



# EL PASO COUNTY



## COLORADO

BOARD OF COUNTY COMMISSIONERS

**SALLIE CLARK**

**COMMISSIONER DISTRICT 3**

**Date:** November 5, 2013 2:30 p.m.

**To:** Senate Agriculture Committee, Subcommittee on Conservation, Forestry and Natural Resources

**Re:** Shortchanging Our Forests: How Tight Budgets and Management Decisions Can Increase the Risk of Wildfire

Dear Chairman Bennet and members of the committee:

**I am El Paso County Commissioner Sallie Clark representing District 3 in the Pikes Peak area of Colorado. I also represent National Association of Counties (NACo) as 2nd Vice President.** The Waldo Canyon Fire started June 23, 2012 in my commissioner district, along a popular U.S. Forest Service hiking trail just a few minutes west of Colorado Springs. Two citizens lost their lives, 346 families lost their homes and more than 18 Thousand acres of scorched earth was left behind.

**The Waldo Canyon Fire destroyed huge areas of vegetation and burned the soil so badly that it will no longer absorb water and has created devastating flash flooding.** We hope and pray each time we see a typical summer thundershower developing over the massive burn scar area that we will not have a repeat of the disastrous flash flooding, evacuations and fear that has ripped through the small town of Manitou Springs and communities along our major highway. Experts tell us that vegetation will be slow to return to the steep mountain slopes made up primarily of unstable decomposing granite and we will continue to face the threat of catastrophic flash flooding for decades to come. So far, more than 30 million dollars has been spent on combined recovery, restoration, flash flood mitigation, and protection of critical water systems, however, much more is needed. It is estimated that over 50 million dollars is a conservative estimate for additional combined agency funding.

**Our story is one that has been repeated many times throughout the west:**

- Cerro Grande, New Mexico in 2000 destroyed 400 homes and burned through parts of the Los Alamos National Laboratory- the U.S. General Accounting Office estimated damages at 1 Billion dollars.
- Colorado's Hayman Fire in 2002 scorched 180,000 acres of forest land destroyed 180 homes and 10 years later, flash flooding off the Hayman burn scar destroyed a mile long section of Highway 67.
- The Schultz Fire 2010 in Coconino County, Arizona...15,000 acres burned.... Loss, recovery and flood mitigation costs have topped 120 Million dollars.

**Wildfire risks can and must be mitigated.** Thousands of acres of dead or dying trees adjacent to urban neighborhoods are a recipe for the kind of disaster we experienced with the Waldo Canyon Fire. Now, as our community begins to recover in the aftermath of the fire, the burned and scarred mountainside continues to generate dangerous flash flooding. Lives have been lost, a major highway washed out, homes destroyed, critical utilities infrastructure lost, businesses closed and jobs eliminated. There were many lessons learned from

200 S CASCADE AVE., SUITE 100  
OFFICE: 719-520-6413  
WWW.ELPASOCO.COM



COLORADO SPRINGS, CO 80903-2208  
FAX: 719-520-6397  
SALLIECLARK@ELPASOCO.COM

this disaster, but one of the most painful is that beautiful public lands, not controlled by local government agencies, are great contributors to our quality of life, but can also pose a substantial threat to lives and property nearby. In a recent flash flood post-fire, another life was lost on our major highway to the mountains.

**Too many trees are too close together and are too close to homes, schools, parks and playgrounds.**

Many years before the Waldo Canyon Fire, a typical acre of land in the Pike National Forest was covered with more than a hundred trees. The experts say the topography, climate and elevation can reasonably be expected to support only about thirty. At a recent hearing on healthy forests in 2012, County Commissioner Dan Gibbs of Summit County, Colorado, representing the world famous ski areas of Breckenridge and Keystone testified. He is a certified wildland firefighter who has fought large blazes throughout the West. Commissioner Gibbs stated that the Mountain Pine Beetle epidemic which has been raging for years throughout the forests in Colorado and Wyoming has left his county with over 146,000 acres of dead or dying pine trees. He also stated that most of the Lodgepole Pine trees are dead and over half of all Pine trees are diseased and dying. Hundreds of thousands of dead trees currently surround mountain towns, cross major highways and threaten the headwaters regions of the Colorado, Platte, Arkansas and Rio Grande Rivers.

**The climate of the Western United States will continue to see cycles of ample precipitation and drought.**

Insects and disease will continue to take a toll on our forests but we have a responsibility to manage these issues and mitigate the risks. The Waldo Canyon Fire was a stark reminder of the need to be proactive in our efforts to protect our citizens, property, and resources. We understand that no single effort is perfect and we cannot end the threat of destructive wildfires. But it is important that we recognize and establish a framework for state, local and federal government agencies and the private sector, to work together to identify and manage our forests in a responsible way and to implement policies that provide the ability to get the job done. Appropriate forest mitigation recognizes the need to preserve our natural resources while protecting the health, welfare and safety of our citizens.

**Unprecedented collaboration and flood mitigation since the Fire –but too little before:** I am pleased to report that El Paso County, The City of Colorado Springs, the United States Forest Service, the Colorado Department of Transportation, the Army Corps of Engineers, the Natural Resources Conservation Service, FEMA and other government related and non-profit volunteer agencies have come together since the Waldo Canyon Fire and continue to meet regularly to seek funding sources, identify and construct flash flood mitigation projects that are making an important difference. This unprecedented cooperation between many groups and jurisdictions is a model for the effectiveness of collaboration between federal, state and local agencies. This highly effective collaboration should be incorporated into all new Healthy Forest legislation to insure that those who know the community best have a voice in setting the policies and procedures that will help to reduce the risk that wildfires raging on public lands will race into city neighborhoods where loss of life and property is almost certain. It is also important to recognize that fire suppression is looked upon as an emergency in terms of funding and does not diminish the ability of efforts by agencies to provide continued healthy forest fire mitigation efforts.

**The Board of El Paso County Commissioners unanimously supports proactive measures to lessen the likelihood of future deadly and destructive wildfires like Waldo Canyon and support the results of a 2007 Congressional Budget Office study indicates that every dollar invested in healthy forest and wildfire mitigation will save more than five dollars in future disaster losses.** In the same report, CBO concluded that fire mitigation projects have one of the highest returns on investment out of all the different FEMA mitigation categories. We understand that fire mitigation projects, despite the fact that they will pay for themselves many times over, are rarely funded by FEMA. The number is getting larger every day, so I can't tell you what the total cost will be to El Paso County and its citizens as a result of our recent wildfires, but I can say with absolute

certainty that pre-fire mitigation in Pike National Forest would have been an excellent return on investment.

**In conclusion, I want to stress the need for more investment in mitigation and the importance of having the Forest Service working together with local officials to make the most of that investment.** Fires and devastating and destructive flash floods have no respect for private property lines, city, county, state and federal boundaries or critical public safety and utilities infrastructure or potential loss of life. So, I am encouraged to see the introduction of bipartisan legislation that would give local officials the flexibility needed to do fire mitigation in a manner that will ensure the greatest return on our investment. We need to mitigate the greatest threats for fires and floods, whether they are on public lands or private property and we need the flexibility to partner and collaborate with multiple agencies, jurisdictions and land owners to get the job done. And, local input is a key to understanding the needs of communities.

**Finally, if you are not already aware of it, the Waldo Canyon Fire of 2012 was at that time, the most destructive wildfire in Colorado history. Just a year later, in June of this year, we experienced in El Paso County, the Black Forest Fire which is now the most destructive wildfire in Colorado history.** In the Black Forest Fire, two more of our citizens lost their lives and this time more than 500 structures were lost. Combined recovery and suppression costs for both fires are estimated in the billions. The terrain in Black Forest is different from Waldo Canyon, so we haven't seen the catastrophic flooding that we have witnessed in the Waldo Canyon. But the value of pre-fire mitigation is prominently on display throughout the Black Forest burn area. Firefighters were able to successfully defend areas where trees were healthy and property owners had taken proper mitigation steps but whole neighborhoods where there had been little or no mitigation were wiped out.

National Association of Counties (NACo) has been actively involved in the development of the National Cohesive Wildland Fire Management Strategy ("Cohesive Strategy"). The three goals are to:

1. **Restore and Maintain Landscapes:** Landscapes across all jurisdictions are resilient to fire-related disturbances in accordance with management objectives.
2. **Create Fire-Adapted Communities:** Human populations and infrastructure can withstand a wildfire without loss of life and property.
3. **Respond to Wildfire:** All jurisdictions participate in making and implementing safe, effective, efficient risk-based wildfire management decisions.

**One thing is clear, we can no longer afford to have one disastrous wildfire right after another.** Healthy forests and pre-mitigation efforts are the only answer. Thank you for the opportunity to speak to you today and I am happy to answer any questions you may have related to wildfire prevention, recovery and post-fire flooding.



**Sallie Clark**  
**El Paso County Commissioner District 3**  
**2nd Vice President, National Association of Counties**