

Good morning Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee. My name is James Earl Kenamer. I am the Senior Vice President for Conservation Programs for the National Wild Turkey Federation and reside in Edgefield, South Carolina. I am a professional wildlife biologist with expertise in the management of wild turkeys and other wildlife on both public and private lands in the United States, Canada, and Mexico. I have worked for the National Wild Turkey Federation since 1980 and for the decade before that as an associate professor for wildlife biology at Auburn University.

The National Wild Turkey Federation was founded in 1973 and is dedicated to the conservation of the wild turkey and the preservation of the hunting tradition. The NWTF now has over 500,000 members in 2,100 chapters nationwide and in 8 foreign countries. Our dedicated volunteers work hand in hand with state and federal wildlife professionals to complete conservation projects to benefit the wild turkey and other wildlife.

We appreciate the opportunity to address you all on what we believe may be the most important legislation affecting our National Forests in many years. On October 29 of last year, seventeen conservation organizations representing millions of America's sportsmen submitted a letter to Senator Frist and Senator Daschle in support of the Healthy Forest Restoration Act. On December 3, 2003, the President signed the Act into law. This law:

- ? Strengthens public participation in developing high priority forest health projects;
- ? Allows Federal land management agencies to use the best science available to actively manage land under their protection, while reducing the complexity of environmental analysis;
- ? Encourages early public participation in project planning and provides a more effective appeals process; and
- ? Issues clear guidance for court action against forest health projects.

The Administration and a bipartisan majority in Congress supported the legislation and were joined by a variety of environmental conservation groups, including the National Wild Turkey Federation.

The National Wild Turkey Federation supports the implementation of the Healthy Forest Restoration Act. We are committed to working with the US Forest Service to wisely manage our National Forests and have been committed for decades.

We signed our first Memorandum of Understanding with the US Forest Service in 1987, and since then we have worked with the USFS to accomplish millions of dollars of cost-share projects to benefit wildlife habitat on our National Forests. As recently as this spring, we completed two stewardship contracts on the Francis Marion and Sumter National Forests to reduce the threat of wildland fire and improve wildlife habitat.

The threat of catastrophic wildfire can destroy what we have worked years to achieve. One example is in the Coronado National Forest in Arizona. Since the late 1980's we have worked with the US Forest Service, Arizona Game and Fish Department, US Department of Agriculture, US Fish and Wildlife Service and the Mexican Government to restore the Gould's subspecies of the wild turkey to these rugged southern mountains. A catastrophic wildfire could undo all this work and set us back decades.

It is estimated that over 190 million acres of Federal forests and rangelands in the lower 48 states are currently at risk of large scale insect and disease epidemics and catastrophic fire. The unnaturally high risk of catastrophic wildfires and large-scale insect and disease outbreaks place rural communities at risk and seriously threaten watersheds and fish and wildlife habitats.

The poor condition of our forests is a direct result of the lack of active forest management over the last 20 years, combined with the exclusion of fire over the last 100 years. We believe that the Healthy Forest Restoration Act will allow us to improve the health of our forests, enhance wildlife habitat, and protect rural communities.

The National Forest Management Act provides new and better tools to the Forest Service to put prescribed fire back into the landscape, thus restoring fire dependent ecosystems and fire adapted habitats. Prescribed fires also safeguard rural communities from the ravages of catastrophic wildfire and improve the overall health of the forest. The Act also provides tools to identify insect pests and to stop infestations before they spread throughout an entire forest. Insects such as the southern pine beetle and the red oak borer would not have spread so fast nor be so widespread had the Forest Service been allowed to maintain the health of our forests over the last several decades.

To maintain a complete array of wildlife species, we must maintain a complete array of habitats and protect those habitats from the ravages of disease and wildfire. One habitat that is lacking in many of our National Forests is early successional habitat, which is characterized by young trees. Early successional habitat can be created through timber harvests and thinnings. These thinnings and harvests also create a break in the continuous fuel found on the forests so that in the event of a wildfire, the firefighters have a chance to stop it when it hits these man made breaks in the canopy.

We must remember that people have managed the land with fire for thousands of years. Many of these fire-adapted landscapes require periodic fire to maintain a healthy forest and the best wildlife habitat. Prescribed fire opens up the underbrush, allows sunlight to penetrate to the forest floor and creates the early successional habitats that are so rare on many of our forests today. Even the catastrophic fires we saw in Yellowstone in 1988, improved wildlife habitat for grazers such as elk, but this was a dangerous and expensive way to create wildlife habitat.

Fire is a natural component of many of this nation's forests. However, before we can safely reintroduce fire back into the landscape, mechanical treatments in the form of thins and timber harvests will have to be conducted. Such thinnings reduce the fuel loads on forests that have become too thick with trees and brush over the last 100 years.

We must remember that the trees in these forests are not going to live forever. Under the current conditions in our forests, we have only two choices. We can either harvest the trees and follow the harvests with prescribed fire to actually improve forest health and habitat quality. Or we can sit by and watch as unnatural infestations of insect pests kill the trees and degrade the habitat. In many habitats, these infestations will then be followed by catastrophic wildfires like the ones we have all watched destroy forests, homes, communities and human lives in recent

years.

In closing, we must remember that by keeping fire out of our forests for these past 100 years we have created a problem that we cannot fix in a few weeks or even a few years. There is no quick fix.

The Healthy Forest Restoration Act offers the beginning of the solution. This bill can ONLY succeed with proper implementation and adequate funding. I urge the Committee to work for full funding so we can reclaim our forests and over time restore the forest systems that have supported our country for hundreds of years. Thank you.