



COW CREEK BAND OF UMPQUA TRIBE OF INDIANS GOVERNMENT OFFICES

2371 NE STEPHENS STREET, SUITE 100

ROSEBURG, OR 97470-1399

Phone: 541-672-9405

Fax: 541-673-0432

Testimony from Tim Vredenburg, Director of Forest Management, Cow Creek Band of Umpqua Tribe of Indians

Chair Marshall, Ranking Member Bennet, and members of the Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to speak today. My name is Tim Vredenburg, and I serve as the Director of Forest Management for the Cow Creek Band of Umpqua Tribe of Indians located in Roseburg Oregon. I am here to voice the Tribe's support for the Fix Our Forest Act. We believe that this legislation provides a dramatic step toward improving forest management and addressing the ever-growing wildfire crisis.

I want to begin by providing some background on the Tribe. The Cow Creek Umpqua is a small Tribe of just over 2,000 members. In 2018 the Western Oregon Tribal Fairness Act partially restored a small portion of the Cow Creek Umpqua Reservation. This is just a small piece of the Tribe's 6.2 million acre interest area, made up largely of ancestral areas of the Upper Rogue and Umpqua River Basins in southwestern Oregon. These forest lands are nested in a checkerboard of Private, State, and Federal lands (Forest Services and Bureau of Land Management Ownership).

Over the last several decades the Cow Creek Umpqua Tribe has witnessed the devastating and lasting effects of catastrophic wildfire. Just in the last ten years, approximately 1.1 million acres of forest have been consumed by fire within their ancestral territory.

These fires have decimated Tribal lands and resources, driven Tribal members from their homes, and significantly impacted the health and welfare of the membership due to harmful wildfire smoke. This is why the Cow Creek Umpqua Tribe has taken a committed approach to management both on and off Tribal lands.

The Cow Creek Umpqua Tribe currently has co-stewardship agreements in place with the Rogue Siskiyou National Forest, Umpqua National Forest, and Roseburg and Medford Districts of the Bureau of Land Management.

In addition, the Cow Creek Umpqua Tribe has served a pivotal role in establishing and leading the Wildfire Risk Reduction Partnership, a collaborative initiative that brings together Douglas County, the State of Oregon (Department of Forestry), the Bureau of Land Management, the Forest Service, private industry, and many other organizations. This partnership was formed in direct response to the escalating wildfire crisis, recognizing that no single entity can effectively tackle this challenge alone.

Through this initiative, the Cow Creek Umpqua Tribe has helped foster greater coordination and shared responsibility among federal, state, Tribal, and private stakeholders. By integrating Indigenous knowledge with modern science, the partnership is working to implement landscape-scale wildfire mitigation efforts, including hazardous fuels reduction, prescribed burning, and proactive forest restoration treatments.

A key focus of the Wildfire Risk Reduction Partnership is streamlining bureaucratic hurdles that have historically slowed down critical wildfire prevention work. The Cow Creek Umpqua Tribe has actively advocated for policy

reforms and legislative solutions that allow for faster, more effective management, ensuring that fire-prone landscapes are treated before the next disaster strikes. We are quite literally in a race to save our forest.

Additionally, this partnership is protecting communities, cultural resources, and ecosystems by prioritizing projects that reduce wildfire risk in high-hazard areas. Leadership by the Cow Creek Umpqua in this effort underscores a deep commitment to long-term sustainability and resilience, demonstrating that with the right tools, we can break the cycle of catastrophic wildfires and restore balance to our forests. For too long, federal policies have restricted management within the Tribe's ancestral area and across the federal forest estate, allowing our forests to become dangerously overgrown and unhealthy. Catastrophic wildfires have destroyed ecosystems, destabilized above ground carbon, choked our communities with smoke, and eroded the lands Cow Creek Umpqua people have stewarded for generations. We cannot continue to address this crisis with tools that are too small for the scale of the problem.

In the forests of Southwest Oregon, historical conditions supported 35 to 50 trees per acre, interspersed with open meadows due to indigenous forest management. Today, many areas have over 1,500 trees per acre, creating an unprecedented fuel load. Fires that once burned in a beneficial, low-intensity way now explode into catastrophic infernos, burning so hot that it can completely sterilize the ground, prohibiting new growth and cause erosion.

Millions of acres across the West have burned, and millions more are at risk. Yet, our response has been far too small. We cannot address this crisis with limited tools. We need legislative solutions that allow forest management treatments at a scale that makes a significant difference.

The Fix Our Forest Act goes a long way in providing several opportunities and tools that are needed if we are to be successful in curbing this devastating and life-threatening trend.

One of the biggest challenges we face is the lengthy bureaucratic review process, which has limited our ability to be flexible and nimble in addressing the growing wildfire crisis. To overcome this, we need adaptable tools such as large-scale categorical exclusions and streamlined environmental procedures. Our goal is to implement forest management and restoration projects at a landscape scale of at least 10,000 acres. We have hundreds of thousands of acres to treat. We urge the Senate to pass this important legislation that helps ensure Tribal lands receive attention and the necessary resources for wildfire prevention and mitigation. We are your partners. If asked and activated, Tribes can vastly improve and grow the impact of our federal land management agencies.

Here are a few other key components that the Cow Creek Band of Umpqua Tribe of Indians and other Tribes strongly support:

The Act acknowledges the significance of Tribal lands in wildfire management. This inclusion ensures that Tribal lands receive attention and resources for wildfire prevention and mitigation.

The Act creates meaningful Tribal representation in discussions and decision making ensuring that Tribal knowledge and perspectives are integrated into national wildfire management strategies.

It emphasizes shared stewardship, allowing the Secretaries of Agriculture and the Interior to enter into agreements with states and federally-recognized American Indian Tribes. This collaborative approach empowers tribes to actively participate in managing and protecting their ancestral lands from catastrophic wildfire risks.

The Act acknowledges cultural burning as a method of hazardous fuels management, as it has been learned and implemented by each individual Tribe. This recognition validates Indigenous approaches to conservation and management, that tribes have employed since time immemorial. It is a focus that I'd suggest may warrant even additional strengthening.

The Act creates modifications to the Good Neighbor Authority allowing revenue from timber sales, under Good Neighbor Agreements, to be retained and used by Tribal governments. This provision enables tribes to reinvest proceeds into further restoration and management activities on Tribal and Federal land and helps sustain programs such as those already being implemented by the Cow Creek Umpqua today.

The Act promotes locally led restoration efforts and supports Tribal sovereignty by enabling Tribes to lead restoration projects, ensuring that they align with cultural values and ecological knowledge.

Beyond large-scale treatments, we also need regulatory certainty in forest management planning. The Cottonwood decision has created extraordinary uncertainty for our land managers and existing forest plans. When a new listed species or significant new information arises, entire forest plan can be exposed to litigation, halting essential work. This provides zero conservation value to our forests, listed and endangered species, communities, or Tribes. The Fix Our Forest Act addresses it and could also present an opportunity to refine the language to better address the barriers that lead to woefully out-of-date land management plans.

Without a fix, agencies will be caught in an endless cycle of re-analysis instead of taking action on the ground. We can still do project level ESA consultation and protect our wildlife through thoughtful management; however we need durable forest management plans that provide stability and allow work to continue.

Notably, the Cow Creek Band of Umpqua Tribe of Indians is one of the only Tribes currently participating in the Indian Trust Asset Management Demonstration Project. We have found that by following Tribal environmental review procedures, we can respond far more quickly to these emergency issues, while meeting or exceeding all federal environmental requirements and standards. This stands in stark contrast to the federal policies, processes, and procedures.

We need to fundamentally rethink the way we're managing our federal lands.

The impact of mismanagement is clear in the Cow Creek Umpqua homelands and throughout the West. Of the areas that have burned in the last 30 years, well over half were within unmanaged reserve networks. Fires are returning to the same places two, three, even four times, destroying native ecosystems and replacing them with invasive species.

This is not just about forests — it is about clean water, healthy air, wildlife, and livable communities. Each fire that burns leaves behind degraded soils, damaged fish habitats, and hazardous smoke that fills the lungs of our children. We must stop waiting for disaster to strike before acting. The emergency is already here.

I urge each of you, as members of this committee and Congress, to continue approaching this catastrophic wildfire crisis with innovative, outside-the-box thinking. This is a bipartisan issue that requires strong collaboration, coordination, and communication for us to be successful.

This Committee has the power to provide the tools needed to confront this crisis head-on. That means:

- Expanding categorical exclusions to allow for projects up to 10,000 acres so we can work at a meaningful scale.

- Good Neighbor Authority for Tribes to reinvest in management.
- Fixing Cottonwood so that management plans remain durable and effective – we prefer a permanent fix, but a secondary alternative would be extending the current fix for another five years.
- Cutting bureaucratic red tape that prevents timely action.

These are not small changes—they are essential reforms that will allow practitioners like myself to address the wildfire crisis before it is too late. I think we can all agree that the pace of the U.S. Forest Service sometimes appears to be like watching an actual tree grow. Emergency fire-shed management is very important. But let's make sure that we have a clear, accurate definition of what constitutes the highest priority areas and ensure that Tribes are able to inform those designations. Doing so will ensure that limited resources are targeted strategically where they can best protect at-risk communities and resources.

I encourage the committee to move this package forward in the most bipartisan way possible. Unnecessary controversy surrounding forest management work has become the kryptonite of forest health recovery efforts. We must find ways to educate ourselves and others to garner the greatest support for our work. We must try to bring more people into the fold and develop language with broad support to ensure success.

My state's delegation has personally visited the destruction caused by wildfire on the Cow Creek Umpqua Reservation lands. I know that they stand ready to engage constructively in this process.

For too long, we have waited for wildfires to serve as our wake-up call. But we are far past the point of alarm. If we do not act now, we will lose not just our forests, but the natural and cultural heritage they sustain.

The wildfire crisis is not a distant threat. It is here, and it is growing more severe every year. The choice before us is clear: continue down the path of inaction and watch our lands, waters, and communities suffer, or take bold, decisive steps to implement large-scale solutions that will make a real difference.

Tribes have long been stewards of these lands, managing forests with proven techniques that promote resilience and sustainability. By fully empowering Tribes, streamlining bureaucratic hurdles, and expanding the tools available for forest management, we can break free from the cycle of catastrophic fires and move toward a future where our landscapes are healthier and more resilient, our communities are safer, and our resources are better managed and protected.

I urge this Committee to pass meaningful legislation that empowers those of us on the ground to act. We must move beyond short-term fixes and embrace real, large-scale solutions.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak today. I'd be happy to respond to any questions from members of the committee.