



GOVERNOR DIRK KEMPTHORNE

Remarks to the Western Governors' Association

Forest Health Summit

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(as prepared)

It is great to be here in Big Sky country and let me just say to Governor Martz that you have been a very gracious host...thank you for making us all feel at home...thank you for your dedication and leadership here in Montana, and your continuing leadership and partnership on issues that affect all of the Western States.

And when we talk about issues that matter most to westerners, this fire summit hits close to home for every one of us here. That's because when you think about places like Idaho, Montana, Arizona, Colorado...or any state in the West...you think about the great outdoors...the majestic mountains, the wild rivers, the blue skies and crystal clear water. Our way of life is inextricably linked to the land, to the flora and fauna. It is a part of who we are and it is at the heart of the western way of life.

That's why there are such strong feelings when it comes to land management issues and why there is such a diversity of thought when it comes to what's best for our forests.

I find it ironic that 200 years ago when Lewis and Clark made their historic and difficult journey across the continent, they encountered a number Native American tribes whom they relied upon for their survival. Among their challenges was a significant language barrier...they did not speak the same language. And yet, they overcame that language barrier and found a way to communicate. Here we are, 200 years later. We do not have a language barrier, but too many times, we don't communicate. That's why these summits are so essential.

This summit provides an opportunity for policy makers, forest managers, and concerned citizens to come together to discuss our common goals – and we do have much in common.

We share a common desire to preserve the land so that the beauty and serenity of our forests will be there for generations to come.

We share a will to protect the habitats of native species and to be good stewards of the natural resources from which we all benefit. By being good stewards, not only will

we sustain the health of the ecosystem, but we will ensure that there is a natural environment that will be enjoyed by Americans for years to come.

It's interesting to note the U.S. Forest Service is approaching its 100th Anniversary in 2005. And I don't think it's a coincidence that as America broke new ground in conservation and forest management, we were also reaching new heights with aviation.

It was also a hundred years ago that the Wright brothers took to flight for the first time with a 12 horsepower gas fired engine. Their first flight lasted only 12 seconds and carried them a distance of 120 feet...less than the wingspan of a modern-day 747.

Just last week, NASA launched another mission to Mars. We've come a long way in a hundred years.

But whether it's forest science or rocket science, America has demonstrated time and again that we have the ability to succeed in all of our endeavors.

We saw evidence of that today, during our field trip as we experienced portions of the magnificent forests here in Montana.

But let me tell you that you haven't really experienced the beauty of the intermountain west until you've seen it from the seat of a Harley.

I rode here on the back of my Harley Roadking Classic – 450 miles, two-thirds of which were along beautiful streams with whitewater rapids with names such as the Clearwater, Lochsa or here the Blackfoot. The view of interspersing forests and meadows. One meadow in particular at Lolo pass was where Lewis and Clark and the Corps of Discovery camped on two different occasions, approximately 200 years ago.

You can hear the birds and smell the scents of the wild outdoors. Would I have made that ride if it were along a six or eight lane freeway? Our forests and waters are precious.

The sad truth is that if I had tried to make that same ride during July of 2000, it would have been an entirely different experience.

Instead of blue skies, green forests, and the open road, I would have confronted smoke filled skies, a charred and burning landscape, and a big sign across the road to Missoula that read "Road Closed due to fires."

None of us can soon forget the 2000 fire season...it was one of the worst on record. More than 8 million acres burned nationwide and more than 1.7 million acres, federal and non-federal, burned in Idaho alone.

That's enough timber to build 100,000 single-family homes.

The vast majority those acres were on federal land. And to understand the significance of that, consider this: the federal lands that lie within the State of Idaho are equivalent to the entire land masses of Maryland, Massachusetts, New Jersey, Connecticut, Delaware, Vermont, New Hampshire and Rhode Island.

Idaho has more than 63% of its land administered by a variety of federal agencies. Of the 50 states, Idaho has the largest portion of its land (almost 39%) in the National Forest System administered by the US Forest Service. The BLM is responsible for almost another 22% of the land in Idaho.

So you can see why we are so interested in developing cooperative land management practices that will not only improve forest health, but protect human interests as well.

We've seen how the forest health policies of the past have worked...quite simply: they haven't. While we've battled gridlock and endless lawsuits in the courtrooms, our forests have gone up in flames and the overall health of the ecosystem has declined.

Last year, we also saw significant fires across the country...nearly 87,000 wildfires burned more than 7 million acres of federal and non-federal land nationally.

The fact is that in some cases, the forests are so dense that fires burn at extreme temperatures and the ground is scorched and left sterile.

In other cases, after the trees and the natural vegetation are gone, the first and only re-growth is a monoculture of noxious weeds. These unwanted invasive species put a stranglehold on the native species, choking them out and altering the entire ecosystem.

That isn't forest health.

Large portions of our forests have reached a critical state and are overgrown, unnaturally dense, diseased and dying. As forests become more dense, competition between trees increases for essential moisture and nutrients, thus stressing the trees and making them vulnerable to insects. In Idaho, we know that our national forests are significantly denser when compared to non-federal timberlands, with about 35 percent more trees per acre.

Let me give you an example. Elk City, Idaho sits among some of the most rugged and beautiful scenery in the west. Out of 100,000 acres surrounding Elk City, 80% of the trees are infested by pine beetles. There are more than a million dead or dying trees within five miles of Main Street.

Elk City is at extreme risk. When you also factor in that the area is key habitat for a variety of fish and wildlife species, including threatened and endangered species, such as steelhead and bull trout, then the situation becomes even more critical. Remember this, because I'll come back to this point.

Over the last three years, on the federal side alone, more than \$6.7 billion has been allocated by Congress to fight wildfires. This includes suppression, preparedness, rehabilitation, restoration, and operations. But that doesn't account for the cost of the thousands of structures that burned, the millions of lives who were affected, and the countless plants and animals that were destroyed.

Consider the fires last year in Colorado. Over the course of two months 140 subdivisions were threatened, forcing the evacuation of 81,000 people.

This isn't fiction...this is a modern day tragedy.

The impacts of some catastrophic forest fires can last for generations. There can be major affects and destruction of fish and wildlife. The blackened and scorched earth can remain scarred for decades. And countless rivers and streams are polluted by the massive amounts of sediment that can result from severe erosion events that often occurs the following spring.

But perhaps the greatest tragedy is when, after the fact...after the fires are out...after the damage is assessed, and after the call to action has been issued, too many times we let sound science and practical land management give ground to partisan politics and finger pointing.

There are those who paint forest health issues in terms of the economy versus the environment, pro-logging versus pro-forest. Unfortunately, too much of our time and money is spent in vain trying to quell the rhetoric and resolve conflicts during the appeals process or in the courtroom.

It is time to change the tone from a culture of conflict to one of cooperation. We must shift the focus from courtroom to the forests...and that's what we're doing.

I commend President Bush for his leadership and his western perspective on this issue and I applaud the efforts of Secretary Veneman, Secretary Norton and Forest Service Chief, Dale Bosworth for working to protect our forests and our citizens from catastrophic wildfires.

Two years ago at the WGA Annual Meeting in Coeur d'Alene, Secretary Veneman and Secretary Norton and Jim Connaughton of CEQ joined the Western Governors, the National Association of State Foresters, the National Association of Counties, and the Intertribal Timber Council to endorse the 10-Year Comprehensive Strategy.

Last May, in Idaho City, I was again joined by the President's team, Secretary Norton, Secretary Veneman, and Jim Connaughton, as well as Governor Kitzhaber, Governor Martz, Governor Geringer to sign the Implementation Plan.

Since then, I'm proud to say that Idaho was the first state in the nation to have its own plan. The "Idaho Plan" continues the philosophy that the states be full partners in land management planning.

We are now working side by side with local collaborative groups and counties, to actively manage our forest resources. An important part of our State's efforts is the leadership of the Director of the Idaho Department of Lands, Winston Wiggins and our State Fire Plan coordinator, Peggy Polichio. They are doing a great job and now 33 of our 44 counties have submitted their local fire preparedness plans.

And I'm proud that our counties are working closely with private industry in Idaho. About a third of our counties have been assisted by Northwest Management out of Moscow, Idaho in preparing their county plans. Private industry is stepping up and working closely with our state and local government with a shared goal —healthier forests.

And since funding has become available through the National Fire Plan, we have been aggressive at putting the money to work on the ground. We have put \$8 million to work on non-federal lands and we're seeing results.

Kootenai County is using a \$1.9 million dollar grant for a program called FireSmart...which reduces hazardous fuels around two thousands homes. In the first month of the program, over 50 homeowners living in the forested mountains east of Coeur d'Alene had their property "cleaned and greened."

And for this free service, provided as a result of the National Fire Plan funding, these homeowners have agreed to keep their property "fire smart" for the next ten years.

And even on federal lands, we're seeing some progress. To date, since the national fire plan was implemented, we've seen about 3.5 million acres treated on all federal land. But when you consider that there are nearly 190 million acres of that federal land that are still threatened, you can see that we have a lot of work to do.

I'd like to highlight one effort by the Shoshone-Bannock Tribes because it also shows another dimension of this discussion. The 2000 Rankin Creek Fire devastated portions of the riparian areas in the Salmon-Challis National Forest. Vegetation along the north and south forks of Rankin Creek were severely burned, jeopardizing the stability of the stream channel and the associated water quality.

Members of the Shoshone-Bannock Tribes spent days restoring the habitat and re-vegetating about 30-acres along Rankin Creek. What's so significant about 30-acres of restored forestland? Rankin Creek also happens to be a tributary of the Yankee Fork of the Salmon River...it is also considered key habitat for Snake River Chinook salmon and steelhead.

And let me go back to Elk City on the Nez Perce National Forest. There you have an historic rural community, that is dependent upon the natural resources and the abundant fish and wildlife...you have key habitat for threatened and endangered species... there's only one road that takes you to Elk City and it's the only way to get out of town and all of it is surrounded by dead and dying trees that are just tinder waiting to be ignited.

A single lightning strike, an inattentive camper, an errant spark from a vehicle, or the unimaginable...an act of arson...no matter how it might happen, it's a recipe for disaster.

I extend a request to my friends and colleagues from the Administration and to the U.S. Forest Service...let's take care of Elk City and all of the Elk Cities across America. Elk City can be a great example of success if we take action, or by our inaction, it could become another tragic story in the saga of failed forest management. Let's use the new tools we have established.

So you can see that forest health is about much more than trees. These ecosystems are incredibly complex and for better or worse, mankind is a part of them. And while at any one time we might be focused on one aspect, we have to embrace a holistic approach to land management and species conservation.

Just two weeks ago, Governor Martz, Governor Kulongoski, Governor Locke and I met to discuss issues relating to the Pacific Northwest salmon and energy. The Endangered Species Act is now in its 30th year and our approach to land management has changed in that time to also include managing the land for the benefit of endangered species.

We crossed state borders and party lines to find common ground on a regional approach to recovering salmon and steelhead while managing the critical natural resources of the Columbia River system.

Despite the ruling by a Federal Judge, we are not going to abandon our successful efforts to recover salmon and steelhead because of a technicality in the law. Putting the Federal Biological Opinion on hold for a year does nothing to improve habitat and off-site mitigation and ultimately, it is not fair to the species. We have forwarded our recommendations to the President and we look forward to continuing our successful efforts on salmon recovery in the Pacific Northwest. Our approach is one of cooperation and we've seen that when we focus on what works, we can make real progress

That's what the President and the Congress hope to do through with the Healthy Forest Initiative and the Healthy Forests Restoration Act. With the administrative rule changes and the legislation currently pending before Congress, we can see a path forward.

I believe that over the course of the next few years, we will be able to reduce the intensity and scope of catastrophic wildfires. We will make our communities in the wildland-urban interface safer and we will make it safer for our firefighters who put their lives on the line battling these wildfires. Last year, we lost 21 brave firefighters who were on the front lines...as we discuss the mechanisms for making our forests healthy; let us also work to make them safer.

Although we cannot legislate an end to forest fires, nor can we make our forests “fireproof,” we can do a better job of protecting our people, our property, our forests and our fish and wildlife.

I have total confidence in the Chief of the Forest Service and it has nothing to do with the fact that we both graduated from the University of Idaho...Dale Bosworth brings a practical, common sense approach in Washington when it comes to managing our forests.

Dale knows, just as all of you know, that active management of our forests is the best way to preserve this legacy for future generations.

Every American has the right to see and experience the great beauty of our national forests and it is up to us to develop policies and take actions that allow them to do so.

That was the vision of President Teddy Roosevelt and the first Chief of the Forest Service Gifford Pinchot nearly 100 years ago when they established the Forest Service. Just as the Wright Brothers took mankind to new heights in the airplane, Teddy Roosevelt led America to new heights in conservation and stewardship of our national forests. He wanted to preserve these resources for generations to come. President Bush shares that same vision.

If that vision is to be a reality, as it has been for this generation, then we must move forward with the full cooperation of all of the partners...the federal government, the states, the Tribes, local government and our citizens.

Since the implementation of the National Plan, we’ve already seen good results, but we can do even more. And, we’re facing another fire season after yet another year of drought. We cannot let up. We must stay the course and continue the pattern of cooperation and collaboration that we’ve begun.

I thank all of you for participating in this summit. We’re here to listen to one another and I look forward to receiving the recommendations from the respective panels tomorrow.