

"Mr. Chairman, thank you for holding this important hearing today and allowing me to make a statement regarding the need for an effective Congressional response to the problem of catastrophic wildfire throughout the Western United States. As we speak, Arizona forest land is burning. The largest wildfire, the Aspen fire, has now consumed 25,000 acres, 345 homes and other buildings, engaged 1,200 firefighters and is only 25% contained. Under current conditions, I fear the devastating toll on people's lives and on natural and economic resources will mount. What's more, the fire season has just begun and the potential for other fires is extremely high.

"Last year's catastrophic wildfires claimed the lives of 23 firefighters, burned 7.2 million acres, and cost \$1.6 billion to fight. Beyond this, the costs of contaminated municipal water supplies, ecosystem destruction, wildlife losses including endangered species and critical habitat, economic losses for timber and tourism, and other widespread damages have not yet been quantified.

"After last year's fire season, many members of Congress made a diligent effort to come up with solutions to this complex problem. Despite their commitment, the debate ended in an impasse and now wildfires are once again destroying lives and property, and other irreplaceable resources. We have not taken the measures necessary to protect communities and our public forest lands from fires that now rage out of control.

"The Healthy Forests bill that is the focus of today's hearing will soon bring the debate to the Senate floor. Mr. Chairman, I am concerned that there still remains substantial disagreement over some of the provisions of this bill and that we will not achieve a successful result.

"Yet, Congress must pass legislation that will provide essential protection to communities and public forest lands from wildfires that we know will occur in the future. Therefore, Mr. Chairman, I want to work with you and other members to identify the areas of common agreement between the stakeholders involved to provide a framework for legislation that will provide effective protection for our communities, restore the health of our forest lands, and rebuild the trust between the federal management agencies and the public.

"There are significant areas of agreement reflected in the bill before the Committee today, other legislative proposals, and efforts such as the Western Governors Association's 10-year Comprehensive Strategy.

"Key among these are, first, that the protection of human life and property are an urgent priority and that the environmental review and appeals process may be modified or waived to expedite these essential actions.

"Second, that there should be a collaborative process to allow those affected at the local level to determine project priorities and management outcomes.

"Third, that the current state of our public forests is the result of 90 years of fire suppression and changing land use, and it will take time and care to bring the appropriate scientific

management and financial resources to bear to produce healthy forests on a large scale.

"Finally, and most important, that the federal government must make the significant financial commitment necessary to accomplish these objectives. We cannot rely entirely on the forest industry to undertake the enormous task of thinning and restoring our forests to achieve the desired public outcomes. On the other hand, economic opportunities should be encouraged and supported, where appropriate.

"It is our responsibility to acknowledge the actual cost of community protection and forest health restoration, by providing funds to the responsible federal agencies so that they can fulfill their vital functions and secure the confidence and trust of the American public.

"Thank you, Mr. Chairman, for providing me this opportunity to speak on this urgent matter."