



WRITTEN STATEMENT FOR THE RECORD

**THE HONORABLE SKIP BRANDT
COMMISSIONER
IDAHO COUNTY, IDAHO**

ON BEHALF OF THE NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF COUNTIES

**HEARING TITLED, *"A REVIEW OF TITLE VIII: FORESTRY STAKEHOLDER PERSPECTIVES"*
BEFORE THE U.S. HOUSE AGRICULTURE COMMITTEE'S SUBCOMMITTEE ON FORESTRY**

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**Testimony of the Honorable Skip Brandt
Commissioner, Idaho County, Idaho**

Chair La Malfa, Ranking Member Salinas, and distinguished members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today. I look forward to discussing the county role in public lands management and sharing recommendations for how the 2023 Farm Bill can strengthen the partnership between counties and our federal partners in the successful management of our public lands. We appreciate the opportunity to work toward our shared goal of promoting stewardship practices that can support both healthier forests and more dynamic communities across rural America.

My name is Skip Brandt. I am a county commissioner in Idaho County, Idaho, a role I've held since I was first elected in 2007. In my role as Commissioner, I serve as the Idaho representative to the National Association of Counties' (NACo) Western Interstate Region Board of Directors and also serve on NACo's Public Lands Steering Committee. NACo is the only national organization that represents all 3,069 counties, parishes and boroughs in the United States, serving nearly 40,000 county elected officials and 3.6 million county employees. Founded in 1935, NACo assists county governments in pursuing excellence in public service to produce healthy, vibrant, safe and resilient communities across the country.

I am a lifelong resident of Idaho County, born in the county seat of Grangeville and raised in the town of Kooskia. In addition to my role as Commissioner, I've also served as a City Councilmember, Mayor, and a three-term Idaho State Senator. Up until two years ago, I owned and operated a local building supply store. I care deeply about my community, and I want to see it thrive through the promotion of a revitalized timber industry, greater recreation opportunities on public lands, healthy forests, and clean sources of water for our residents and visitors. Unfortunately, Idaho County and counties like it across America face numerous challenges stemming from our public lands that have negatively impacted the health of our environment and the livelihoods of our residents.

With a total area of roughly 8,500 square miles, Idaho County is the largest county in the state and the only county that spans the entire Idaho panhandle, sharing borders with both Oregon and Montana. Grangeville is approximately 220 miles north of our state capital, Boise. With a population of just over 17,000, Idaho County is also distinctly rural in character. Like much of rural Idaho, Idaho County experiences higher rates of poverty relative to the rest of the state. The county's median household income is about \$47,000 – almost \$16,000 lower than the state average – while Idaho County's unemployment rate of 4.9 percent is two percentage points higher than the state average.

Many of the challenges facing Idaho County, as well as many potential opportunities, are rooted in our public lands. Idaho County contains over 4,400,000 acres – almost 7,000 square miles – of federal land within its boundaries, larger than the entire areas of Connecticut and Rhode Island combined. No county in the country outside Alaska has as much land under federal management. Roughly half of this land – 2,200,000 acres – is locked up behind wilderness designations that restrict its use. Most of Idaho County's public lands belong to the National Forest System (NFS) and are divided between six different national forests:

- Nez Perce National Forest – 2,224,091 acres
- Clearwater National Forest – 870,807 acres
- Payette National Forest – 804,853 acres
- Bitterroot National Forest – 464,108 acres



- Salmon National Forest – 66,074 acres
- Wallowa National Forest – 1,787 acres

Regardless of location, size or scope of services, all counties support stewardship practices that can sustain both healthier forests and more dynamic communities across America. The 2023 Farm Bill presents a unique opportunity to reexamine the county role in public lands management and restructure federal policy that can better support current challenges counties experience on the local level.

Today, I will discuss the following points for your consideration as the subcommittee assesses challenges and opportunities for the Forestry Title of the 2023 Farm Bill:

- **Counties play an integral role in public lands management across the country.**
- **Despite our role in forest management, counties are oftentimes hampered in our ability to manage our forests.**
- **Through the reauthorization of the Farm Bill, there are additional tools that our federal partners can leverage to further help local governments address natural resource management challenges.**

Counties play an integral role in public lands management across the country.

Counties work with state and federal partners to manage public lands in several key capacities.

Under the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), counties are entitled to formally participate with federal partners as a cooperating agency. By becoming a cooperating agency, a county can contribute its expertise to the environmental analysis process for land management projects, often bringing relevant insight and data on local economic, social, and community conditions, as well as integration opportunities with local natural resource plans and related efforts.

In turn, counties can engage in joint management projects with federal agencies through powers authorized in the Farm Bill, such as the Good Neighbor Authority and Shared Stewardship Contracting. These allow county governments, along with states and tribes, to enter into long-term agreements with federal agencies to collaborate on land management projects within their jurisdictions. However, counties lack the authority to collect receipts from the sale of forest products from these projects and invest them in additional conservation or restoration initiatives, as our state counterparts can do. This hampers our ability to plan and execute local visions of public lands management that serve the needs of our residents.

Idaho County has enjoyed a strong relationship with federal land management agencies that operate within our borders. Along with other land managers and local stakeholders, we work with USFS on projects in our national forests as members of the Clearwater Basin Collaborative. Specifically, the Collaborative has partnered with the Nez Perce-Clearwater National Forests on the Selway-Middle Fork Collaborative Forest Landscape Restoration Project. Completed from 2010 to 2019, we were able to jointly implement a wide variety of treatments across 1.4 million acres in the Selway-Middle Fork project area, including hazardous fuel removal, invasive species management, and outdoor recreation enhancements.



Despite our role in forest management, counties are oftentimes hampered in our ability to manage our forests and support our communities.

Despite the success that we've enjoyed in our work with the USFS and other land management agencies, Idaho County and counties across the nation still face significant challenges that threaten our ability to adequately manage our forests and support the livelihoods of our communities that depend on our public lands. Idaho County understands the need to protect our natural resources. In addition to forestry, public lands recreation and tourism are major economic drivers in our communities. However, relying on recreation and tourism will not provide us with the diversified and dynamic economy this is necessary for long-term economic resilience, particularly when our communities are faced with the impacts of reduced timber harvests and the long-term decline of the forest products industry that still serves as the backbone of our local economy.

While the national forests within the county's jurisdiction represent a major economic asset for our communities, it also means that Idaho County's government operates under the economic constraint that 83.5 percent of our land is under federal management – and therefore exempt from local taxation. Because of this, we are extremely limited when it comes to financing our vital county operations and services.

Unfortunately, this obstacle is not unique to Idaho County. Sixty-two percent of counties across the country have federal land within their boundaries. Since the advent of our federal lands system, counties with significant portions of untaxable public lands have struggled to make up revenue shortfalls, especially over the past 30 years as federal regulations drastically reduced timber harvests within the NFS. Even though we are not able to collect property taxes on federal land, county governments must still provide essential services for our residents and those who visit these public lands each year. Such services include road and bridge maintenance, law enforcement, search and rescue, emergency medical care, fire protection, solid waste disposal and environmental compliance.

Idaho County not only is mandated by the state to provide a broad range of local government services with a limited tax base, but we must also deal with the complications presented by the land management decisions made by federal land management agencies. While we work closely with the U.S. Forest Service (USFS) to better manage the resources under their control, we are restricted in our ability to influence outcomes on federal land within our jurisdiction.

The landscape-scale catastrophic wildfires in the national forests in Idaho and other Western states have had a disproportionately large impact on the ecological, social and economic life of Idaho County and our neighbors. The threat of wildfires has only worsened in recent years. Fire seasons last an average of 78 days longer compared to 40 years ago. As a result, wildfire suppression eats up a greater share of the USFS budget every year. In the past, the USFS spent the bulk of its dollars on forest management, such as timber harvests and mechanical thinning, whereas today, suppression has become its major priority. Today, more staff is devoted to fighting fires than managing the forests. This challenge is amplified by USFS' ongoing challenges in hiring and retaining its workforce.

Counties believe that active forest management is a cornerstone of responsible public lands stewardship. By reducing fuel loads within our National Forest System, we can combat the threat of catastrophic wildfires while in the process creating a healthy, thriving ecosystem that improves the economy of rural communities and the environment. Healthy forests contribute to clean water supplies and improved air quality. Biodiversity increases when we manage our forests in sound, scientific ways.



Local economies see the benefits of both resource use and recreation. Nobody loses when our forests are healthy and resilient.

We can achieve these goals by increasing timber harvests from our national forests, reducing fuel loads through more mechanical thinning and controlled burns, reducing red tape through the National Environmental Protection Act (NEPA) process, and combating frivolous special interest lawsuits that serve only to delay much-needed management of our National Forest System.

Through the reauthorization of the Farm Bill, there are additional tools that our federal partners can leverage to further help local governments address natural resource management challenges.

The pending reauthorization of the Farm Bill poses significant opportunities to shape federal policy that can better address the challenges that counties like Idaho County face. The Farm Bill is critical for county governments that are charged with delivering vital services to many of our nation's vulnerable communities. From clean water and broadband infrastructure to nutrition assistance and energy conservation – the farm bill helps all of America's counties access the resources they need to invest in strong and resilient communities.

The Forestry Title of the 2023 Farm Bill gives Congress its best chance in five years to build the partnership between counties and our federal partners to tackle our shared land management goals.

Counties support the following priorities for the Forestry Title of the 2023 Farm Bill:

Promote Collaborative Land Management by Reauthorizing the Collaborative Forest Landscape Restoration Program (CFLRP) and the Landscape-Scale Restoration (LSR) Program

Counties believe that active management of federal lands and forests must be done in a sustainable manner that ensures the health of our federal lands for generations to come. However, agencies like the USFS and BLM are hamstrung by their bureaucratic processes and inability to hire and retain employees. Allowing counties and tribes to participate on the same level as the states would allow local governments to collaborate with the agency, providing more capacity to get work done on the ground. One way to help ensure a balanced approach to address natural resource management challenges is by promoting locally driven collaborative processes that promote consensus-driven decision making. Counties across the United States have engaged in collaborative efforts to address their natural resources challenges. By bringing a broad cross-section of local stakeholders into collaborative processes, counties, industry, outdoorsmen, conservationists, and federal and state land managers have built consensus on some of the most complex natural resource management challenges.

To do so, counties call on Congress to ensure that the appointment process for the USFS Resource Advisory Committees (RAC) is streamlined to ensure that appointees are approved promptly. Counties also support the reauthorization of the Collaborative Forest Landscape Restoration Program (CFLRP) and the Landscape Scale Restoration (LSR) Program. When talking about truly treating the land to combat wildfire and improve forest health, a few hundred-acre projects are simply inadequate to get the job done. By enabling stronger partnerships with county governments, programs like CFLRP and LSR give our agency partners real options to carry out meaningful landscape treatments. In turn, improving the process of authorizing limited and reasonable categorical exclusions for projects that improve forest health and have been developed through consensus-based collaborative processes will increase the number of acres treated and help to reduce the threat of wildfire.



Support Revenue Sharing for Shared Stewardship Contracts and Good Neighbor Agreements

Counties support the reauthorization and expansion of shared stewardship contracting authorities for federal land management agencies. In addition to improving forest health and reducing wildfire risk, increased active management will generate more revenue for the federal treasury and critical services provided by counties, while promoting job creation and economic growth in counties across the nation. The growth in stewardship contracting in recent years has shown that a market-driven approach to forest management projects can achieve both forest management goals and increased production.

Counties support and are active partners in stewardship contracting initiatives across the United States, but unlike under a traditional federal timber harvest, counties are not eligible for a 25 percent share of the revenues generated from a stewardship contract. Forest revenue sharing payments support critical county services such as transportation infrastructure and education. America's counties look forward to working with Congress to further strengthen forest revenue sharing between counties and the federal government by making counties eligible for 25 percent of the revenues generated from stewardship contracts.

Additionally, counties call on Congress to expand the Good Neighbor Authority (GNA) to enhance the ability of the USFS and BLM to partner with counties on federal forest restoration and management projects. The GNA program has allowed the USFS to partner with states on federal forest restoration and management projects to improve wildlife habitats, enhance watersheds, and reduce wildfire risks. In the 2018 Farm Bill, Congress amended GNA to make tribes and counties eligible to enter into Good Neighbor Agreements. However, counties and tribes were not afforded the same authority as states to retain GNA project receipts to reinvest in management projects, reducing a significant incentive to partner with USFS. Additionally, the 2018 Farm Bill removed the ability for restoration services to take place off federal lands. This means adjacent state, county, and tribal land that is essential to the health and productivity of National Forests can no longer be restored as comprehensive landscapes.

Good Neighbor Agreements strengthen the partnership with federal land management agencies and state, county and tribal governments. Standardizing the use of GNA funds will help counties support forest management projects and facilitate better land management decisions based on local impacts and needs. To accomplish these goals, counties support the inclusion of H.R. 4705/S.2492 – Treating Tribes and Counties as Good Neighbors Act, proposed by Senator James Risch and Representative Russ Fulcher in the 117th Congress in the 2023 Farm Bill.

Conclusion

Chairman La Malfa and Ranking Member Salinas, thank you for inviting me to share Idaho County's story.

Counties stand ready to work with Congress and our federal partners to develop a 2023 Farm Bill that will improve the health of our federal forests. Counties continue to serve as essential partners in public lands management, as well as leaders in improving forest health across the country. We look forward to working with you to achieve our shared priorities for promoting responsible forest management that can serve the needs of our rural communities and the environment.

Thank you again for the opportunity to testify and I look forward to your questions.

