

Chairman Crapo, Senator Lincoln and distinguished subcommittee members, it is an honor to appear before you today to present this testimony on the implementation of the Healthy Forests Restoration Act. My name is Robert Cope, and I am the Chair of the Board of Commissioners from Lemhi County, in central Idaho. I am also honored to serve on the Board of Directors of the Idaho Association of Counties (IAC) and as Second Vice President of the National Association of Counties (NACo) Western Interstate Region (WIR).

As far back as the mid-eighties, county officials were among the few lonely voices urging active management and warning of the catastrophic consequences of non-management. NACo, spurred by officials from the public lands counties of the West, began calling on the federal government to take action to address the looming forest health crisis. Sadly, it took several years of devastating fires to begin to turn public opinion around. Now, at last, there is a broad national consensus for active management, laying the groundwork for the President's Healthy Forests Initiative and ultimately for the enactment last year of the Healthy Forests Restoration Act.

NACo is proud of the role it has played in bringing us to this point, but we believe that we have a long way to go to fulfill the promise of the Act. As the implementation of the Initiative continues and implementation of the Act gets underway, we respectfully submit four general observations and recommendations for your consideration:

First, and foremost, NACo urges the agencies to be aggressive. This year's combined Department of the Interior and USDA Forest Service target of treating 2,660,000 acres for fuels is a good start, but we believe that the scale of the problem on the ground calls for even more intervention. At this rate we will be barely able to slow the problem's rate of growth, much less begin to reverse the course. A quick look at the proposed plan of vegetation and fuel treatments on the Salmon-Challis National Forest in my part of Idaho, for example, suggests that the program could be much more ambitious. More high priority acreage could be treated if there was more willingness to use all the tools available, including the new categorical exclusions and well-designed timber sales.

Second, intensive collaboration with local communities must be stepped up. In order to take advantage of the Act's full range of tools, the agencies must be working in collaboration with communities, by and through their state and local governments. To this end, NACo, along with the National Association of State Foresters, the Society of American Foresters and the Communities Committee has developed a handbook to help local leaders to develop their own Community Wildfire Protection Plans. A copy of the handbook will be submitted for the record as an attachment to my written testimony. NACo hopes that the handbook will be useful for communities which have not already developed such plans to think through the issues, and take advantage of the opportunities available under the Act. At the same time, federal land managers should also reach out to local governments and encourage them to come to the table and help build consensus around a shared strategy for their local forest.

Creating partnerships with the private sector to implement treatments that maximize environmental benefits of forest ecosystem health, diversity and sustainability is integral to effective local-level collaboration. It should not be seen as simply government-to-government collaboration. It should also be private sector-driven and fully integrate long-term community

and economic development planning. Such partnerships enhance the local tax base, provide living-wage jobs and build critical community infrastructure. We must abandon the irrational notion that restoration work can only be done by "government". It not only can - it must - pay for itself.

Third, more must be done to educate the general public on the need for ongoing management to ensure the long-term health of our forests. While the hard-won consensus appears to be holding fairly steady, there are habits of thought - and even aesthetic preferences - that reinforce bad management. Many people, for instance, prefer the look of dense stands of trees that are actually unnatural and overstocked with hazardous fuels. The agencies, as well as all their collaborating partners, must devote a significant portion of their education and public information resources to spread the word about the importance of active management for the long-term health of the forests. The venerable, and perhaps all-too effective, suppression message of Smokey Bear, for instance, could be updated to communicate the imperative of restoring fire-adapted ecosystems to health, through active management.

Finally, Congress must continue to fund the programs of the National Fire Plan, including those aimed at implementing the "Comprehensive Ten Year Strategy to Reduce Wildland Fire Risks to the Communities and the Environment" developed and endorsed by NACo, along with the Western Governors' Association, the agencies and other stakeholders. The programs which provide assistance to communities to develop their capacity to partner effectively with state and federal agencies are particularly important. We are encouraged, for instance, by the \$5 million increase provided in the FY 2005 Interior Appropriation bill for the State Fire Assistance program to assist communities in developing Community Wildfire Protection Plans. On the other hand, we regret having to continue to plead with Congress to fully meet its obligations under the Payment in Lieu of Taxes (PILT) program. The public lands counties depend on PILT in order to have the basic capacity to come to the table and participate meaningfully in all the collaborative processes contemplated by the Ten Year Strategy, the President's Initiative and the Act.

For our part, NACo urges eligible counties to use funds received under Title III of the Secure Rural Schools and Community Self-Determination Act of 2000 to develop Community Wildfire Protection Plans and then to use Title II money to leverage other programmatic funds for hazardous fuel treatments. By pooling federal, state and local government resources as well as those from the private sector, progress can be made at an appropriate pace and scale.

Mr. Chairman, in conclusion, NACo is encouraged by the new direction being taken, and we urge you to ensure that we stay the course.