

Good Morning, Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee. My name is Tom Partin and I am the President of the American Forest Resource Council (AFRC). The American Forest Resource Council, based in Portland, Oregon, represents nearly 90 wood products manufacturers and forest landowners located in twelve states west of the Great Lakes. Our mission is to promote balanced and sustained management of our nation's public and private forests including a consistent and predictable flow of raw materials from all forests. Many of our members depend on the federal forests for a portion of the raw material they need to operate. Furthermore, many of our members own forest land that is near or adjacent to federal forests. Unfortunately, insects, disease and wildfires do not recognize property boundaries. Many of our members are located in small rural communities throughout the west, and these wood products facilities provide the economic backbone that makes these rural communities thrive. These rural communities are only as healthy as the forest products industry located in them, and the forests surrounding them. Unfortunately, during the past several decades both the forests and forest products industry have suffered due to lack of adequate forest management, and that has negatively impacted many of our forest dependent rural communities.

The topic of today's hearing is the implementation of the Healthy Forests Restoration Act of 2003, which was signed into law on December 3, 2003. HFRA is the most comprehensive forestry legislation enacted in the last 30 years, and we believe it has the necessary authorities to address a portion of the extreme forest health crisis now occurring throughout our nation's forests. AFRC worked very hard with members of congress to help get this legislation passed because we believe it is the answer to finally getting some needed treatment on the forested landscape that has been decimated by fires and insects and disease. The Bitterroot Fires in Montana, the Rodeo-Chediski fire in Arizona, the Biscuit Fire in Oregon, and the San Bernardino fires in Southern California point out that this is a national crisis not isolated to one area.

For decades federal land managers have been struggling with how to manage the forests while complying with complicated National Environmental Policy Act regulations, a judicial process that favors intervention rather than project implementation, drought conditions that have taken their toll on the overcrowded forests, and analysis paralysis that favors planning over action. The result of these conflicting constraints and interests has put our nation's public and private forest lands in serious jeopardy to destruction by wildfire, insects, disease, and blowdown. We believe that HFRA did a good job of identifying the current forest health problems and providing a vision on how to deal with the obstacles facing our forest managers.

As I mentioned, our forest health problems have been evolving over several decades, and it is only reasonable to assume that it is going to take a significant amount of time to remedy the crisis facing our forests. The Forest Service and BLM are playing a game of catch-up, and HFRA allows the agencies to focus on the highest priority areas first, primarily around the wildland urban interface, areas sensitive to endangered species, or where windthrow, blowdown, or other insects and disease pose a threat to forest or rangeland health. The members of AFRC realize that this process of reclaiming our forests and restoring their health is a long term undertaking, but we believe it is the only option that satisfies the needs of the forests, the needs of the public, and provides the clean water, clean air, and wildlife we have

come to expect from our nation's forests.

The 2004 fire season is just getting underway, and Forest Service Chief, Dale Bosworth has assessed it as being as severe as the 2002 fire season during which over 7 million forested acres nationwide burned. This all too familiar trend of one bad fire season after another exemplifies why the membership of AFRC so strongly supports the HFRA legislation, and the work that needs to be done to fireproof our forests. With this grim fire forecast, AFRC believes in, and has promoted, the rapid implementation of HFRA using some of the new authorities granted to the Forest Service and BLM. Further, as a follow-up to this important task, AFRC will be keenly watching the agencies aggressiveness, effectiveness and willingness to implement HFRA projects. In particular AFRC is closely following:

1. The number of acres that will be treated in fuels reduction projects in this fiscal year and in 2005.
2. How the agencies are engaging in and supporting community-based fuels reduction projects in the Wildland Urban Interface.
3. If the agencies are utilizing the new expedited environmental analysis processes which requires that only two alternatives be discussed.
4. If expedited judicial review procedures are being followed and implemented properly including the use of the balance of harms provision.
5. How aggressively the agencies use the new stewardship and categorical exclusion authorities and opportunities.
6. How the agencies implement the biomass provisions in the bill, and accomplish the removal of fuels from the forests to facilities that can utilize them.
7. How successful the implementation of the proposed 1000 acre study areas to review new treatments for insect infestations and disease has been.

The Healthy Forests Restoration Act only targets 20 million acres of the 190 million acres identified at risk from wildfire, insects and disease. The Forest Service and BLM are now only treating about two million acres per year in forest health efforts. This effort must intensify, but it must be done properly. Projects that are hurried, and don't have the proper planning and oversight will only end up in the court system and will never yield results on the ground. AFRC believes that to avoid implementation problems a thorough understanding and commitment to the Healthy Forests Restoration Act by agency personnel is a key component of future successes.

Broad support for HFRA has come from the general public and particularly communities at risk to wildfire. AFRC and our members are working with a number of these communities in the preparation of community-based wildfire protection plans. These plans are developed on the local scale and treat local problems. For the most part these plans have broad community support, are less likely to be appealed and have the ability to treat a larger landscape. The community-based wildfire protection fire plans are essential for HFRA to be effective.

I would like to switch gears at this point and talk about what has happened rather than what should happen regarding the implementation of HFRA since its signing six short months ago.

The success of any new program or authority is driven to a large degree by the attitude of those

people doing the implementation. It has been the observation of the AFRC staff that a new and welcomed "can-do" attitude is taking place within the agencies when it comes to implementation of HFRA and accomplishing fuels reduction and forest health projects. I believe this attitude may have been molded when all of the Forest Supervisors signed a pledge to Chief of the Forest Service Dale Bosworth earlier this year that they would help implement HFRA. It should also be noted that the Forest Service and BLM are still operating under the 2004 budget which has not been increased since HFRA implementation, and any changes to existing programs and projects have been done with existing funding.

Some new HFRA related efforts currently under way on most forests include:

- ? Identifying at-risk watersheds that most need fuels treatments
- ? Construction of new fire condition class maps for location of priority projects
- ? Identification of high risk Wildland Urban Interface areas
- ? Developing up to date Insect and Disease overlays
- ? The use of Title 3 Funds to assist in developing a community-based fire plan
- ? Reviewing and providing technical support in developing Community-based fire plans

In addition to the passage of the Healthy Forests Restoration Act, some additional new authorities have been given to the Forest Service and BLM that will assist in the implementation of HFRA. I believe that a discussion of how effective and useful these new authorities have been should be part of the HFRA discussion as well.

I mentioned earlier several of the large fires that have occurred during the past three summers in which millions of acres of forestland were burned. This spring on several of the salvage projects in Oregon, Regional Forester Linda Goodman issued an emergency determination to salvage the timber and capture the value of the wood before it completely deteriorated. The removal of this wood not only adds needed sawlog volume to sawmills starved for wood, but it also removes tons of fiber from the forest that otherwise would fall over and create an additional risk of fire. We strongly support the Forest Service for making the emergency determinations request, and we suggest that it be used more broadly.

Additionally we are seeing the agencies doing a better job of more rapidly performing NEPA work on timber stands at risk. Two examples of these expedited projects include the fuels treatment and rehabilitation of the Togo fire which burned last August on the Colville National Forest. The fire was controlled in September of 2003, and by mid-December fuels reduction and rehabilitation efforts were underway. The Davis project on the Deschutes National Forest would rehabilitate a large area that was burned last July and is scheduled for implementation this August. Both of these projects exemplify a strong desire to quickly treat forest health problems, and the members of AFRC appreciate the efforts.

CONCLUSION

Mr. Chairman, the Healthy Restoration Act of 2003 has given the Forest Service and BLM the needed tools and authorities to treat our forests at risk to wildfire, insects and disease. This authority is not a panacea or a cure-all for our unhealthy forests nor is it intended to take the place of the regular green sale timber program. It is intended to provide an expedited approach

for treating twenty million acres of federal forest that are the most at risk.

The effective implementation of these new authorities will require an immediate buy-in by agency staff, some creative thinking on how and where to best implement projects, and cooperation from at-risk communities in the development of community based fire plans. We are also hopeful that the FY'05 budgets for the Forest Service and BLM will include adequate funding to make this an effective program.

To date, we are pleased with the new attitude of the agencies, the new focus on planning projects in areas most at-risk, and how the agencies are using other authorities in conjunction with HFRA to accomplish wildfire protection and rehabilitation. For this effort AFRC gives our forest management agencies a B+. We are also pleased with how at-risk communities have started developing their own community-based fire plans using the template developed by a coalition of organizations earlier this year. Decades of forest fuels and biomass accumulation dictates the need for rapid forest health treatments, and with the prediction of another extreme fire year, it is important that the agencies deliver on their promise to treat 20 million acres sooner than later for the sake of our forests, our communities and the forest products industry.

Mr. Chairman, I would like to thank you for the leadership you have shown on this important issue. This concludes my prepared remarks and I would be glad to answer any questions at this time.