risks, and benefits big game populations, particularly mule deer.

Although tree expansion is a natural process normally controlled by wildfire, fire suppression efforts over the years have allowed expansion to go unchecked. As a result, trees have spread to areas they have not historically occupied because wildfire, which threatens wildlife, private property, and human lives, is no longer a viable option for combating forest expansion. Effective alternatives are needed to limit the damage caused by invasive trees.

Fortunately, federal restoration projects have proven successful in replicating the benefits of wildfire, while avoiding its associated damages to natural habitat, adjacent property, or human neighbors. Our legislation helps build on these successes by removing lengthy, cumbersome environmental review processes for vegetation management projects that benefit sagebrush ecosystems.

Though targeted tree removal would seem to be a commonsense priority, Senator Heinrich and I found that responsible management efforts by Federal agencies are frequently delayed by

needless bureaucratic impediments. So, to help safeguard and reinvigorate sage grouse and mule deer habitats, we agreed to accelerate the approval of beneficial vegetation management projects by giving the Bureau of Land Management expanded tools to aid its sagebrush restoration efforts.

As I mentioned earlier, this is a bipartisan effort, and a diverse group of stakeholders have come out in support of the reasonable measures contemplated in this bill. I am confident that passage of this legislation will bolster ecological health and promote sustainable populations of wildlife species that depend on sagebrush habitat.

Our bill will also reduce the risk of costly catastrophic wildfire. In accomplishing this goal, I believe we can benefit communities throughout the West that rely on sportsmen and natural resource development as economic drivers, while still sending a clear message that we are serious about sound environmental stewardship.

Mr. Chairman and other members of the Committee, it is critical that we get this legislation signed into law, and I appreciate the opportunity today to speak to the merits of this bill. I want to thank the Chairman and the members of the Committee, with whom I am eager to work in moving this bill forward, and I just appreciate this opportunity to make these points.

[The prepared statement of Senator Hatch follows:]

Senator Barrasso. Thank you very much, Senator Hatch.

Senator Thune, welcome to the Committee.

STATEMENT OF THE HONORABLE JOHN THUNE, A UNITED STATES SENATOR
FROM THE STATE OF SOUTH DAKOTA

Senator Thune. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Chairman Barrasso, Ranking Member Carper, and members of the Committee, I appreciate the invitation and opportunity to speak today on behalf of a bill that I introduced in August, which is Senate Bill 1731, the Forest Management Improvement Act of 2017.

Mr. Chairman, we have all heard the saying that Nero fiddled while Rome burned. Well, this happened in A.D. 64, when, for six days and seven nights, the citizens of ancient Rome watched helplessly as their city burned.

Fast forward to 2017 and we have a familiar scene. Since January 1 of this year, through today, Americans have watched 49,000 fires burn more than 8.4 million acres of forestland. According to the U.S. Forest Service, since 2000, wildfires have burned an average of 6.9 million acres every single year.

But, Chairman, after nearly a quarter century of hands-off management, fire suppression costs have grown, as Ranking Member Carper pointed out, from 16 percent of the Forest Service annual appropriated budget in 1995, to 52 percent of the Forest Service annual budget in 2015. We must take immediate steps to improve the health of our Nation's forestland by being much more aggressive and proactive when it comes to forest management. Because forest fires are occurring on a large scale across the

western United States, proactive management to protect our forests must be initiated on a large scale.

Mr. Chairman, I believe my bill being discussed here today offers commonsense solutions that would help solve our problems of declining forest health. In short, my bill would one, increase current categorical exclusions from 3,000 to 10,000 acres; two, allow the Forest Service to take steps to rapidly salvage dead and dying trees after wildfires, ice storms, or wind events; three, expedite the environmental review process; four, create a single Good Neighbor Authority policy; five, clarify congressional intent on stewardship contracting; and, finally, six, provide much greater certainty for project level decisions through litigation relief.

Proper management of forests makes them resilient and better able to withstand fires, pests, and diseases. We must allow expanded use of 21st century techniques by land management professionals, and not cave to the direct mail specialists and litigators whose misguided efforts have resulted in disasters in our forestland.

We have the technology and know-how to restore America's cherished landscapes back to healthy natural conditions, and we should waste no more time to use this technology to preserve and protect our Nation's forest landscape.

Mr. Chairman, I urge my colleagues to support this bill. I

thank you, Mr. Chairman and Ranking Member, for bringing Senate Bill 1731 before this Committee and inviting me to speak on behalf of this important legislation. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

[The prepared statement of Senator Thune follows:]

Senator Barrasso. Thank you, Senator Thune.

Senator Tester, welcome to the Committee.

STATEMENT OF THE HONORABLE JON TESTER, A UNITED STATES SENATOR
FROM THE STATE OF MONTANA

Senator Tester. Well, thank you, Chairman Barrasso and Ranking Member Carper, and thank you to all the members on the Committee. It is a pleasure to be here today to talk about this important legislation. And I also want to thank my colleague, Senator Daines, for sponsoring this important bill.

In Montana and across this Country, we are experiencing a historic wildfire season. A changing climate, historic drought, longer summer, a crippled Forest Service resulting in a lack of forest management turned Montana into a tinderbox, and all it took was Mother Nature to light it up, and she did.

Over 1 million acres of Montana is burned, and we are not out of the woods yet. A dangerous and costly wildfire season forced the Forest Service to burn through much of their budget and already start the fire borrowing process.

In its 2015 Cottonwood decision, the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals ruled that the Forest Service can be required to continuously update its forest plans to protect an endangered species, even if it has already consulted with the Fish and Wildlife Service, even if it has updated its forest plan, and even continues to consult with the agency for projects under this plan.

This means that the Forest Service actively, under that

plan, from timber harvest to watershed restoration, could be put under an injunction for years while the plan is updated. And there is no guarantee that the plan won't need to be updated again and again and again as new species listed or habitat areas are changed. All the while the forest goes unmanaged.

The Cottonwood decision has already led to injunctions on five vegetation management projects in Montana alone. One of those, the Stonewall Vegetation Project, included fire mitigation work, and part of that burned this summer as well. Across Regions I, II, and IV, at least 80 projects are at risk.

This bill is targeted as a bipartisan fix to this court case. We need to support the recovery of endangered species, there is no doubt about that, but blocking forest management across the board is not going to help our forests. This legislation that you are going to consider today, the Litigation Relief for Forest Management Act, will help address the real and pressing issues for our Forest Service.

It will help put saws in people's hands, cut trees, mitigate wildfire hazards, restore habitat, strengthen timber economy, and maybe most importantly, maintain our forests. It will ensure the requirements to update forest plans make sense and that the Forest Service will be able to get started on their projects, instead of being stuck in a constant bureaucracy and endless litigation. It will cut through red tape and allow for

the Forest Service to spend more time in the woods and less time in the courtrooms.

This legislation will help good forest projects move forward. These projects are carefully designed. They take input from Fish and Wildlife Service, they will take input from the public, and, ideally, they will hold up in court.

But for the Forest Service, to get the job done and win in court, they need the resources to do the analysis. If the Forest Service spends over half its money in fighting fires, that is less money for responsible forest management; it is less money to create recreational access, to create watershed protections, and the due diligence that they need in order to succeed in court and produce a healthy forest.

The Forest Service is already borrowing \$300 million to cover firefighting costs this year. This depletion means it won't be able to responsibly manage our forests, making it harder to mitigate the impacts of wildfires. Sadly, the Senate seems incapable of addressing climate change in a responsible and tangible way, and I think that is a big problem.

We may not be able to decide on how to tackle climate change today, but we should be able to give the Forest Service the tools they need to responsibly manage our forests. The Litigation Relief for Forest Management Act is a good start, but we will need to address the funding issues within the Forest

Service as well.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

[The prepared statement of Senator Tester follows:]

Senator Barrasso. Well, thank you very much, Senator Tester.

Senator Daines, welcome to the Committee.

STATEMENT OF THE HONORABLE STEVE DAINES, A UNITED STATES SENATOR
FROM THE STATE OF MONTANA

Senator Daines. Thank you, Chairman Barrasso, Ranking Member Carper for holding today's hearing on Senate Bill 605, my legislation with Senator Tester to increase active forest management by fixing a damaging court decision that just creates red tape and blocks much-needed projects on the ground with no benefit to the species.

We burned over 1 million acres in Montana this fire season. In fact, the Ranking Member, it is the size of the State of Delaware.

Senator Carper. Huge.

Senator Daines. It is big.

[Laughter.]

Senator Daines. To put it in perspective, we lost two firefighters, too, and a sobering thought, lost their lives in Montana fighting those fires.

Let me say up front that this legislation codifies the legal position taken by the Obama Administration. Leaders of the Department of Agriculture and Department of Interior under the current Administration, likewise, have expressed support for the core elements of my legislation.

There is a reason there are two Montanans in front of you today on the hearing. Montana had two of the three most

expensive fires in the Nation. I just saw the brief from Secretary Perdue yesterday. Stack ranked the most expensive fires, the top 20. Montana, number one, was the Lolo Peak fire south of Missoula, and number three was the Rice Ridge fire near City Lake.

Furthermore, Representative Mike Simpson and Representative Collin Peterson have introduced bipartisan companion legislation in the House, so we have this from a bipartisan, bicameral viewpoint, as well as administrative support. It is also supported by dozens of organizations, several sportsmen and conservation groups, as well. Simply put, it has strong bipartisan roots and strong bipartisan support.

Senator Bill 605 responds to the Ninth Circuit ruling in the U.S. Forest Service versus Cottonwood Environmental Law Center that the Forest Service is required to do an extra layer of plan level consultation with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Services following the designation of critical habitat for the lynx species. To be clear, the Forest Service and Fish and Wildlife Service were already conducting robust scientific analysis with regard to lynx habitat at the project level, so these agencies were and are fully committed to the conservation of the species.

The Cottonwood ruling stands in contrast with a Tenth Circuit ruling on a related case in 2007. Unfortunately, in

2016, October, the Supreme Court declined the Obama Administration's petition to resolve the conflicting circuit court opinions, which effectively upholds the Ninth Circuit ruling.

As highlighted by President Obama's Department of Justice, the Cottonwood ruling has "the potential to cripple the Forest Service and BLM's land management functions."

DOJ also highlighted that this decision substantially increases unnecessary paperwork requirements without any conservation benefit. And far from being just a case about the lynx, the Department of Justice noted that there are more than 850 listed species in the geographical area of the Ninth Circuit, and emphasized the sheer volume of agency resources that would be required to adhere to the court's decision.

We are seeing this firsthand in Montana, as the Forest Service is now prioritizing re-consultation with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service on the lynx first, above other work like grizzly bear consultation and permitting projects.

Today there are five forest management projects in Montana comprising over 150 million board feet of timber that have been blocked through injunctions due to the Cottonwood decision. These projects were designed to achieve critical objectives such as reducing the risk of wildfires, improving habitat, and protecting water quality. Several of these projects were

developed through locally driven, collaborative process that involved diverse stakeholders working together to improve forest health, and yet each one was stopped due to repeat fringe litigants capitalizing on the Ninth Circuit's disastrous Cottonwood ruling.

And perhaps the most alarming example, and Senator Tester just alluded to it, was the injunction of the Stonewall Vegetation Project near Lincoln, Montana. This project was enjoined this past spring, just days before the work was scheduled to begin. And about one month later, guess what happened? Fires broke out on some of the very acres that would have been treated under this project.

While I can't say the project would have prevented the fire, the mere fact that wildfires occurred in areas that could not be treated due to the Cottonwood shows that we need to urgently pass my bipartisan legislation to statutorily reverse this decision. Senator Bill 605 simply clarifies that Federal agencies do not need to do the extra layer of unnecessary consultation that is required by the Cottonwood decision. This will statutorily fix right now this conflict we have with the circuit courts. Removing this burden will allow Federal agencies to have more time to complete preventive work on the ground, while also creating good paying wood products jobs.

I strongly believe this legislation, together with other

management and wildfire funding reforms, should be passed into law this year. We say out in Montana either we are going to manage the forests or the forests are going to manage us.

I look forward to working with this Committee towards that end. Thank you.

[The prepared statement of Senator Daines follows:]

Senator Barrasso. Thank you very much, Senator Daines. We appreciate you bringing forth this bipartisan piece of legislation and are very grateful for your leadership. Thank you.

We will now hear from our witnesses.

I am pleased to first introduce Jessica Crowder, who serves as a Policy Advisor for Wyoming's Governor Matt Mead. From her work for the Governor's Office and as a former policy analyst for the Wyoming Department of Agriculture, Jessica knows the value of strong coordination among States, Federal, and local agencies.

Jessica holds a bachelor's and master's degrees in range management, during which she studied post-fire activities, including grazing following prescribed fire during summer months.

Jessica is a key member of the governor's Task Force on Forests, which concluded January 2015, and she continues to work closely with me and my staff to develop forestry solutions for Wyoming. Jessica wears many hats and offers a unique perspective on the way fire affects forest health.

Jessica, I appreciate you making the trip to be with us today. I look forward soon to hearing your suggestions for improving forest health for the next generation.

In addition to Ms. Crowder, we have Mr. Lawson Fite, who is

a General Counsel for the American Forest Resources Council. We appreciate you being here today.

And Mr. Collin O'Mara, good to see you again, President and CEO of the National Wildlife Federation.

I would like to remind the witnesses that your full testimony will be made part of the official hearing record today. Please try to keep your comments to five minutes so that we may have time for questions.

Ms. Crowder, please begin.

STATEMENT OF JESSICA CROWDER, POLICY ADVISOR, OFFICE OF GOVERNOR
MATTHEW H. MEAD

Ms. Crowder. Thank you and good morning, Mr. Chairman and members of the Committee. Thank you for the opportunity to testify on enhancing forest management to effectively mitigate wildfires.

Wyoming's forested lands make up more than 11 million acres of our State, and over 60 percent is administered by the Forest Service and the Bureau of Land Management. Federal impediments to active management have negatively affected Wyoming's economy, natural resources, private property, and human health.

The current situation on forested lands in Wyoming and across the Country demands immediate action. Governor Mead believes we can do better in managing our forests. He created a Task Force on Forests in 2013 to analyze and consider response strategies for forest management. Through this and subsequent work, we believe there are opportunities to reach the goal of sustainable forests.

Wyoming's forests offer an illustration of the need for active management. Logging, mechanical treatments, managed livestock grazing, prescribed fire, managed wildfire, all of these serve to improve forest health and the multiple benefits derived from our forests. Despite this knowledge, we have not been able to fully implement active management at a landscape

scale, and the results are concerning.

Over the past 20 years, aerial detection surveys have mapped over 4.6 million cumulative acres of trees killed by insect and disease in Wyoming alone. Catastrophic wildfires and the costs to fight wildfires have increased across the West. Unmanaged forests impact the ecosystems and essential benefits they provide. Dead trees pose a hazard for humans. Downed trees make it difficult for people and animals to use an area. Forage for livestock and effective wildlife habitats are reduced. It is difficult to access areas for treatment for livestock management or for recreational pursuits such as mountain biking, hunting, and hiking.

Forests impacted by insects and disease also make firefighting difficult. 2017 has been average year in terms of wildfires for Wyoming. Unfortunately, this is not true for several western States. For Wyoming, the fire season of 2012 was an intense and record setting year: over 700,000 acres burned and over 75 residences were destroyed. The suppression costs totaled approximately \$110 million.

Increased occurrences of catastrophic wildfires can harm municipal watersheds. High intensity fires increase erosion and sedimentation in reservoirs that provide water for people. Wyoming's air quality has also been affected by smoke. The first two weeks of September were particularly smoky. The

Wyoming Department of Environmental Quality has recorded nearly 40 values over air quality standards for particulate matter and ozone since July.

Because of these impacts of unmanaged forests and wildfires to Wyoming, I offer these potential solutions.

First, I would like to address insect and disease areas. Congress gave the Forest Service the ability to use categorical exclusions under the Agricultural Act of 2014, or the Farm Bill, in designated insect and disease areas. Federal agencies are, in some instances, hesitant to utilize existing authorities and capitalize on opportunities to complete analyses in an expedited manner. In Wyoming, over 2 million acres have been designated. To date, this tool has not been used in our State.

Congress should urge the use of categorical exclusions already allowed in insect and disease areas. Additionally, increasing the acreage allowed to be considered under a categorical exclusion would be beneficial. It will take management on a larger scale than has occurred in recent years to effectively decrease wildfire risks.

Second, Wyoming has worked to increase partnerships with both the Forest Service and the BLM. The permanent authorization and expansion of Good Neighbor Authority and the Farm Bill is important for getting more work done on the ground. This work contributes to proactive management and decreased

potential for large intense fires.

However, the Farm Bill does not allow permanent roads to be reconstructed under Good Neighbor Authority, and these roads are often necessary. We recommend removing this provision.

And, finally, I would like to discuss the National Environmental Policy Act. NEPA was enacted to fulfill a specific purpose. It is a procedural statute designed to disclose impacts and assist Federal agencies in making decisions. Yet, NEPA has evolved into a cumbersome and costly process. Analyses often contain unnecessary information in an effort to guard against or answer possible litigation.

A change in the NEPA process through legislative action and agency action is necessary. My written testimony contains simple suggestions for improving NEPA. Slow and unwieldy analyses do not provide for progress in reacting to ever-changing conditions on the ground. A shift from how the law is currently being executed will require leadership, and I submit that this Committee is exceedingly qualified to undertake and accomplish the goal of restoring and streamlining NEPA.

In closing, Governor Mead appreciates this Committee's continued leadership and interest in finding solutions to the crisis we are seeing on our western landscapes.

Thank you again for this opportunity to share Wyoming's perspective, and I welcome any questions you may have.

[The prepared statement of Ms. Crowder follows:]

Senator Barrasso. Thank you, Ms. Crowder.

Mr. Fite.

STATEMENT OF LAWSON FITE, GENERAL COUNSEL, AMERICAN FOREST
RESOURCES COUNCIL

Mr. Fite. Thank you. Chairman Barrasso and Ranking Member Carper, members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to address you today.

This hearing is a timely and constructive step toward commonsense reforms in the way that we manage our Federal forests.

The American Forest Resource Council, where I am the General Counsel, represents the forest products industry in Washington, Oregon, Idaho, Montana, and California. Our members' businesses, and the rural communities that they support, depend on a steady and predictable supply of timber. The forest products industry is one of the only sources of family-wage jobs in these areas, and these jobs are the linchpin of many rural economies. The milling and logging infrastructure that our industry provides also makes forest restoration and thinning efforts possible.

We in the forest products industry take pride in our stewardship of the lands where we work. We are invested in sustaining this renewable resource for future generations, protecting our communities, and ensuring the health of our forests so it will offer its benefits to the many users who work, fish, hunt, and recreate there.

Right now, swaths of our Federal forests are overstocked, unhealthy, and at high risk of catastrophic wildfire. As you have heard during this hearing, this year's wildfire season in the West was one of the worst on record: over 8 million acres burned. The effects of these wildfires are not mere statistics; they are human suffering, burned homes, destroyed and charred wildlife habitat, and burned dead forests. And when forests burn, valuable timber resources are lost, leading to job loss and closure of that needed mill and logging infrastructure.

Many of these risks were illustrated in dramatic fashion by the Eagle Creek fire just east of Portland. This fire took weeks to contain, it threatened key area water sources and gravely damaged treasured recreational sites such as Multnomah Falls and the Angel's Rest Trail. It covered the entire Portland area with a thick blanket of smoke.

On September 17th, Portland had the worst air quality in the entire Country. Portland public schools cancelled their first day of kindergarten this year. My daughter's preschool, they have gone outside every day for 30 years, and this year they had to stay inside for several days because of the poor air quality from this wildfire.

Fortunately, there are solutions that can increase the resilience of our forests and our rural communities. The legislation before you today makes great strides towards

streamlining forest management and reducing artificial constraints on land management agencies. In particular, S. 605, the Litigation Relief for Forest Management and Projects Act, which is a bipartisan bill and a bicameral bipartisan bill, would fix the Ninth Circuit's disastrous Cottonwood decision which is currently stalling a wide range of needed projects across 11 national forests. The bill would fix the decision by adopting the position taken by the Obama Administration in front of the Ninth Circuit and in a petition to the Supreme Court.

In Cottonwood, the Ninth Circuit ruled that when a new species is listed or new critical habitat designated, it is not enough to consult on that species for a project that is underway; it ruled that the Forest Service had to go back and redo its plan level consultation, even for a forest plan that may be 20 or more years old. In the Northwest, in particular, we are operating under a series of forest plans adopted in 1994.

This plan level consultation offers no conservation benefit over a project level consultation because plan level consultations often include a broad level of acceptable impact that can be spread over many projects. But when projects are analyzed project by project, a buffer is more likely to be incorporated to ensure those projects do not adversely affect listed species.

Cottonwood has had a dramatic effect on the ability of

Region I of the Forest Service to manage its lands, and that is only the beginning.

In addition to S. 605, both S. 1417 and S. 1731 are worthy of your considerations. Currently, there are too many roadblocks and too much analysis paralysis going on in managing our Federal forests. Solutions to these problems can be achieved here in Washington, D.C., and we urge the Committee to act.

[The prepared statement of Mr. Fite follows:]

Senator Barrasso. Thank you very much, Mr. Fite, for your testimony.

Mr. O'Mara, welcome back.

STATEMENT OF COLLIN O'MARA, PRESIDENT AND CHIEF EXECUTIVE
OFFICER, NATIONAL WILDLIFE FEDERATION

Mr. O'Mara. Chairman Barrasso, Ranking Member Carper, thank you for the invitation to be with you all. I am so thankfully to you personally, Mr. Chairman, for holding this hearing. This is a crisis that has not received nearly the attention nationally that it should; it has been drowned out in the news. And when you look at 8.5 million acres of wildfire this year, it is a big number. There are a million acres burning right now, which is the same size as, Senator Carper, my State of Delaware. Eight of the worst years in wildfire history have been the last 15. I mean, this is a trend that is absolutely terrifying. And there are solutions that have gone up to the two yard line in the last several congresses, but haven't quite gotten kind of across into the end zone.

I want to be clear from the beginning that fire is natural. There are absolutely appropriate uses of fire, prescribed burns, very appropriate management technique. That is not what we are talking about today. These megafires that we are seeing are unlike anything we have really ever seen before, and they are more intense, they are more frequent.

And the thing that is scary for me is that this year we actually had a decent snowpack in a lot of places. So the summer was just so hot after that that basically all the

additional precipitation that we had wasn't enough to increase the soil health, and you still had these massive fires.

So you can't ignore the climate impacts between the snowpack and the warmer springs and the longer, drier summers, but there are things we can do about it, and right now the Forest Service is estimating that between 65 and 82 million acres of forests of the 193 million acres in our national forest system require restoration. We are only restoring a fraction of that. And for this conversation I think it is absolutely imperative that we both link the management improvements that are absolutely possible with this funding crisis, because we can have all the tools in the world for our guys on the ground, and they are doing the best they can with the tools they have, but if there are no resources to actually restore these forest stands, it will all be for naught.

So there is a bipartisan path forward. There was a bill introduced just a few days ago by Senator Crapo, with Senator Wyden, Senator Merkley is on it as well; a huge bipartisan coalition of folks. But we would really encourage that this conversation be tied to that conversation because, at the end of the day, if we don't fix this fire funding crisis, a lot of these tools we are talking about will be insufficient.

And we have talked about half of the Forest Service budget going towards fighting fires. We are going to be over 60

percent this year, and pushing up to two-thirds, 65 percent in the next few years.

At the same time, we absolutely can improve forest management, and there are commonsense things we can do. We should be pushing innovation and collaborative tools. We should be focusing on restoration, on habitat restoration in particular. We need to make sure that forests and wildlife health and watershed health are adequately considered. And we can also improve the efficiency of the way that we look at these tools while maintaining public input and collaboration and environmental safeguards.

And before this Committee today you have two bills that are great examples of reaching this balance. Senator Hatch and Senator Heinrich's sage brush bill is a good start. It is a bill that is targeted on a very specific problem, the juniper encroachment and looking at some of these other invasive species. It is targeted. It requires there be a habitat benefit. It addresses multiple threats, and it has incredible bipartisan support.

The thing about this bill that is interesting is that you have support from almost all the conservation groups; you have support from industry groups like the American Petroleum Institute, the NRA. There are some conversations folks want to have about a couple small pieces. Some folks are concerned that

invasives could come if you create a lot more roads and you could have some unintended consequences. But it is a great bipartisan bill that we strongly support.

Senator Daines and Senator Tester talked about the Cottonwood bill. Again, huge bipartisan support; great broad coalition of folks. Again, there are a few small pieces that some groups want to talk about. I think there is a collaborative process we can have between now and markup to have that conversation, but, again, something that has big bipartisan support that makes a lot of sense.

I also agree with Senator Thune that a lot of the concerns that he has raised are things that we need to address. I think his bill goes a little too far in some places, and we would like to work with the committee to ratchet it back a little bit. I think there are a couple places where we should have more collaboration and really empower local communities. I think some environmental safeguards that are kind of stepped by the wayside that, frankly, could be kept in place and still be more efficient.

But, again, these are conversations that are timely and you could have a big bipartisan win at a time in this chamber where I think bipartisanship is fairly rare. You could have a massive, massive bipartisan victory in the next two months using these bills before this Committee as a basis and combining

Senator Crapo's work on the other side.

So, for me, at the end of the day, if we can put forward a package that solves the wildfire funding crisis, finally, that we have been talking about for four years, adopts landscape scale approaches, the Nature Conservancy has been doing good work on this; if we can actually reduce some of these redundant environmental reviews in a way that still protects the integrity, but actually increases efficiency; if we reward collaboration -- there is nothing more frustrating for folks than to participate in a process for years, finding good commonsense bipartisan solutions, nonpartisan solutions and have them blown up by litigation later -- and then expanding and improving these Good Neighbor and stewardship contracting provisions, we could have an absolute homerun and actually address a major problem on the landscape in a big way.

So, on behalf of the National Wildlife Federation, our 6 million members, our 51 State affiliates, State and territorial affiliates, thank you for working on this issue because I think this is one of those opportunities that could be government at its best over the next couple months if we put our heads and actually get something big done. So thank you to Mr. Chairman and Mr. Carper.

[The prepared statement of Mr. O'Mara follows:]

Senator Barrasso. Thank you very much for your testimony. I appreciate the testimony of all of you. We will proceed to some questioning at this time, and I will start with Ms. Crowder.

According to the Federal land management agencies, on average, humans are, either intentionally or unintentionally, responsible for many of the wildfires in the United States. Casper Star Tribune reported that the cost of fighting the most expensive fire in United States history was in California, and that exceeded \$200 million. The fire was caused by an illegal campfire. Last year, in Wyoming, a fire believed by the authorities to be man-caused destroyed a residential home and burned more than 19 square miles near Yellowstone National Park. It cost the U.S. Bureau of Land Management \$1.4 million to fight that fire in Wyoming.

Given the high cost to the American taxpayer, are there measures that we should be taking in order to make our forests more resistant to catastrophic manmade fires, or man-caused fires?

Ms. Crowder. Mr. Chairman, yes, there are steps we should be taking and could take fairly easily. First, continued support for State fire assistance programs is important. In Wyoming, this includes fire prevention efforts such as education, educating the public on the impacts that their

actions may have on citizens and even just their visit to these areas. Fire-wise programs to help homeowners and communities reduce the risk of wildfire damage are also important. Of course, hazardous fuel reduction projects are very important. This is an opportunity to mitigate wildfire hazards and lessen the threat of catastrophic fires or megafires. It is an opportunity to reduce lighter fuels, opportunities to reduce surface fuels, and also put in place some thinning projects.

And these State fire assistance programs also provide the State opportunity to build or maintain capacity of State, Federal, and even volunteer fire departments, which become important in initial attacks when we have these fires. And, of course, I believe also that proactive management on a large scale is necessary as well.

Senator Barrasso. Following up on that, to Mr. Fite, some parties are advocating a complete hands-off approach to national forests. In the past, you have expressed some skepticism over this concept of passive forest management. Specifically, June of this year you were quoted in Courthouse News as saying this approach "leads to conditions that are quite unhealthy and even dangerous."

So, do you feel that there is a way to have healthy interactions with forest ecosystems and make forests more resilient to disease, to pests, and to catastrophic fire?

Mr. Fite. Yes, Mr. Chairman, absolutely. There are things that we can do to make our forests more resilient and to restore a more natural role of fire in our ecosystem, and that involves active management, that involves untying our land and management agencies' hands so they can implement active management on a wider basis and without devoting so much of their resources to planning activities. For example, the Forest Service figures that we have seen 40 percent of their time and resources are spent on paperwork and planning, and that is not the way we should be out there managing our forests, reducing the fuels so that, when a fire comes through, the impacts are not catastrophic like we have seen this year.

Senator Barrasso. Thank you.

Ms. Crowder, you know, as a doctor, I am concerned about health impacts of these wildfires. Earlier this month, the Casper Star Tribune reported that the EPA considered the air quality over parts of several western States as very unhealthy because of the fires. It also quoted a physician with the American Lung Association who warned that fires spew particulates into the air which are linked to premature death and cancer, and can make asthma and chronic lung diseases worse.

As a Wyoming official and a resident, can you describe what impacts these fires are having on the physical health of the people of the West?

Ms. Crowder. Yes, Mr. Chairman. Human health is certainly a concern when it comes to wildfires. The air quality in Wyoming has been particularly bad this summer. Particulate matter, or those particulates that are suspended in the air, really do cause damage. The Wyoming Department of Health has put out several announcements and warnings to Wyoming citizens over the past several months, warning them to stay indoors and close their windows. You know, as a Wyoming resident, I have seen my own neighbors be forced inside because of air quality, and that is concerning in Wyoming.

Additionally, we are concerned about visitors who visit our great State, and the impacts that poor air quality has on them and their trip, as well as our economy.

We are also concerned with municipal watersheds and the impacts that fires may have on municipal watersheds, from sedimentation to notices from the Cheyenne Board of Public Utilities that our water may smell like smoke or taste like dirt because of a small wildfire in the area.

So these are real health concerns in Wyoming.

Senator Barrasso. Thank you.

Senator Carper.

Senator Carper. First of all, welcome one and all, colleagues. It is great to see you back here, and thank you for all the good work that you continue to do with your life; and I

think the same is true for our other witnesses as well.

You had a chance to hear Mr. O'Mara's comments in his testimony. Do you agree, Ms. Crowder, with anything he said?

Ms. Crowder. Mr. Chairman, Senator Carper, he makes some very good points. Fire is a natural process and we do need to look at management at a large scale, and management needs to occur now at a large scale. There are several tools that we have in the toolbox, and we need to be using those immediately.

I also believe that the testimony that Mr. O'Mara put forward that these megafires are of concern is absolutely true, and I do believe that collaboration is an important part of the process. We have seen some collaborative processes in Wyoming move forward. We have seen the Forest Service lead some of these collaboratives in Wyoming and put together landscape scale, and start to put landscape scale management activities, and that is important.

However, I do think we also need to move quickly, and time is of the essence here. Thank you.

Senator Carper. All right. Thank you.

Mr. Fite, do you agree with anything that Mr. O'Mara had to say here in his testimony?

Mr. Fite. Yes, Senator. For example, Mr. O'Mara discussed the Cottonwood bill, S. 605, sponsored by Senators Daines and Tester, and how that is a way to ensure that we get needed

forest management projects done particularly in the northern Rockies and other regions where they are being held up for paperwork reasons that aren't producing conservation benefits.

On the collaboration aspect, we in the industry support collaborative efforts where they produce good projects. We have a project where I, in fact, represented a collaborative in court that has been held up in litigation under the Cottonwood decision. So that is holding up collaborative projects, and that is why we need that fix.

Senator Carper. All right, thank you.

Collin, in your testimony, I think regarding the Litigation Relief Act, you mentioned that other members of the conservation community who are concerned that this bill, this would be the Tester-Daines bill, are concerned that this bill may be broader than necessary to achieve its goals and may result in some unintended consequences.

Could you just elaborate on these unintended consequences and how we might address these concerns in the legislation?

Mr. O'Mara. Sure. Thanks, Senator. And I have to give Senator Daines and Senator Tester a lot of credit. If you compare this bill to the House bill, it is already much more concise, and I think there is some concern that if you are only looking at the project level, when there is new information that comes on, that there could be information that should be

integrated into kind of cumulative facts across the entire plan. I, frankly, think with a little bit more conversation we can actually resolve this quickly. We support the bill as it is. We are very grateful to Senator Daines for the work that he has done. We think that is actually a very strategic approach. These plans are supposed to be done every 10 years. It is more like 25 years in practice. So we just don't want to see projects held up that are going to help species today waiting for some long, collaborative process. But I think the biggest thing is just making sure there is no unintended consequences at scale.

Senator Carper. Our other witness, do you have any brief reaction to what Collin just said? Briefly.

Ms. Crowder. Mr. Chairman, Senator Carper, yes, I do believe that these projects do need to happen for habitat management and other reasons as well. As I spoke about earlier, the bill, the Daines-Tester bill does allow for project-specific consultation, and that is important. Ultimately, we want to see species recovery, and we don't want to harm that in any way or harm the opportunity for actually getting management done on the ground. So I do agree that that is an important step forward.

Senator Carper. Okay, thanks.

Mr. Fite, any comment on what Collin just said?

Mr. Fite. Yes, thank you, Senator. I think this bill is

very carefully drawn. It does not undo existing law as to how you consult when you revise or prepare a new forest plan. So Senators Daines and Tester worked very carefully to make this a narrow fix that just eliminates work that is not going to actually benefit our species.

Senator Carper. All right. I have some more questions and hope we will have an opportunity to ask those. Thanks for those responses.

Senator Barrasso. You certainly will, Senator Carper.

Senator Inhofe.

Senator Inhofe. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I have been sitting and listening with a lot of interest. Of course, I know this hearing is covering the forest fires, but we have prairie fires in Oklahoma. In fact, the last one we had was not really a record-setter, but it is something that we are facing. I can remember flying my own plane over it and going all the way up to southern Kansas and seeing the carcasses of animals up against fences where they were trying to get loose. So it is a very tragic thing.

Ms. Crowder, in your testimony you say outreach at the early stages of development in the NEPA process would be key to reducing the time it takes to reach a decision. We have a lot of experience in that in this Committee during our highway bills and everything else, and we have learned from experience that we

can do that. Last week I introduced a bill that pertains to the FERC permitting, providing for all Federal, State, and local regulatory agencies to come to the table early to coordinate their participation. It sounds to me like this is needed across government for all other types of projects.

Can you further detail as to why it is important to get all the stakeholders at the table early, rather than later?

Ms. Crowder. Yes, Mr. Chairman, Senator Inhofe. I have extensive experience working on these National Environmental Policy Act processes and actually putting the documents together, and, from my personal experience, those projects where the Federal agencies engage State and local governments, as well as others, early in the process tend to move a lot faster. So, for example, if a State agency has, and they often do, wildlife data that is important and useful for the Federal agency, then that State agency can bring that wildlife data forward, instead of waiting until the last minute to provide that information.

Senator Inhofe. Which is normally the case.

Ms. Crowder. Often the case, yes, sir. So I believe that bringing the entities to the table that have the data and expertise is of most importance.

Senator Inhofe. And I think we successfully did this in some of our, in our FAST Act, the previous transportation bill prior to that, and we got some things done that otherwise we

would not have gotten done. It was a joint effort, very bipartisan effort and very successful.

Mr. Fite, in hearing your testimony today, there seems to have been more of a system for forest practices at a more local level. Besides the NEPA process, the Forest Service and other agencies are constantly blocked from responsible forest management through litigation from environmental groups that challenge every decision, even when these decisions are backed by science and beneficial to the overall ecosystem. There is a problem that needs to be solved, as these cases delay projects for years and create uncertainty, and then we will see situations like when the circuit courts split and the Supreme Court doesn't weigh in.

What are your thoughts? You concentrated in your opening remarks more about S. 605, but on the other bill that Senator Thune was interested in, S. 1731, do you have any other thoughts on how you can solve these problems? Concentrate more on 1731.

Mr. Fite. Yes, Senator. Thank you for the question. Litigation is a real problem, particularly when you have a project like you were describing, where stakeholders get involved, they are at the table helping develop the project, and then an outside group comes in at the very end and undoes the whole process, halts everything in litigation. And the arbitration provisions in 1731 I think are a good step at a

pilot project for trying to figure out ways to streamline the litigation process, because right now the litigation process on top of the planning process can take years and years, and we need to fix that.

Senator Inhofe. Well, that is good. Do you think 1736 would help in that respect?

Mr. Fite. Yes, Senator.

Senator Inhofe. The legislation we are discussing today are some ways to address forest management issues. Are there other things that Congress could do that are not addressed in this legislation? Anybody?

Mr. O'Mara. Senator, thank you. I would really --

Senator Inhofe. You are a very effective fast talker. My wife is always telling me to talk slower, and I am realizing now there is a great benefit to talking faster.

Mr. O'Mara. Trying to squeeze 10 minutes into 5 minutes.

[Laughter.]

Mr. O'Mara. I joke that I grew up in Syracuse, New York; and if you don't talk fast, your mouth actually freezes shut.

I would encourage everyone to take a look at Senator Crapo's legislation on the funding side, because if we fix the funding side and there are sufficient resources for managers and we make some of these management improvements so they have more tools, then we actually could have a victory that would

transform forest management in this Country; and, frankly, it would be one of the most significant improvements in decades. So putting those two together I think could be an absolute homerun.

Senator Inhofe. Good. Appreciate that.

Any other comments on that, other things that could be done?

Mr. Fite. There are a number of measures that have been proposed on the House side in a bill sponsored by Congressman Westerman that can really streamline planning processes, in particular an action-no action analysis. So that could really streamline --

Senator Inhofe. Well, that is interesting. We will get that and look at those provisions.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman. By the way, this is just another reminder that we have a problem between two Committees, this Committee and the Commerce Committee, that always seem to meet at the same time, so one of these days we will get that fixed.

Senator Barrasso. Thank you, Senator Inhofe.

Senator Merkley.

Senator Merkley. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

And thank you all for your presentations.

Oregon has been burning with 20 major forest fires, and some of those are complexes, meaning it is called one fire, but

it is actually maybe a dozen. At one point there were over 80 fires burning in my State just recently.

Mr. Fite, I was up on the Eagle Creek Trail and the Pacific Crest Trail while the Indian Springs was burning on Eagle Creek, but we then had the fireworks that set off the whole Pacific Gorge aflame, and phenomenal just what that did.

Oregon has had probably more success than any State in the Country on stewardship projects and collaboratives, and that effort came from, well, we have this war, this war going on over our forests, with some saying, hey, they should be managed primarily to get forests to an old growth state where they are fire resistant, and don't mess with Mother Nature, and others saying the solution to everything is to clear-cut. So that war was unproductive, ends up in all these court battles, so out of that came the stewardship efforts and the collaborative efforts.

We have hundreds of thousands of acres in Oregon of second growth forests that are really good for fire and they are really good for disease, but they are not either great for either timber stands or for ecosystems. So there is a potential here for a win-win, and that is what the stewardship projects and the collaboratives are all about. And essentially, in the end, it is some version of thinning. You have these forests with the trees far too close together. The boughs are very low; the fire easily moves from the soil level to the canopy. Every tree is

so close it lights the next one on fire; any wind blows through that. Then that carries over out of the fatal forests onto private land.

So I was involved in a couple pilot projects that involved various types of thinning, and I have been up in the woods with both timber companies and the environmental groups to discuss how do we push this forward. So I just wanted to ask each of you, Ms. Crowder, do you feel like there is a real space for thinning projects to be able to kind of provide a steady supply of saw logs to the mills, but also to reduce the disease and fire challenges that we have in these forests?

Ms. Crowder. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, Senator Merkley. Thinning is absolutely a useful tool for reducing fuels. It reduces fuels that lead to crown fires potentially; it has the potential to improve wildlife habitat; has positive impacts on tree growth, which leads to positive tree and forest health. It also leads to a potential decrease in insect and disease. So I do believe that thinning is a useful tool for reducing fuels and improving forest health. But thinning is only one of the tools in the toolbox.

Senator Merkley. I am going to run out of time, so I won't ask you to go through the other tools.

Mr. Fite, do you feel that that is a useful tool?

Mr. Fite. Yes, Senator. Thinning projects are a useful

tool. I would say that even for thinning projects the process and litigation has become a significant roadblock. For example, projects in Oregon, a 187-acre project, for example, or a couple thousand acres, courts have required an environmental impact statement which is on the level of -- that is more documentation than you need to build a new runway at Hillsboro Airport, quite literally, and that is why we need some fixes to management.

Senator Merkley. Thank you, Mr. Fite. I will point out that virtually no stewardship projects ended up in court in Oregon. The whole point is to get people together beforehand and work out what is referred to as a prescription so you don't battle it out in court and you actually get work done in the woods.

Mr. O'Mara?

Mr. O'Mara. Thank you, Senator. I think you are right, I think some of the collaboratives in Oregon are some of the best examples, and I think some of the early stewardship contracting. I would like to see a lot more of it. I want to make sure that we actually enhance those programs and kind of build on the lessons since the Farm Bill. But, absolutely, thinning, prescribed burns, the things that actually work for some of the northwestern forests are absolutely essential to improve management.

Senator Merkley. One of the challenges with thinning

projects is they are often not commercially viable. It is just a lot, if you will, cheaper to take out trees in big chunks, big clear-cuts, and that is why we have programs to help fund that thinning. We had a lot in the stimulus bill. We have various other fuel hazardous loads and so forth programs. But we need to do a lot more of that.

That is an interesting sound. Whose phone was that?

Unidentified Speaker. Seems like it was coming from out there.

[Laughter.]

Senator Merkley. Hello.

So that is one challenge, the funding to do those thinning projects.

But one of the things that happens often when we have fires is there are folks who say, well, you know, the best thing to do is just get rid of the environmental side and let's go in and allow clear-cuts without any sort of action and, by the way, let's take out the fire-resistant trees at the same time, which just puts off alarm bells. Why would we take out old growth and the fire-resistant trees in the course of trying to make a forest more resilient?

And since I am out of time, I won't ask you all to answer that, but I did notice that that is exactly what is in Senate Bill 1731, full permission to take out the old growth and the

fire-resistant trees; and that is just the sort of approach that destroys all the efforts to bring together the two communities to create forest health, because it is like, oh, well, here is an excuse to just go to old-style clear-cutting, rather than actual forest stewardship and making the better timber stands and better ecosystems.

So I just wanted to express that concern and say that we really need to focus on not increasing the timber wars, but expanding on the foundation we have from the stewardship contracts and the collaboratives who are showing how we can stay out of the courts, make the forests more healthy, and produce a steady supply of saw logs for the mills. Thanks.

Senator Barrasso. Thank you, Senator Merkley.

Senator Rounds. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. Fite, in your testimony you state that wildfires this season have been one of the worst on record. Now, according to the U.S. Forest Service, fire seasons are now approximately two and a half months longer than in 1970. Just this month alone, KEVN News in Rapid City, South Dakota, has cited over 20 wildfires in the Black Hills National Forest. We are facing, in my opinion, a Federal forest management crisis.

If you could point to the most needed change to Federal management policy, what would that be, and why?

Mr. Fite. Thank you, Senator. The most needed change is

simply a focus on actively managing our landscape and making sure that the Forest Service and the BLM, those are the two agencies with the most Federal forests, that that is their number one priority. Wildfires have to be fought when they come out, and it certainly costs a lot of money and we need to pay for it, but we need to be getting in there on the front end and making our landscapes more resilient so then, when a fire does come through, we don't get the destructive and catastrophic effects like we have seen this season and the past few seasons.

Senator Rounds. Let me just ask a specific, because the suggestion is that the type of management that you would suggest is clear-cutting forests. Can you talk about that for a minute? Is that really what the desired management practice is?

Mr. Fite. No, Senator, and I appreciate you asking the question. I think in one of the previous comments from the Committee there was a discussion of are we clear-cutting, are we removing fire-resistant trees. When we are going in and doing active management, there are different tools that agencies use in different circumstances, and in some cases you may want to create an opening or use former regeneration harvest. But a land management agency goes in and it uses its tools intelligently, knowing how the landscape is going to benefit. And we have seen research, particularly in California, that a little more intensive management can open up areas for prey for

some of these iconic owl species; and that if you aren't going in and managing at all, that is, one, going to create this wildfire risk, but then you are not creating the prey base for these wildlife species that folks want to keep around.

Senator Rounds. Really, what you are talking about is a diversity within the Forest Service itself. You want some areas with grass; you want some areas with shrubbery; you want some areas where heavy timber stands are allowed, moved in. It is almost like managing a garden in many ways, isn't it?

Mr. Fite. I think that is a fair characterization, Senator. The Forest Service should be using all the tools at its disposal to make an active, healthy forest that produces all the multiple uses that they are designed for. And I think there are solutions out there with active management that can help give them those tools and help our communities as well.

Senator Rounds. In your testimony you indicated that there seems to be a disparity in outcomes between federally- and non-federally managed forestlands. With all due respect to our Federal agencies and employees, I have seen this firsthand in the Black Hills in my home State, and it is often obvious from the condition of the trees themselves where federally managed forestlands start and where they end. A failure to properly manage forestland, or a lack of management entirely, is what leads to some of these very dangerous conditions; fuel buildups,

undergrowth that hasn't been addressed in some cases; old growth timbers that have not been thinned in some cases. And when you do have a pine beetle infestation or anything else, you end up with so much heat that you basically sterilize the ground; the heat gets so high.

Can you elaborate on what exactly the Federal Government is doing wrong as it relates to active forest management?

Mr. Fite. It is a combination of factors, Senator, and one of those factors is just the agencies' hands are tied. They have one hand tied behind their back by a number of these repetitive processes and then the litigation loop, so they are not able to get projects together at the scale or the pace that they need to get them together.

Senator Rounds. Ms. Crowder, very quickly, you testified that the permanent authorization of Good Neighbor Authority in the 2014 Farm Bill has been an important tool for getting work done on the ground. Can you explain how the Good Neighbor Authority, collaborating with the Forest Service and the Bureau of Land Management, has allowed you to better manage forests?

Ms. Crowder. Absolutely. Thank you, Senator, Mr. Chairman. In the Black Hills of the national forests, we have seen, with State forestry and working with the Federal Government, as well as the National Wild Turkey Foundation, a Good Neighbor Authority project that actually does improve

active management on the Black Hills. We have also seen some very particular projects on BLM lands in southcentral Wyoming, where we have been able to work with other entities, including the BLM and the Forest Service, through Good Neighbor Authority to do mule deer habitat improvement and to actually get some timber moved off of some of those areas before it is unusable.

Senator Rounds. Thank you.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Senator Barrasso. Thank you very much, Senator Rounds.

Senator Gillibrand.

Senator Gillibrand. Thank you so much, Mr. Chairman and Mr. Ranking Member, for holding this hearing.

Mr. O'Mara, in your written testimony you mention that the U.S. Forest Service is restoring just under 5 million acres per year. The U.S. Forest Service also estimates that approximately 65 million acres of Forest Service land is in need of some type of restoration. This seems to me to be an alarming gap between what needs to be done and what is actually being done to prevent wildfires.

Yesterday, Secretary Perdue said, during his press availability, that what we need is a "permanent funding fix" and that a legislative effort is not necessarily needed if a funding fix is provided.

Do you agree with Secretary Perdue that the major

impediment to forest restoration efforts is primary lack of funding and resources? And what level of funding should Congress and the Administration be providing to carry out forest restoration projects?

Mr. O'Mara. Thank you, Senator. I absolutely agree with Secretary Perdue. During my testimony earlier, I was focused on that. You can have all the management tools in the world, but if you don't have the resources to get products on the ground, they are all for naught. And I think right now you are spending \$2 billion between the Forest Service and BLM and the Interior agencies on fighting these catastrophic fires, and that doesn't include the money that the Pentagon is spending and some State agencies are spending on top of it. So it is a massive number. And there has been good work by Senator Murkowski and Senator Udall and others in the appropriations process to try to put a band aid on the problem, but there is a great bipartisan bill that Senator Crapo has been working on with Senator Wyden and Senator Feinstein and so many others that I think is a perfect path to actually having the funding necessary.

My belief is that we should have a dedicated separate fund for fires, rather than trying to put it into the FEMA universe, because if there is another hurricane that hits New York or Delaware or somewhere else, those funds are not predictable enough. So there should be a separate funding source. And

there is a model that I think has broad bipartisan support, at least in this body; and if we can move that quickly, it solves a lot of these other problems. And I would love to complement it with some good management improvements also to give folks more tools to do better projects.

But right now this restoration deficit, if you had all the money in the world, you would be able to restore a lot of that 65 to 82 million acres in the coming years, instead of this maybe, if we are lucky, over the next 20 or 30 years at the current rate of funding.

Senator Gillibrand. Well, I would like to work with you on those management ideas, because if we do get a vote on that bill in this Committee, I could offer an amendment to add that to the bill.

In your written testimony, you raised several concerns with S. 1731, the Forest Management Improvement Act. Among the concerns you raise is the reduction in transparency and public involvement that would be the result of the bill. What would the consequences of limiting the options that are looked at as part of an environmental review or environmental assessment for all forest management practices, and how would such a limitation affect the ability of the public to provide meaningful input in the process?

Mr. O'Mara. So, I am a big fan of collaborative processes,

where you get folks on the ground together to come up with kind of solutions, and the 2014 Farm Bill actually had a great model for a lot of these individual exclusions to have a more collaborative process, and what they did there is they actually kept the environmental safeguards in place, but they really focused on empowering the collaboratives. And I think in this case there is a commonsense moderate middle between, and I think there is a bipartisan agreement where I think this overreaches on a few fronts. I think there is a more moderate place. None of us want to see projects that are collaborative blown up by the courts and things like that, but the answer isn't get rid of everything in the process and kind of throw the baby out with the bath water. So there is a middle ground that we would love to work with you and the Committee on finding, because we can get this done very well.

Senator Gillibrand. A major reason why we subject major projects and activities to an environmental review process is to ensure that the voices of the public and other stakeholders are heard before decisions are made. This allows, in many instances, potential conflicts and unintended consequences to be identified and resolved before a project moves forward, rather than trying to fix it after the fact.

For any of you, could you give us an example, either now or for the record, of how this process has worked well to resolve

environmental issues before a project was implemented?

You could start, Collin.

Mr. O'Mara. Sure. I mean, I think there are incredible projects in places like Oregon and places like Montana that have had great collaborative processes that identified potential impacts to make sure you had the sportsmen interests for elk and big game kind of matched and making sure you don't have an adverse impact on things like raptors and owls and other kind of species. So having more voices at the table at the local level I think is the absolute best way to do this. And then what I would like to see is have those processes bolstered so they have greater weight in the courts. I mean, you shouldn't have somebody that wasn't part of the process be able to blow them up. We see that all too often.

And I think this is where Senator Daines' bill and Senator Tester's bill, of making sure we are not having to go back to the entire plan, but just kind of focus on a specific piece and getting the best science, best collaboration at that level is a commonsense moderate middle that can actually make sure these kind of projects that are good and collaborative actually advance.

Senator Gillibrand. Lawson?

Mr. Fite. Thank you, Senator. Certainly, in Idaho and Montana there has been a lot of progress. I was involved in a

project recently in southern Idaho where we got on the phone with conservation groups and the Forest Service and worked something out.

Things are a little more difficult in Oregon. We have a collaborative project that is under litigation by a former member of a collaborative and a group that has participated in those processes, so I think that is a frustrating experience for folks when they go in that process and then there is still litigation.

Senator Gillibrand. Chairman, I am out of time. Could Jessica answer, though?

Senator Barrasso. Ms. Crowder?

Ms. Crowder. I will be brief. Thank you, Senator.

The collaboratives are important. We do have collaborative processes beginning in Wyoming. We are a little behind Oregon on some of those efforts. And I would submit to you that involving the people locally on the ground who live and work in these communities is of the utmost importance. However, I would also caution, and what we hear often from our constituents is we need immediate action; and they want to be involved in the process, but they want the process to lead to action on the ground. Thank you.

Senator Gillibrand. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Senator Barrasso. Thank you very much.

Senator Boozman.

Senator Boozman. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member. I apologize for being late; I was at a Veterans hearing talking about veteran suicide, which is also very important. But, also, this is very important too, in a different way.

Ms. Crowder, my State of Arkansas is very active in forest management on private, State, and some instances on Federal land. We have a thriving timber industry that provides good-paying jobs for thousands of Arkansans. Further, Arkansas creates a net sequester of carbon at an impressive 16 million tons a year. It appears that investing in forest management is not only good for our environment, but it also boosts the U.S. economy.

In your testimony and in answers to questions, it appears, Ms. Crowder, that you feel like that the legislation that we are discussing, well, enhanced forest management practices would help with the forest fire situation. Am I correct in that?

Ms. Crowder. Yes, sir.

Senator Boozman. Do you view increased forest management as a way for the United States to reduce its carbon footprint?

Ms. Crowder. Yes, sir. Trees are important; they are carbon holders, carbon capture, so they are of the utmost importance to having healthy forests, to having healthy people, to having a healthy environment; and active management of those

trees only increases those opportunities.

Senator Boozman. Would you all comment, if you would?

Mr. Fit. Well, I will comment very quickly. I met with one of our members, one of our sawmill members, and he said, you know what I do? I sequester carbon. By putting wood into products like the paneling in this room, we are sequestering carbon and we are storing it in our forests. And if we have these catastrophic wildfires, then we are releasing amounts of carbon that could be stored in those forests and kept there with good active management.

Mr. O'Mara. Thank you, Senator, and thank you for the question. The estimates have ranged anywhere from 50 million metric tons of carbon go off every year from these wildfires to 150 million. Just by way of comparison, all the refineries combined across the entire Country is about 220 million metric tons. So it is a lot. So, if we can improve management of our forests in a constructive way that reduces some of these catastrophic fires, the emission savings are significant; and, frankly, I would rather have it be in the trees, in the older trees and the larger trees, and actually have some local jobs as a result, also.

Senator Boozman. Very good. Thank you.

Mr. Fite, as you know, forest management is generally a bipartisan issue. Do you believe the legislation in front of us

today effectively promotes a healthy environment, while getting rid of redundant processes that put our Country at greater risk of catastrophic wildfires? And I think it kind of goes to the comment that Ms. Crowder said a few minutes ago about the need, when you talk to individuals on the ground, the locals, getting something done now. But we have redundancies and we just have a paralysis of action.

Mr. Fite. Absolutely, Senator. Forestry is a bipartisan space, and it is really encouraging that there are so many bills, particularly the litigation reform bill sponsored by Senators Daines and Tester also has bipartisan support in the House, and that is so encouraging because it is so important to our communities and to our ecosystems. We can do a lot of things that are win-win, where we are increasing the health of our forests, but we are also increasing the stability of our communities. And one of the great things about forestry is it provides jobs in rural areas that are blue collar and middle class; and there aren't as many jobs in this Country like that as there used to be, and that is a great thing for America.

Senator Boozman. Very good.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Senator Barrasso. Thank you, Senator Boozman.

Senator Carper.

Senator Carper. Thanks, Mr. Chairman.

Collin, I will come back to you on the first question. Could you just take a minute and explain the relevance of the term categorical exclusion to this discussion? And then I am going to ask you some more specific questions.

Mr. O'Mara. Sure. So the categorical exclusion is a way to have a project that is defined that basically avoids the need for the same level of environmental analysis that would be required under the National Environmental Protection Act, and I think they have been used very strategically in some places, in the Farm Bill. I used a couple examples of that. The administrative agencies also have some authority to have narrowly crafted ones. And it is a way to basically expedite the review of projects by not having the same level of scrutiny.

Senator Carper. I understand that the Forest Service has authority, I think explicit authority, to use categorical exclusions up to, what is it, 3,000 acres now? And I understand they have used it not hundreds of times, but maybe 30, 40 times, something like that. On average, I believe it is about roughly 1,000 acres at a time. And we have heard testimony today that they have not fully utilized this authority.

Your testimony expresses strong concern about proposed new categorical exclusions up to what, I think 10,000 acres. Could you talk more about the unintended consequence of implementing such a broad exclusion, particularly before the Forest Service

has fully implemented its existing authorities and before Congress has addressed the agency's funding needs?

Mr. O'Mara. Sure. There is kind of two parts to the proposal. One is increasing the acreage and the second is kind of reducing the other kind of collaboration and the restoration intent that some of the other exclusions have. So what we would like to see is a more narrow focus on projects that actually have a restoration purpose, and I think we actually see that in the mule deer bill, the stage grouse bill that Senator Hatch and Senator Heinrich have been working on; and at the same time still encourage things like collaboration and having some level of protection.

So we just don't think it is absolutely necessary, given that the vast majority of projects that the Forest Service is looking at using this particular exemption for right now are about 1,000 acres, as you mentioned, not even reaching the full 3,000. So I think the deal that was the bipartisan agreement from the Farm Bill in 2014 was a pretty good one. I would love to have them have more resources and more tools to use that existing exemption, as opposed to going further for something they really don't need yet.

Senator Carper. Okay, good. Thanks. That was helpful.

Ms. Crowder, somewhere in your testimony you mention that the State of Wyoming -- have you always lived in the State of

Wyoming?

Ms. Crowder. I am sorry?

Senator Carper. Have you always lived in the State of Wyoming?

Ms. Crowder. I have been there about 13 years.

Senator Carper. I was in Wyoming last weekend, Camden, Wyoming. It is a little town just south of Dover, Delaware. I go there a lot, and I always say to John Barrasso, our Chairman, and Mike Enzi, I was in Wyoming last weekend. It is a different one. I have been there a couple times. Lovely place. Lovely place. The real Wyoming, the really big one.

But you mention in your testimony that your home State, your native State requested that the Forest Service uses authorities enacted in the Farm Bill we were talking about earlier, 2014 Farm Bill, but the agency has not yet done so. And I just want to ask you if you think this is in large part because the Forest Service's budget is inadequate and the agency has to spend more than half of its budget fighting fires.

Ms. Crowder. Yes, sir. Fire borrowing is a real concern, and Governor Mead shares that concern and would like to see a fix to the fire borrowing issue. Essentially what it does is it takes away opportunities for us to get some active management done on the ground, as well as other projects, recreation projects, habitat enhancement projects, and others.

In Wyoming, categorical exclusions related to insect and disease designation areas under the 2014 Farm Bill have not happened yet. That is not only because of the fire borrowing issue; it is because of a hesitancy to utilize the tool and also because there are many instances where a larger action is necessary. So chipping away 3,000 acres at a time on a forest like the Medicine Bow National Forest won't make the results happen as quickly and it won't be as useful as we would like to see.

Senator Carper. Okay, thanks.

I have maybe one question, but for the next round?

Senator Barrasso. Go ahead.

Senator Carper. Okay, thanks.

This would be for all witnesses, but I am going to start off, if I could, Mr. Fite, with you.

According to the Forest Service's NEPA handbook, the agency has, I don't know, 30, 40, maybe 35 categorical exclusions at its disposal. Do you believe these exclusions are being fully utilized? If not, why do you think they have not been fully utilized? And do you have specific recommendations on how they could be better utilized?

Mr. Fite. Thank you, Senator. The categorical exclusions, many of them are being utilized, but they are for very small pieces of work, for 70-acre treatment or there is a categorical

exclusion for facility maintenance. So many of these categorical exclusions don't really make a difference on the landscape.

As far as barriers to using categorical exclusions, I will say I think Region I of the Forest Service has done a really good job using the Farm Bill authorities. They already have 15 projects, just Montana, northern Idaho, North Dakota. Certainly, budget is an issue, but making sure that we can streamline authorities ensures that that money will be spent wisely and it gets a good return, because the difference between a categorical exclusion and an EA versus an EIS can be significant time and significant taxpayer dollars.

Senator Carper. All right.

Collin?

Mr. O'Mara. I do think that we have gotten better at this the last few cycles and we have seen some improvement. There is a really great idea that the Nation Conservancy and the National Wildlife Federation and Senator Cantwell and Senator Murkowski have been talking about, kind of like these landscape scale plans where you basically try to do habitat restoration at scale and then use it through an EA process as a way to kind of expedite the review, but as opposed to every individual small project kind of looking at scale.

So I think what we would argue is that we could use the EA

process much more efficiently and not need the full-blown EIS, kind of NEPA analysis, and that is a better solution, from our point of view, than having a bunch more categorical exclusions that may or may not be used. So I think there is a better mousetrap to get the same exact result on the ground in a way that can be much more bipartisan.

Senator Carper. Okay, good.

And Ms. Crowder?

Ms. Crowder. Yes. Categorical exclusions, I agree with these two gentlemen, do not provide the needs that we have in Wyoming, in Region II and Region IV of the Forest Service, across several of our forests that are just devastated, and that is my concern. I am sorry, categorical exclusions do provide that opportunity. So when we don't see those categorical exclusions used because they don't provide the bang for your buck that is needed in some of these areas that are truly devastated, that is where the concerns come in.

We do have two projects that are very close to 3,000 acres that are starting to move forward under the insect and disease designation areas permitted in the Farm Bill of 2014; however, it is slow. It has been very slow. And we would like to see that use be improved and expanded. And I think that streamlining NEPA as a whole for environmental assessments and environmental impact statements is also necessary and a very

good tool.

Senator Carper. All right.

The last thing I would ask is sometimes when we have issues for which there is not yet unanimity, we look to a panel like you. You don't see all these issues entirely the same, but there is a lot of consensus. Just a closing word or two, some counsel for us, as we try to move forward with these bills, just to keep in mind. Anything, any last thought that you have, we would appreciate it.

You want to go first, Ms. Crowder?

Ms. Crowder. Thank you, Senator, Mr. Chairman. I think that, in closing, for Wyoming and the rest of the Country, what is important here is immediate action, an opportunity to evaluate what we really want our forests to look like, how we really want our forests to function. Do we want them to provide ecosystem benefits and jobs for our economy? Do we want them to be a great place to recreate and for visitors to enjoy, for wildlife? Yes. So we need to evaluate what those goals actually are for our forests and what are the steps to actually get there.

In Wyoming, we are concerned with management being too small, at two small a scale to get to the level of management that we would like to see, and to see the healthy forests that we really do want and that are very important to our citizens.

So thank you for the opportunity.

Senator Carper. No, we are grateful to you. Thank you.

Mr. Fite.

Mr. Fite. Thank you, Senator. In closing, some words to go on, we have a great opportunity with active management to create healthy forests that support our communities and support many of the other uses of the national forests, which are great multiple-use lands for timber production, recreation, and all sorts of other uses. What we need, though, is a comprehensive approach, because merely fixing a budget approach without giving the Forest Service and BLM more management authorities isn't going to get us to where we need to be with an actively managed healthy landscape, because if we just send money at the problem -- and I agree the wildfire funding problem needs to be fixed, and we in industry support fixing that, but without some management reforms, we are not going to get the management outcomes that we need on our national forests. And we in the forest product industry, we stand ready to partner across the aisle, across the spectrum to create solutions and support approaches that will create good results on the ground.

Senator Carper. All right. Thanks.

Mr. Fite. Thank you for the opportunity.

Senator Carper. Collin, last word?

Mr. O'Mara. Thank you, Senator. There is an opportunity

of a big bipartisan agreement here if we focus on the things that are truly bipartisan, and I think the fire funding crisis fix I think is bipartisan in the Senate. I think we have gotten really close a few times. I think the bills you have before you, with Senator Tester and Senator Daines, as well as Senator Thune and Senator Hatch, I think those are bipartisan. I think that with some more thought, I think there are some pieces of the Thune bill, in Senator Thune's bill that could be bipartisan. But speed is of the essence.

We have been stranded. We have lost kind of goal line stands several times on this issue in the last several years, so I think we can't let perfect be immediately good and I think we have to be rational on all sides, and frankly it comes back to your three Cs, right? Collaboration and compromise. And we could get this done by the end of the year. I mean, this could be one of the biggest national resource bills that has gone through this body in years. But I think everyone is going to have to be legitimately compromising to get there.

Managers absolutely need more tools and managers absolutely need more resources, and if we focus on outcomes like wildlife habitat and forest resilience and watershed health and local recreation and local jobs, there is a solution there; and we would love to work with both of you to make that happen.

Senator Carper. Great. Thank you so much. Thank you.

Great to see you. Thank you.

Senator Barrasso. Thank you, Senator Carper.

I ask unanimous consent to include a record letter, number of different articles on wildfires into the record.

Senator Carper. I object.

Senator Barrasso. Without objection.

Senator Carper. I don't object.

Senator Barrasso. Objection is overruled.

[Laughter.]

[The referenced information follows:]

Senator Barrasso. Mr. O'Mara, if I could, just following up on what you were talking about. You mentioned catastrophic wildfires, tens of billions of dollars in damages, local communities, the economies. So many of the populations depend on the great outdoors to sustain the economies. We have had these catastrophic fires. They affect hunting, fishing, hiking, all of the activities. Can you talk a little bit about just the impact on the outdoor economies that is impacted?

Mr. O'Mara. Yes. And I think we haven't done a good job quantifying this, but this year, using Senator Daines' and Senator Tester's hometown, all the folks who tried to go to Glacier that couldn't visit this year, that is a massive loss of impact on Kalispell and Whitefish and all those communities up there. I was in Jackson just a few weeks ago and there was still haze in the air, still affecting local kids and local schools.

So you are talking about tens of billions of dollars of impact on the ground on the physical assets. You are probably talking, you know, 30, 40, \$50 billion of economic impact further upstream. So a fire funding fix that is a fraction of that cost, plus some management reforms that are basically just better policy, is a small price to pay for having this massive impact on the economy, rural jobs and outdoor economy jobs.

Senator Barrasso. I want to go to Mr. Fite next, but I am

going to let you finish it off, Ms. Crowder, and you can talk about that, even things like the eclipse and the impact on people coming to Wyoming, and whether they are going to have a good vision of the Great American Eclipse.

Mr. Fite, let me just get to you in terms of wildlife and the specifics there to better protect species. This Committee has examined how to improve wildlife conservation. We have done that over the last several months; we have had hearings. Given the importance of conservation to this Committee, can you talk a little bit about your thoughts as to the devastating impact wildfires have on our Country's wildlife and how you believe these bills addressed will really help protecting wildlife?

Mr. Fite. Yes, Senator, absolutely. We have seen fires in the West recently that have had dramatic and horrific impacts on key wildlife habitat. One example was a fire complex called Westside on the Klamath National Forest in northern California. It destroyed 20,000 acres of very high quality northern spotted owl habitat. Just destroyed it. It looked like a bomb had gone off, basically. And the Forest Service, in its evaluations of the northwest forest plan 20 years on, it noted that wildfire impacts to key wildlife habitat are 10 times that of timber harvests or really any other impact. Wildfire is really the number one threat that a lot of these sensitive, endangered, and threatened species are facing, particularly forest-dependent

species and particularly old forest-dependent species. If we are not managing areas that are designated for timber production or more of the front country, if we are not managing that, then areas that are set aside as reserves are going to be vulnerable from fire.

So we are not looking at management as a solution. It protects not only the active working forests, but it protects areas that we have set aside, such as Glacier. And the solutions that are in front of this Committee can really have a positive impact on those conservation efforts. Going back to the Cottonwood bill, so many of those projects have significant wildlife benefits like fish passage improvements and the like.

So what the opportunity here is a great win-win of improving wildlife conservation and supporting our local economies, and also preventing more catastrophic wildfire in the future.

Senator Barrasso. Ms. Crowder.

Ms. Crowder. Senator, tourism is Wyoming's number three industry. We have several of these reserve forests and wilderness areas and national parks that people enjoy visiting. We have several places throughout State that people love to go fish, they love to go hike, they love to get on the Snake River and raft. What we see from wildfires are concerns from our tourists, as well as our citizens, that they won't be able to do

those things that they really want to do.

We often see letters from people who have planned their once-in-a-lifetime trip to Yellowstone, Grand Teton National Park, the Bridger-Teton National Forest, and they find out that there are wildfires and they don't know if they should come to Wyoming or not; they don't know if they should cancel their trip. They are worried about their health; they are worried about their ability to do the activities that they have planned a lifetime for. And that is concerning. And we saw that play out with the Great American Eclipse. And we are not the only State that had these concerns.

The potential for people to come to Wyoming to watch the eclipse in its totality, what an amazing experience, really; and people planned for years for that. And what we saw was a concern and a real concern that wildfires would put a lot of smoke in the air and really block that view, and that that would have a major impact on our tourism industry not just for that day, but in the weeks surrounding it. And, luckily, that ended up not being the case, but there were fire bans throughout the State to make sure that that would not be the case.

It has also come to light in places like Jackson or Casper, where folks are concerned that wildfires really will ruin their industry, people who live and work in those places who maybe run a fishing business and a guide business or a rafting business.

And those folks have concerns that they won't be able to continue their livelihood in these areas if wildfires continue to be an issue and they stop people from coming to these great places that we love across our Nation.

Thank you.

Senator Barrasso. Well, I appreciate all of you being here. I thought it was excellent testimony; excellent give and take. We had about 10 members who had the chance to be here to ask questions. Some members may want to submit written questions, as well, so I would hope that you would respond to those quickly because the record will stay open for two weeks.

I want to thank each and every one of you for being here for this very important issue.

This hearing is adjourned. Thank you.

[Whereupon, at 11:45 a.m. the committee was adjourned.]