

TESTIMONY OF GOV. DIRK KEMPTHORNE

[as delivered]

Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee
Subcommittee on Forests and Public Lands Management
Salmon City Hall
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I believe, Mr. Chairman, that any discussion of the 2000 fire season must begin with an acknowledgement of the heroic efforts of our firefighters. I visited them many times this summer. Mr. Chairman, as you indicated, this morning we said farewell to some of the 582 Marines and sailors who have been out on the fire lines. I thought it was wonderful to see how many signs in Salmon say, "Thank you Marines," and the courtesies which many members of this community extended to the firefighters. Whether they were from the Army or Marine Corps, the National Guard, the Forest Service, the BLM, our smoke jumpers, hotshot crews, NIFC, the state forest officials, local volunteer firefighters, the pilots of the helicopters and airplanes, law enforcement – everybody has absolutely done an outstanding job.

The camaraderie and morale was high. And the cooperation and coordination was exceptional. This is how government ought to work. This is how government ought to work, and we should use it as a model of as we now look at how how government should work in terms of future forest health policy.

It's appropriate that this oversight hearing is being held here in Salmon, Idaho. It's the site of Idaho's worst single fire -- the Clear Creek Fire that burned more than 216,000 acres. It's a place where the smoke from the fires was so thick that people had to use their headlights to drive through town at noon. 86,000 tons of smoke pollution statewide because of the fires. And it's a town where tourism – a mainstay of the local economy – took a pounding. Roughly 60 percent of its tourism was lost.

I submit to you that Salmon has been one of the hardest-hit towns in the Western United States because of the fires.

And I want to commend the people of Salmon. Mayor Davis, the county commissioners, all of the local officials here. Because they have truly done yeoman's work. All of our local officials throughout the state of Idaho have provided exemplary leadership through these difficult times. But thank goodness for the Western spirit. Because of that spirit, and in spite of everything we will succeed because we will persevere.

This has been the worst forest fire season in Idaho's recorded history. To give you an idea of what Idaho has experienced this year, more than 1.2 million acres went up in flames. Of that amount, it is estimated conservatively that the fires consumed 1 billion board feet of timber. That is equivalent that would allow us to build 100,000 single-family homes.

To give you some idea about fuel loads in the forests: for every acre of state forested land, there are 20 acres of federally owned forested lands. A 20 to one ratio. And yet we sell and remove more board feet of timber off the state land than all the federal land combined.

Right here, at the site of the Clear Creek Fire, you can see what kind of a dramatic difference can be made when you address the fuel loads. This morning, as we flew over the area of the fire, you see a green oasis right in the middle. It is the result of a prescribed burn which took place just a few years ago. So as the intensity of the flames approached, they went around. The fuel load was not there.

I heard about fuel loads continually from firefighters who were putting their lives on the line to fight these fires. Until we address the issue of fuel loads, we will continue to see these dramatic and devastating fires.

In addition to the hundreds of thousands of charred and devastated acres, are a series of other issues we need to address, dealing with the loss of critical habitat and it's impact on species, including the endangered species which have been referenced. The loss of grazing opportunities on allotments because they were burned. Determining how to help a community so choked by smoke that it threatened the opening of school – and do we charge that to federal smoke or state smoke? Helping a rancher who has lost 600 head of cattle through one lightning strike. Yes, he may qualify for low-interest loans, but he's been wiped out. How do we deal with that?

To officials in the east trying to understand the magnitude and the complexity of the issues that we must now deal with, I have suggested to them to mentally picture the aftermath of a hurricane on the East coast, and to apply that picture to the west. We have just suffered a terrific hurricane of fire.

You look at all of this, and it's very clear: any justification for continuing the status quo forest policy just went up in flames. Here in Salmon. Across the State of Idaho. And throughout the West.

Clearly, it is time for a new policy. One that's based upon scientific principles, one that focuses on forest health, as my colleagues have indicated. And I don't put that in terms of logging quotas, but instead on what is necessary to reduce the fuel load. There are a number of tools that can be used to accomplish this – selective thinning, prescribed burns, and commercial cuts, to cite a few. But the primary goal must be forest health – something on which all of us involved in this debate should be able to agree.

I also believe that a new policy must have the states working as full partners with the federal government – not only for the recovery efforts in the short term, but in the long-term efforts at forest health and wildfire risk reduction.

Significantly, we must reduce the command and control from Washington, D.C. and get the decision-making down to where it needs to be – on the ground and in the hands of the land managers – our forest supervisors and our state foresters.

Last Monday in Salt Lake City, I joined a bipartisan group of governors at a meeting with Secretary Babbitt and Secretary Glickman to talk about developing this new policy. And out of that meeting came an agreement to move forward. This past week, the governors have worked with federal land management officials to develop a collaborative framework for this new policy.

And as a result of this work, the Western Governors' Association has submitted language to the House and Senate Appropriations Committee members that would establish this framework. Mr. Chairman, I would ask that this language and the accompanying cover letter be made a part of this record.

We hope that this can be made a part of the appropriations bill that includes the President's request for additional funds to respond to the wildfires. And when members resume their work on this bill next week, we hope that they will adopt this bipartisan proposal.

And on that subject, let me take this opportunity to personally commend Senator Craig for his efforts, and other Appropriators that have not only embraced the \$1.6 billion proposal by the President, but have used that as a floor and have added additional funds to that, which, Mr. Chairman, I believe will be absolutely necessary so I commend you for that leadership.

That, Mr. Chairman, is a brief summary of what has happened this summer here in Idaho. We hope we can take the lessons we've learned from these devastating fires and develop new policies that will mean greater prevention and less remediation in the coming years.

But as you gentlemen can agree with me, when you have people like the people of Salmon, like the people in Idaho, we have a western perspective and we believe that we can do things right if we're allowed to do that. That sort of partnership can be the result of this fire season.

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