

Remarks Prepared for Delivery
By The Honorable Gale Norton
Secretary of the Interior
Western Governors' Association
Forest Summit
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Exactly one year ago yesterday, the Rodeo fire started in the White Mountains of Arizona.

A reporter for the *Arizona Republic* described the first sighting of the fire as a thin veil of white-gray smoke curled on itself in a half-dozen twisted knots and wafting northeast with the late afternoon breeze.

In the time it took firefighter Gary Thompson to call the Bureau of Indian Affairs dispatch office in Whiteriver, brilliant orange flames punched through the gray smoke.

Two firefighting crews headed for the Red Dust Rodeo grounds in Cibecue. More crews had to be called in, but wouldn't arrive for three hours.

The newspaper reporter wrote:

"In that short time, the Rodeo fire exploded, gobbling tinder and trees at an astonishing pace. By midnight, the docile plume of knotted gray smoke Thompson spotted would devour 300 acres."

"The wonder now isn't that the fire grew so quickly, but that it didn't grow even faster."

"Humidity was staggeringly low. Temperatures were dangerously high. The air around Cibecue was poised to suck up flames and spew them hundreds of yards into a lush undergrowth that experts say was thicker and drier than almost any time in the past century."

At one point the fire was a 6-mile wall of flames, 400 feet high generating 2,000-degree temperatures. You know the rest of the story of the Rodeo fire. It merged with the Chediski fire created a 50-mile wall of flame and eventually burned more than 450,000 acres. Thousands were evacuated and more than 400 structures were destroyed.

This horrific scene was repeated across the West last year. The fire season was among the worst in the past four decades burning an area the size of New Jersey and Rhode Island put together.

Three states—Oregon, Colorado and Arizona registered the worst fires in their history.

This year, the fire season has just begun in several states that are at substantial risk of wildland fire.

The mid -June report showed very high to extreme fire indices in Arizona, Colorado, Nevada, New Mexico, Texas, Western Montana and Utah. The Missoula area was added on Monday. As Gov. Napolitano noted, fires are already burning in Arizona.

You have designated this section of your program as: “ACCEPTING THE CHALLENGE AND GETTING RESULTS.”

The challenge is clear from the Rodeo-Chediski fire and all the others that burned last year. Interior and Agriculture have accepted the challenge. President Bush himself is very personally interested in this issue. In many ways the Western Governors’ Association was a catalyst.

We reached consensus with the WGA and other partners in May of 2002 on a 10-year Comprehensive Strategy Implementation Plan. We have taken it very seriously. Within five weeks of signing the Agreement, we completed detailed work plans to address the 23 implementation tasks identified in the plan.

Overall, the 10-year plan set four goals. The first was Improving Fire Prevention and Suppression.

We have worked on a bipartisan basis to increase the resources available for fire fighting and fuels treatment work. The result: Interior and Agriculture dollars available in 2003 to fight fires have increased 55 percent since 2000.

These dollars mean more firefighters, helicopters, airtankers and heavy equipment to fight fires. This has allowed us to continue to do an outstanding job of fire fighting, controlling more than 99 percent of the wildfires on initial attack.

The plan’s other goals were reducing hazardous fuels, restoring fire-adapted ecosystems and promoting community assistance.

Those three goals are embodied in the President’s Healthy Forest Initiative. Last month the President recalled his visit to the Squires Peak Fire in Oregon. He introduced the Washington D.C. press corps to the fact that thinned forests survive fires.

President Bush said:

“On one side of a dirt road, where small trees and underbrush had been removed before the fire rolled through, the forest was green and alive. On the other side of the road, where a similar thinning project had been stalled by lawsuits, the landscape was charred and the trees looked like matchsticks. The contrast between these two sides of the forest was startling, and it was tragic.”

The President said active forest management could have saved both areas; and he encouraged Congress to move legislation on the Healthy Forests Initiative.

The House of Representatives has passed a measure by Rep. Scott McInnis of Colorado, and the Senate will have a hearing on a similar bill by Sen. Domenici next Thursday.

When I took office, the lessons learned from 2000 were just beginning to be implemented. There was no method, no plan for making fuels treatment work. There were no priorities, no data base to keep track of the work.

That has changed. We have issued a series of directives and we now have a system for setting priorities. We are beginning to see results in high priority areas.

Some 62 percent of the dollars spent are going into the Wildland Urban Interface areas. The projects chosen are fully collaborative with our State partners.

Interior will meet or exceed budget targets this year. As of June 12th, we have already treated 800,000 acres. That is 70,000 more acres than were treated in all of 2001. We are already on track to treat more than a million acres in fiscal year 2004.

But the federal forests have an estimated 190 million acres that are in the overgrown condition described earlier in the Rodeo fire story.

We have implemented a number of improvements and are looking at more to help facilitate the Healthy Forest Initiative.

Without changes, we obviously can't make a dent in the untreated acres.

We are in the field now with 15 model environmental assessment projects. These projects are testing guidance set up by the Council on Environmental Quality to streamline the NEPA process to allow more efficient planning for fuels reduction. The goal was to follow the process in the National Environmental Policy Act that instructs us to be thorough but brief in our analysis. It reinforces NEPA and stresses the required components of environmental analysis.

Interior has ten of these model projects in Western states. One is already out for public comment and six of the ten will be out for public comment by the end of the month. These projects show a range of ecosystems—Pinyon/juniper and salt cedars from 15- 20 feet tall.

Also under the National Environmental Policy Act there is a “categorical exclusion” that we would like to use for fuels reduction projects. Categorical exclusions have been used for decades on a broad range of land management activities. It simply means there is a category of action that in the past consistently has had findings of no significant environmental impact.

We should not have to re-create the wheel for every similar project. This should save time and allow professional foresters to exercise their judgment. They need to be able to respond to insect and disease infestations.

We also have issued guidance under the Endangered Species Act for managers to expedite consultation under Section 7 by putting similar projects together in a batch, collaborating early on with agencies on project design and improving dispute resolution.

The Fish and Wildlife Service and the National Marine Fisheries Service have directed their field offices to consider the balance between short-term adverse impacts and significant long-term gains during Section 7 consultation on hazardous fuels treatment. For example, restoring fire-adapted ecosystems ultimately will benefit many listed and sensitive species and their habitat.

Finally under the ESA we are proposing a regulation on an alternative consultation process under Section 7 for forest management projects within the scope of the National Fire Plan. The alternative process will eliminate the need to conduct informal consultation on actions determined “not likely to adversely affect” any listed species or designated critical habitat.

One of the greatest tools we have open to us now—thanks to action by the Congress—is Stewardship Contracting. Both the Bureau of Land Management and the Forest Service have this authority through the year 2013. It allows contracts with private or public entities to cleanup lands in exchange for the value of timber or other wood products removed from public lands.

We need to emphasize public/private partnerships that are self-sustaining and can endure for decades.

This brings me to the crux of my message today: The importance of biomass in stewardship contracting.

I am announcing today that the Interior, Agriculture and Energy Departments have signed a memorandum of understanding on Woody Biomass Utilization.

Its purpose is to focus efforts by the Departments and their partners. We know that using woody biomass by-products can be an effective restoration and hazardous fuel reduction tool that delivers economic and environmental benefits and efficiencies.

Biomass provides a net reduction in greenhouse gases. Dr. Richard Bain, of the Energy Department’s National Renewable Energy Lab says biomass gives us a 34 percent gain in carbon sequestration.

The President’s Healthy Forests Initiative, the National Fire Plan and the 10-year implementation plan all call for biomass and wood fiber use. The recent House-passed bill has a title on biomass that promotes developing and expanding markets.

The use of biomass also meets an objective in the President's National Energy Policy. Both Interior and Energy have been working for more than a year on renewables on public lands. This is just one aspect of that work.

The problem has been that markets for biomass and small wood are sporadic and marginally economic, in most western states. Stewardship contracting for the next ten years presents the opportunity for a steady supply, new markets and product uses. This can include Indian Tribal projects and promote jobs on reservations.

Thinning for biomass allows for wildlife habitat improvement with wildlife biologists designing the projects. These projects go on all the time on private land and are profitable for the environment, energy and the landowner. A million acres have been thinned in the last 25 years for biomass use and 800,000 of those acres were private.

Many of you saw yesterday on our field trip some of the new technology that is available to harvest woody products and still protect the mass of the forest.

I'm going to take you one step further into the future of technology in the forest.

How many of you remember the all terrain Armored Transport or AT-AT walker from the first Star Wars movie?

It was a four-legged transport and combat vehicle used exclusively by the Imperial ground forces. It was ungainly but resembled a gigantic beast and it was intimidating. *[Walking machine clip.]*

Now take a look at this clip. This machine may be the future of thinning wood. It treads lightly on the forest leaving virtually no trail behind it.

This equipment from Plustech is being developed in Finland. It is a 6-legged machine that fells, de-limbs, crosscuts and piles. It is designed to adapt to the forest environment by going backwards, forwards, sideways, diagonally and up and down. It can step over obstacles and leaves a minimum impact on the land. It even tests and shifts its weight in order to do minimum soil compaction.

This only goes to show that truth is often stranger than fiction and that the technology of the future will allay many of the concerns about the methods for achieving forest health. The degree of cooperation between the state and federal governments on forest health issues is virtually unprecedented. I want to thank Gov. Martz and the Western Governors' Association for organizing this conference and for keeping the nation focused on this important issue.

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