

Good morning Chairman Crapo and Ranking Member Lincoln, members of the subcommittee. Thank you for the opportunity and the honor of testifying before you this morning.

My name is Alan Thompson. I am a County Commissioner from Ravalli County in western Montana. I am also proud to represent the Montana Association of Counties on the Public Lands Steering Committee of the National Association of Counties and it is on NACo's behalf that I appear before you today.

Mr. Chairman, Ravalli County is situated in western Montana with your State of Idaho on its western border. The Bitterroot National Forest encompasses seventy-five percent of the total land mass of the county and the Bitterroot-Selway Wilderness area extends into the County. The Bitterroot National Forest contains 1,577,883 acres and in the current forest plan 389,820 acres are designated as suitable for timber harvest. The area designated as suitable is thirty percent of the total land in the forest and the wilderness acreage is 743,082 acres or forty-seven percent of the total. Data compiled by the Forest Service shows approximately 91 million board feet of saw timber growing per year in the suitable lands, with an average mortality of 14 million board feet per year.

The historical economy of the valley was mainly agriculture and natural resource extraction from the forest. Many sawmills provided excellent paying jobs for local citizens as well as the removal of accumulating biomass from the forest. The decade of the 60's showed a vibrant economy in the valley with an average harvest on the suitable lands of 58.3 million board feet per year. Although logging practices at the time were not as gentle on the land as they could or should have been, nevertheless the yield from the forest was sustainable and seventy percent of the forest remained untouched.

Within the last twenty years Federal land management policies have changed and there has been a dramatic shift in the landscape throughout forested public lands as well as the impact those policies have had on our local economy. The valley has no saw mills at this time and the good paying jobs are a distant memory.

In the Bitterroot Forest the average harvest for the decade of the nineties was 7.1 million board feet per year on the suitable lands or about 50 million board feet per year less than the 60's. The last three years of the nineties saw a total harvest of 23.2 million board feet on suitable lands that had the potential to produce 272 million board feet of usable saw logs. Consequently in just those three years there was an accumulation of approximately 249 million board feet of merchandisable timber that was left on suitable lands. Since mortality is double the amount of timber being harvested we have a tremendous accumulation of biomass on the forest. The forest was being stressed at this time because of the ongoing drought and problems with Douglas Fir and Pine Bark Beetles leading to greater mortality than was normal.

The summer of 2000 dawned hot and dry in Montana and the Bitterroot Valley. On July 31st a series of dry thunderstorms swept across the southern portion of Ravalli County setting off 78 fires. Fire personnel reacted immediately and were able to control all but less than a dozen of the fires. Because of the conditions that were on the forest, those fires ultimately created a fire storm that consumed 307,000 acres of National Forest Land and 49,000 acres of State and

private lands. 70 homes and 170 other structures were destroyed in Ravalli County. Over 1000 homes had to be evacuated and a total of 1700 homes were threatened. Hundreds of fences were destroyed along with farm implements and thousands of bales of freshly stacked hay. Local resources were quickly overwhelmed and volunteer organizations sprang up overnight to assist not only displaced people but also displaced livestock and family pets. Ravalli County Fairgrounds and barns were opened to local farmers and ranchers as places of refuge. Since the fairgrounds were being used the fair was canceled and the youth that had 4-H projects were not able to show their livestock or have the animals bid on by local businesses that support our youth. Some Valley schools were delayed in opening for the school year and preseason athletics were put on hold until the air was fit to breathe. Ravalli County assessed a 2 mill levy on our citizens to help pay for the fire suppression effort and then had to renew it the following year to offset clean-up on both private and Federal lands. Mental health officials in the valley had no way to handle the huge influx of people seeking solutions to their problems and acts of violence escalated as tempers became shorter.

When the fires finally were out and costs were tabulated the numbers were staggering. Fire suppression costs exceeded \$54 million for the Bitterroot's 2000 fire season. Along with the millions in costs to the Federal Lands many more millions were lost on private residences. Ravalli County spent \$300,000 to rebuild road infrastructure that had been destroyed either by the fires or by heavy equipment that had to use the roads to fight the fires. The Forest Service did reimburse the County \$36,000 or slightly more than 10% of what we spent fixing roads. The total cost in suffering and disruption of lives can never be calculated and even now many people in our valley have recurring problems relating to the fires of 2000. While 55,000 acres burned in the interface we have 124,000 that did not burn and these areas are choked with unnatural high fuel loads. As of today, July 27, 2006, we have a half dozen fires burning in the valley and evacuation orders have been signed to protect our citizens. The hope is that we will not have to go through another year like 2000, but with high fuel loads, drought, diseased trees and hot dry temperatures we think that scenario is once again possible.

Approximately \$31.5 million has been invested in the burned area recovery work on the National Forest System lands to date. An additional \$25.9 million was originally allocated to the Bitterroot in 2002 and 2003 for recovery work but was quickly withdrawn, to pay for higher priority wildfire suppression efforts across the country. In order to bring the Bitterroot back to the way it was before the fires of 2000 another \$22 million is needed to complete the recovery.

Much of the cost of recovery could have been recovered by prompt action to harvest the burned trees before they lost their commercial value. The Burned Area Record of Decision identified the need to remove timber to reduce fuels on 40,805 acres of burned, forested lands. Immediately several environmental organizations filed a lawsuit, saying this would irrevocably harm the Bitterroot Forest by building roads and doing salvage logging. Eventually there was a negotiated settlement between several environmental groups, local logging contractors who had bid on the work and the Forest Service that authorized treatment on 14,700 acres. Of the 1.2 Billion board feet of timber that was burned we were able to harvest 36 million board feet or 4% of the total. After the settlement was reached and work began other environmental groups protested by sitting in trees that were to be cut and in one incident stopping a logging truck on a

bridge in Missoula and by attaching ropes to the load and hanging from the bridge with large banners. These events once again taxed our local law enforcement agencies as they reacted to the protests. The irony that exists in Ravalli County is that we lead the State of Montana in manufacture of log homes that could have used the burned trees and would have bid high prices for them as they were close at hand. One local log home company, Rocky Mountain Log Homes, currently is buying logs for their operation 800 miles north of the Canadian border in Alberta while we continue to accumulate biomass, fight lawsuits and endanger our citizens.

Both Federal and State lands were burned in the fires of 2000 and the response was very different. Salvage was immediately done on the state school lands and they were replanted that fall and the following spring. If anyone would so desire they could view both the State lands and the National Forest lands that lay side by side and were burned in the same fires and could determine which course of action better served the recovery process. The State lands provided dollars for education, work for the local loggers, pulp for sawmills, stimulated the economy and by replanting in a timely manner, guaranteed future supply of wood to meet the growing demands of our economy. Much of the Federal lands remain as it was after the fires. What has taken place there is trees that are slowly rotting and becoming fuel for future fires. In some areas there has been blow down of the trees that have lost their root system and by toppling over have exposed soils that have silted in many of our fisheries. Without proactive recovery such as replanting both trees and grasses, some of this land has experienced mudslides that have closed both County roads and Highway 93 which is the only road providing access into and out of Ravalli County.

What can be done to rectify the problems on forests that have suffered catastrophic events such as Ravalli County? Focus needs to be on restoring ecosystems (Federal, State and private lands) and communities in both the short and long term. There was a cross boundary approach that was first utilized in the Bitterroot and it was critical to the recovery that took place. Approximately \$4 million of Forest Service State and Private Forestry Funds were invested, most frequently through matching grant programs, in private and community restoration needs. This work included fence replacement, emergency rehabilitation and slope and stream bank stabilization, reseeding and reforestation, and support to expand uses for wood products coming off burned areas and "green" fuel treatment projects. The Federal Government's support to the Bitterroot's private landowners' and communities' post-fire needs was unique and made a significant difference in my constituents' abilities to recover from the devastating affect of the fires.

There are significant problems with the way recovery takes place at this time. The number one problem is the time it takes to move through the process. There needs to be some policy that allows the federal agencies to expedite their processes when responding to emergencies. Each day the burned or downed timber loses value and increases the cost that will have to be borne by the taxpayers. We believe the streamlined approach provided by HR 4200 has great promise to improve response time and we urge you to consider adopting some such measures in a Senate version of the bill.

Secondly in the negotiated settlement after the fire, elected officials were barred from having the opportunity to represent their constituents. The average citizen needs to have a place at the table

through their elected representatives. At the moment, neither the environmental groups nor industry represent the vast majority of citizens in the affected area. Many environmental groups maintain they speak for the average citizen, but the reality is they speak for a small vocal segment of our society and for the most part their stand on this issue is not in accordance with the wishes of the local population. As county officials, we are elected by and accountable to our communities which should give us the legal standing to speak on their behalf.

Finally, I believe there should be a national policy that requires the posting of a bond when a lawsuit is filed. If the belief is so strong that something wrong has been done then there should be the will to back the suit with more than just the cost of filing. Many organizations file the lawsuits knowing that if any part of the judgment is ruled in their favor then all costs are born by the Government. Surely some costs need to be assessed to each party and not just the Government.

Thank you for listening and for your ongoing efforts.