

REVIEWING PARTNERSHIPS TO ENHANCE MANAGEMENT OF THE NATIONAL FOREST SYSTEM

HEARING

BEFORE THE
SUBCOMMITTEE ON FORESTRY AND HORTICULTURE
OF THE
COMMITTEE ON AGRICULTURE
HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
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CONTENTS

	Page
Newhouse, Hon. Dan, a Representative in Congress from Washington, opening statement	1
Prepared statement	3
Salinas, Hon. Andrea, a Representative in Congress from Oregon, opening statement	3
Prepared statement	5
Thompson, Hon. Glenn, a Representative in Congress from Pennsylvania, opening statement	6
Prepared statement	7

WITNESSES

Coe, Hon. Ned, Supervisor, District I, Modoc County Board of Supervisors; Second Vice President, Western Interstate Region, National Association of Counties, Alturas, CA	9
Prepared statement	10
Submitted question	57
Glover, Hon. Tracy, Sheriff, Kane County, Utah; President, Western States Sheriffs' Association, Kanab, UT	13
Prepared statement	15
Joseph, Travis, President and Chief Executive Officer, American Forest Resource Council, Portland, OR	23
Prepared statement	25
Submitted questions	57
Whitney, Molly, Executive Director, Cascade Forest Conservancy, Vancouver, WA	37
Prepared statement	39
Submitted questions	58

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THURSDAY, JUNE 25, 2026

HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES,
SUBCOMMITTEE ON FORESTRY AND HORTICULTURE,
COMMITTEE ON AGRICULTURE,
Washington, D.C.

The Subcommittee met, pursuant to call, at 10:00 a.m., in Room 1300, Longworth House Office Building, Hon. Dan Newhouse [Chairman of the Subcommittee] presiding.

Members present: Representatives Newhouse, Moore, Baird, Valadao, Thompson (*ex officio*), Bost, Salinas, Costa, and Vasquez.

Staff present: John Busovsky, Laurel Lee Chatham, John Hendrix, Karrie Kirschenmann, Sofia Jones, Hannah Otte, John Konya, Sean Mullin, Emma Simon, Claudia White, and Jackson Blodgett.

OPENING STATEMENT OF HON. DAN NEWHOUSE, A REPRESENTATIVE IN CONGRESS FROM WASHINGTON

The CHAIRMAN. The Committee will come to order.

Welcome, and thank you for joining today's hearing we've got, entitled, *Reviewing Partnerships to Enhance Management of the National Forest System*. After some brief opening remarks, Members will receive testimony today from our witnesses, and then the hearing will be open to questions.

In consultation with the Ranking Member and pursuant to Rule XI(e), I want to make Members of the Subcommittee aware that other Members of the full Committee may join us today.

So, let me begin with my opening statement.

Good morning, everyone. Welcome to this Forestry and Horticulture Subcommittee hearing, entitled, *Reviewing Partnerships to Enhance Management of the National Forest System*. This morning, we will hear from an expert panel of stakeholders on various issues before the National Forest System, and we'll be reviewing how partners work with and support the Forest Service. These partnerships help to support active forest management, expand recreational opportunities, and create and maintain forest products and jobs, including those of essential community personnel like law enforcement, and how regulations from the top down impact their work day to day.

Our National Forests have been under-managed for decades, and because of that, we are seeing a corresponding decline in forest

health and resiliency. Millions of acres need better management to improve forest health, address invasive species, and ramp up much-needed fuels reduction activities to decrease the threat of catastrophic wildfires. Over the past decade, we have seen some of the worst wildfires on record, resulting in millions of acres of burned forests, destroyed homes and property, and, unfortunately, in some cases, lost lives. Since wildfires are happening beyond the hottest and driest months of the year, I'm not sure that we are any longer able to label this as a fire season, but rather, a fire year. I'm seeing the impact of these nearly every day in my district. Most of these disasters are preventable, and we need to be doing more to support important management work in our forests.

The Forest Service is trying to do just that by identifying more than 100 million acres of National Forest land for treatment in the coming years. As you know, this will be no easy task given the acreage and the scale. The agency has long relied on partners to help carry out this important work through partnership agreements, such as Good Neighbor Authority, stewardship contracts, memoranda of understanding, and other existing authorities and programs. This Committee has long supported these partnerships. The 2026 Farm Bill (H.R. 7567, Farm, Food, and National Security Act of 2026), which passed on the House floor just last month, continues this effort and provides additional improvements. It also reauthorizes the Landscape Scale, Collaborative Forest Landscape, and the Joint Chief's Landscape Restoration Partnership Programs. Additionally, it includes authorizations for hazardous fuel reduction, cross-boundary wildfire mitigation, insect infestations and diseases, and expands several existing categorical exclusions to help encourage active management.

Now, support for new markets for forest products is also included in the Wood Innovation Grants Program and a new biochar application demonstration project. We also prioritize forest products infrastructure by authorizing the Timber Production Expansion Program. All these are just a few of the provisions in the forestry title, and I'm glad to see the Senate has started their work. Our nation's farmers, ranchers, and foresters need a new and modernized farm bill, and we must deliver. With that, I'm looking forward to hearing from our witnesses today about how they work with the agency and support the critical management of the National Forest System, this is probably the most important recommendations for improvement. So, thank you to all of you for appearing with us today.

Before we get into all of this, I just want to take a moment now to acknowledge something that's kind of personal for all of us. This is our first Subcommittee hearing since we lost, tragically, our good friend, Mr. Doug LaMalfa. I think I can speak for everybody that Doug is sorely missed. He was a true champion of our National Forests and of our rural communities. He was a fellow farmer, so we had a lot in common. I'd also like to recognize, even though he's not here—oh, he is here—our newest Member of the Committee, Mr. David Valadao from California. So, welcome, David.

Mr. VALADAO. Thank you.

The CHAIRMAN. Yes. So, with that, again, thank you all for being here.

[The prepared statement of Mr. Newhouse follows:]

PREPARED STATEMENT OF HON. DAN NEWHOUSE, A REPRESENTATIVE IN CONGRESS
FROM WASHINGTON

Good morning everyone. Welcome to this Forestry and Horticulture Subcommittee hearing titled "Reviewing Partnerships to Enhance Management of the National Forest System."

This morning, we will hear from a panel of stakeholders on various issues before the National Forest System and will be reviewing how partners work with and support the Forest Service. These partnerships help to support active forest management, expand recreational opportunities, and create and maintain forest products and jobs—including those of essential community personnel like law enforcement.

Our National Forests have been under-managed for decades and because of that we are seeing a corresponding decline in forest health and resiliency. Millions of acres need better management to improve forest health, address invasive species, and ramp up much-needed fuels reduction activities to decrease the threat of catastrophic wildfire.

Over the past decade, we have seen some of the worst wildfires on record resulting in millions of acres of burned forests, destroyed homes and property, and in some cases, lost lives. Since wildfires are happening beyond the hottest and driest months of the year, we are now no longer seeing a fire season, but rather a fire year. I am seeing the impact of these nearly every day in my district.

Most of these disasters are preventable, and we need to be doing more to support important management work in our forests. The Forest Service is trying to do just that by identifying more than 100 million acres of National Forest land for treatment in the coming years.

This will be no easy task given the acreage and scale. The agency has long relied on partners to help carry out this important work through partnership agreements such as good neighbor authority, stewardship contracts, memoranda of understanding, and other existing authorities and programs.

This Committee has long supported these partnerships. The 2026 Farm Bill, which passed on the House floor just last month, continues this effort and provides additional improvements. It also reauthorizes the Landscape-Scale, Collaborative Forest Landscape, and the Joint Chiefs Landscape Restoration Partnership programs. Additionally, it includes authorizations for hazardous fuel reduction, cross-boundary wildfire mitigation, insect infestations and diseases, and expands several existing categorical exclusions to help encourage more active management.

Support for new markets for forest products is also included through the Wood Innovation Grants program and a new biochar application demonstration project. We also prioritize forest products infrastructure by authorizing the Timber Production Expansion Program.

These are just a few of the provisions in the forestry title, and I am glad to see the Senate has started their work. Our nation's farmers, ranchers, and foresters need a new and modernized farm bill and we must deliver.

With that, I am looking forward to hearing from our witnesses today about how they work with the agency and support the critical management of the National Forest System—and recommendations for improvement. Thank you to all of you for appearing today.

Before we start, I want to take a moment now to acknowledge that this is our first Subcommittee hearing since the tragic passing of Doug LaMalfa. Doug is sorely missed and was a true champion for our National Forests and rural communities.

I'd also like to recognize welcome Congressman Valadao as a new Member of this Committee and Subcommittee.

With that, I yield to Ranking Member Salinas for any opening remarks she would like to provide.

The CHAIRMAN. I'd like to welcome the distinguished Ranking Member, my friend, the gentlelady from the great State of Oregon, Ms. Salinas, for any opening remarks that she might like to share.

**OPENING STATEMENT OF HON. ANDREA SALINAS, A
REPRESENTATIVE IN CONGRESS FROM OREGON**

Ms. SALINAS. Well, thank you, Chairman Newhouse, and, welcome, Congressman Valadao. And I did notice at the beginning of the hearing, my former Chairman had a very large gavel that he would strike down, and I thought about him as you opened up this Committee and I, too—yes.

The CHAIRMAN. I've got it at the ready here.

Ms. SALINAS. We will all sorely miss him. Well, thank you for convening us today, and thank you to our witnesses for making the trip to discuss this timely topic.

This hearing is happening against the backdrop of what experts warn will be one of the worst wildfire seasons in recent memory. From increased temperatures to a historically low snowpack and extreme drought conditions, we're facing a perfect storm this year for an especially devastating wildfire season. My home State of Oregon, as many of you know, is nearly 50 percent forested and has 30 million acres of some of the world's most productive forests. Our forests are at risk, but I am hopeful today's hearing will prepare this Subcommittee to protect our forests, communities, and infrastructure.

Despite the threat wildfires posed to Oregon and much of the West, this Administration is taking steps that make us all less safe. Specifically, the reorganization of the Forest Service and the Administration's consolidation of wildfire response under the Department of the Interior are causing chaos in our communities and are creating more questions than answers about the future of forest management. These changes come at what I consider a very dangerous time, right as wildfire season is taking hold, with 2.7 million acres already burned nationwide this year, exceeding the 10 year average for both fires and acres burned to date.

On top of the Administration's changes to the Forest Service, their work, or lack thereof, to reduce hazardous fuels in our forests is particularly alarming. From 2024 to 2025, the Forest Service treated roughly 25 percent fewer acres of hazardous fuels, and in Oregon, treatments were down 47 percent in that period. Treating hazardous fuels must be the absolute top priority of the agency. A forest that is vulnerable to wildfire cannot deliver the same ecosystem benefits as a treated forest. I'm talking about benefits like recreation opportunities, timber production, clean water, wildlife habitat, and carbon sequestration. The steep decline in hazardous fuels work since 2025, coupled with our changing climate, will only lead us to one outcome: catastrophic wildfires and decimating communities.

To make things worse, the Trump Administration's Fiscal Year 2027 budget included an approximate 43 percent cut to the Forest Service budget, and that's if we do not include the loss of funding as part of the proposal to move wildfire operations from Forest Service to the Department of the Interior. This budget proposal eliminates state, private, and Tribal forestry; eliminates forest and rangeland research; and cuts important programs like the Collaborative Forest Landscape Restoration Program that meaningfully improve the health and resilience of our forests. At the same time the Trump Administration is calling for states and partners to take on more of the burden in managing our forests, they are cutting all support for this work. The collapse in hazardous fuels acres is just one obvious symptom of this misguided approach.

This is not the time for removing opportunities for collaboration, active forest management, and real progress. What we need is a path to move forward, to work together, and to invest in active forest management. We know what effective forest management looks

like. We need prescribed fires, hazardous fuel reduction, targeted thinning and timber harvest, and other practices that reduce wildfire risk to communities and restore balance to our forests after decades of overly aggressive fire suppression. We can prevent and combat wildfires without irreparably damaging the habitat and ecosystems we rely on to survive, or harming the private and industrial forests intended for harvest.

Partnerships are imperative to the success of active forest management. Tribes, states, local governments, universities, and private landowners all bring unique tools and expertise. Programs like Good Neighbor Authority, Service First agreements, and shared stewardship show what's possible when we do work together. Partnerships are the backbone of the National Forest System, and they are necessary to complete the work on the ground that keeps our forests productive, healthy, and safe for the public. They are even more important right now considering these catastrophic changes the Trump Administration is making.

This Subcommittee has a responsibility to ensure the Forest Service can be effective, and we must work alongside one another to expand collaborative forest management, reinforce those partnerships between all who care for our forests, and keep our focus squarely on protecting people, communities, drinking water sources, and ecosystems. I am eager to hear from our witnesses and to work together to chart a path forward that will help us ensure our nation's forests are managed in a way that keeps them productive, resilient, and healthy. Thank you all. I yield back.

[The prepared statement of Ms. Salinas follows:]

PREPARED STATEMENT OF HON. ANDREA SALINAS, A REPRESENTATIVE IN CONGRESS
FROM OREGON

Thank you, Chairman Newhouse, for convening us today, and thank you to our witnesses for making the trip to discuss this timely topic.

I would especially like to thank Ms. Whitney, who comes to us from the Pacific Northwest, and who will shed some light, from the conservation perspective, on the importance of partnerships for effective forest management. I know her testimony and feedback today, along with the important perspectives of our other witnesses, will give this Subcommittee the information we need as we consider ways to leverage partnerships to improve forest management across our nation.

This hearing is happening against the backdrop of what experts warn will be one of the worst wildfire seasons in recent memory. From increased temperatures to a historically low snowpack and extreme drought conditions, we're facing a perfect storm this year for an especially devastating wildfire season.

My home State of Oregon is nearly 50 percent forested and has 30 million acres of some of the world's most productive forests. Our forests are at risk, but I am hopeful today's hearing will prepare this Subcommittee to protect our forests, communities, and infrastructure.

Despite the threat wildfires pose to Oregon and much of the West, this Administration is taking steps that make us all less safe. Specifically, the reorganization of the Forest Service and the Administration's consolidation of wildfire response under the Department of the Interior are causing chaos in our communities and are creating more questions than answers about the future of forest management. These changes come at a dangerous time—right as wildfire season is taking hold with 2.7 million acres already burned nationwide, exceeding the 10 year average for both fires and acres burned to date.

On top of the Administration's changes to the Forest Service, their work—or lack thereof—to reduce hazardous fuels in our forests is particularly alarming. From 2024 to 2025, the Forest Service treated roughly 25 percent fewer acres for hazardous fuels. And in Oregon, treatments were down 47 percent in that period. Treating hazardous fuels must be the absolute top priority of the agency: a forest that is vulnerable to wildfire cannot deliver the same ecosystem benefits as a treated for-

est. I'm talking about benefits like recreation opportunities, timber production, clean water, wildlife habitat, and carbon sequestration. The steep decline in hazardous fuels work since 2025, coupled with our changing climate, will only lead us to one outcome: catastrophic wildfires that decimate communities.

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We know what effective forest management looks like. We need prescribed fires, hazardous fuels reduction, targeted thinning and timber harvests, and other practices that reduce wildfire risks to communities and restore balance to our forests after decades of overly aggressive fire suppression. We can prevent and combat wildfires without irreparably damaging the habitat and ecosystems we rely on to survive, or harming the private and industrial forests intended for harvest.

Partnerships are imperative to the success of active forest management. Tribes, states, local governments, universities, and private landowners all bring unique tools and expertise. Programs like Good Neighbor Authority, Service First agreements, and shared stewardship show what's possible when we work together. Partnerships are the backbone of the National Forest System, and they are necessary to complete work on the ground that keeps our forests productive, healthy, and safe for the public to enjoy. They are even more important right now, considering the catastrophic changes the Trump Administration is making.

This Subcommittee has a responsibility to ensure the Forest Service can be effective, and we must work alongside one another to expand collaborative forest management, reinforce partnerships between all who care for our forests, and keep our focus squarely on protecting people, communities, drinking water sources, and ecosystems. I am eager to hear from our witnesses and to work together to chart a path forward that will help us ensure our nation's forests are managed in a way that keeps them productive, resilient, and healthy.

Thank you, and I yield back.

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you, Ms. Salinas. Thank you very much. Now, we're delighted today to have the Chairman of the full Committee, Mr. GT Thompson, from the great State of Pennsylvania. So, now I recognize Chairman Thompson for any opening comments he'd like to make.

OPENING STATEMENT OF HON. GLENN THOMPSON, A REPRESENTATIVE IN CONGRESS FROM PENNSYLVANIA

Mr. THOMPSON. Thanks, Mr. Chairman. Well, good morning, everyone, and I want to thank Chairman Newhouse and Ranking Member Salinas for holding this Subcommittee hearing today on the importance of partnerships for the health of our nation's forests. I'd like to add my thoughts to the Chairman, taking a moment to recognize our great friend, Doug LaMalfa. Doug certainly would have many thoughts and insights into today's discussion. He was a great friend, Mr. Chairman, and he's missed. And with that also, I'd like to acknowledge Chairman Newhouse as the new Subcommittee Chairman and Representative Valadao as a new Member of both the full Committee and this Subcommittee.

As for today's hearing, partnerships the Forest Service greatly benefit Pennsylvania's 15th District by directly supporting forest health, bolstering the forest products industry, expanding rec-

reational opportunities on public lands, and similar impacts that are felt in areas near a Forest Service in 40 different states. To me, it's common sense that the current forest health crisis and the issues facing our forest products industry share a common solution, and that's increasing active management and sustainable timber harvest levels to benefit both ecological health and rural communities.

While this Committee has continued to support the Forest Service through partnerships, much more can be done, starting with swift passage of a new farm bill. I'm proud to say that we have worked diligently over the last few years to ensure the Farm, Food, and National Security Act has a robust forestry title that will broaden and strengthen the Forest Service's toolbox for active forest management, including enhancements to authorities that allow them to engage in critical partnerships with organizations like those that we have sitting before us today. These improvements have become increasingly important in recent years as wildfires and forest health crisis in this country has continued, and this is why the time to act is now.

I'm proud of the work that the House Committee on Agriculture has done over the last several years, and I'm proud of the bipartisan vote that our farm bill recently received on the floor of the House. With the release of the text this week, I strongly encourage the Senate to act on a new farm bill as soon as possible. It is long overdue, and millions of people around this country depend on its passage for certainty in a wide variety of lines of work. And so, thank you, Mr. Chairman, and I yield back.

[The prepared statement of Mr. Thompson follows:]

PREPARED STATEMENT OF HON. GLENN THOMPSON, A REPRESENTATIVE IN CONGRESS
FROM PENNSYLVANIA

Good morning. I would like to thank Chairman Newhouse and Ranking Member Salinas for holding this Subcommittee hearing today on the importance of partnerships for the health of our nation's forests.

I'd like to take a moment to recognize our great friend Doug LaMalfa. Doug certainly would have many thoughts and insights into today's discussion. He was a great friend and Chairman, and he is sorely missed.

With that, I'd also like to acknowledge Chairman Newhouse as the new Subcommittee Chairman and Representative Valadao as a new Member of both the full Committee and this Subcommittee.

As for today's hearing, partnerships with the Forest Service greatly benefit Pennsylvania's 15th district by directly supporting forest health, bolstering the forest products industry, expanding recreation opportunities on public lands, and similar impacts are felt in areas near National Forests in 40 different states.

To me, it's common sense that the current forest health crisis and the issues facing our forest products industry share a common solution: increasing active management and sustainable timber harvest levels to benefit both ecological health and rural communities.

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release of text this week, I strongly encourage the Senate to act on a new farm bill as soon as possible. It is long overdue, and millions of people around this country depend on its passage for certainty in a wide variety of lines of work.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and I yield back.

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you, Mr. Thompson. If Ms. Craig, from Minnesota does come, we would be happy to recognize her for any opening comments. And I would request that other Members submit their opening statements for the record so the witnesses may begin their testimony and ensure that we have ample time for questions.

So, our first witness today is Mr. Ned Coe. He's the Supervisor of Modoc County, California, so welcome, Mr. Coe. Our next witness is Mr. Travis Joseph. He's the President and CEO of the American Forest Resource Council and no stranger to Washington, D.C., so welcome. Our third witness today is Mr. Tracy Glover, who is the Sheriff of Kane County, Utah, so welcome, Mr. Glover. And next, I would yield to my Ranking Member to introduce our next witness, Ms. Salinas.

Ms. SALINAS. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Witness intro: Thank you. I'm pleased to welcome Molly Whitney, Executive Director of Cascade Forest Conservancy, who we will hear from today. In that role, she oversees the Conservancy's work with local stakeholders to advocate for sustainable land management and participates in two forest collaboratives in the Gifford Pinchot National Forest that directly participate in project planning with the Forest Service as well as other Tribes, timber interests, and other stakeholders. Ms. Whitney holds a bachelor's degree in environmental science with a focus in water from Linfield College, which is in my district. She brings a diverse background in conservation stemming from her deep appreciation for the Pacific Northwest landscape and her desire to protect, sustain, and restore its important ecosystems.

Prior to her current role with Cascade Forest Conservancy—oh, thank you—Ms. Whitney served as Development Director at Water Watch of Oregon. Previously, she was Program Manager of the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation's Columbia Basin Water Transaction Program. She also served on the Board of the Tualatin Riverkeepers and currently serves on the Board of Mount St. Helens Institute. As a native Oregonian, Ms. Whitney has a lifelong relationship with the Cascades and brings a real enthusiasm for its protection and restoration. I am eager to hear from her today to understand the perspective she will bring to this Subcommittee.

Ms. Whitney, thank you for joining us today. I yield back.

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you, and I just want to, again, express my thanks to all of the witnesses for joining us today. So, we'll now proceed to the most important part of the hearing: your testimony. You'll each get 5 minutes. The timer is right there in front of you. It will count down to zero, at which point your time has expired. So, Mr. Coe, please begin.

**STATEMENT OF HON. NED COE, SUPERVISOR, DISTRICT I,
MODOC COUNTY BOARD OF SUPERVISORS; SECOND VICE
PRESIDENT, WESTERN INTERSTATE REGION, NATIONAL
ASSOCIATION OF COUNTIES, ALTURAS, CA**

Mr. COE. Thank you, Chairman Newhouse, and thank you for the kind comments in regards to the passing of my previous Congressman, Congressman LaMalfa, and close friend of over 3 decades.

Good morning, Chairman Newhouse, Ranking Member Salinas, and Members of the Committee. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today on behalf of the National Association of Counties, or NACo. My name is Ned Coe. I serve on the Modoc County Board of Supervisors, and I am Second Vice President of the NACo's Western Interstate Region.

Modoc County is the third least-populated county in California, with 70+ percent being federally owned. National Forest management is not an abstract issue for us. It directly affects our roads, schools, emergency services, and our local economy. I'm here today to share what genuine Federal-county partnership looks like in practice. That partnership operates on three levels: counties as fiscal partners, as operational partners, and as intergovernmental partners.

In counties like mine, where so much of the land is federally owned and, therefore, not taxable, programs like Secure Rural Schools are not optional. They are essential. Secure Rural Schools helps support county roads, schools, and local capacity that makes partnership with the Federal Forest Service possible in the first place. Title II of SRS is especially important because it supports resource advisory committees, or RACs. In Modoc County, our RAC brings together county government, Forest Service, ranchers, environmental interests, and other local stakeholders to identify and recommend projects that improve forest health and meet local needs. Through that process, we have supported projects like stock water wells, fuels reduction, habitat restoration. These projects benefit livestock operations, improve emergency fire suppression capacity, and strengthen the long-term resilience of the forests, but none of this happens without stable funding. Counties cannot plan, hire, or build durable partnerships one year at a time. NACO urges Congress to enact a long-term or permanent reauthorization of Secure Rural Schools before the program lapses again. Stable funding ensures counties as operational partners. An example of what this looks like in Modoc County is the Devil's Garden Colt Challenge, and I ask you to refer to my written comments on more details on this.

But most importantly, Modoc's Shared Stewardship Program: Federal staffing vacancies are one of the biggest barriers of effective forest management in the West, and we built a solution to this. Through this program, University of California Cooperative Extension recruits, trains short-term employees. The Modoc County Farm Bureau serves as the employer of record. The Forest Service then gains qualified workers who are immediately able to help get work done on the ground. This program has been operational in the county for over 5 years now. In the most recent field season, 43 workers logged more than 1,800 hours. They performed more than

700 miles of trail/road maintenance; completing grazing allotment surveys; supported fuels and vegetation work; helped with timber sale production preparation; conducted hydrologic, archeological, and botany wildlife surveys; supported NEPA work; maintained campgrounds; and assisted in public education programs.

The third level is partnership with formal standing in Federal planning and decision-making. Modoc County, we have a standing coordination committee with the Modoc National Forest. Each year—or each month, two members of the Board of Supervisors, our natural resources advisor, and our farm advisor meet directly with forest leadership. These meetings help ensure local input shapes Federal decisions on forest health, wildfire reduction, grazing, roads, and water infrastructure.

NACo urges Congress, three things: reauthorize Secure Rural Schools, support shared stewardship programs, and encourage Forest Service to establish regular coordination structures with county governments. Please refer to my written testimony for additional comments, and I would entertain questions at the appropriate time. Thank you.

[The prepared statement of Mr. Coe follows:]

PREPARED STATEMENT OF HON. NED COE, SUPERVISOR, DISTRICT I, MODOC COUNTY BOARD OF SUPERVISORS; SECOND VICE PRESIDENT, WESTERN INTERSTATE REGION, NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF COUNTIES, ALTURAS, CA

Chairman Thompson, Subcommittee Chairman Newhouse, Ranking Member Salinas, and Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for holding today's hearing examining how counties and Federal partners can work together to enhance the management of the National Forest System, and for inviting me to testify on behalf of the National Association of Counties (NACo). NACo represents America's 3,069 county governments, which deliver essential services to more than 300 million residents every day. As intergovernmental partners, counties implement Federal policy on the ground and serve as the primary interface between Federal land management agencies and the communities most directly affected by their decisions.

My name is Ned Coe and I serve as a member of the Modoc County Board of Supervisors, California and as Second Vice President of NACo's Western Interstate Region (WIR), which represents county governments across 17 western states. Modoc County is the third least-populated county in California, with 8,700 residents across 4,203 square miles, or nearly 2.7 million acres, 1.7 million of which is federally owned. I am also a lifelong beef cattle rancher in far northern California. For 45 years, I have worked with the California Farm Bureau, including the last 25 years as a regional field representative serving county bureaus across the northern quarter of the state, with a focus on public lands, water resources, livestock and predator management.

Federal partnership matters and works best when local and Federal partners are aligned and coordinate often to meet the needs of residents and the National Forests they depend on. The Modoc County experience offers a concrete model for how forest management programs, including those funded through the Secure Rural Schools and Community Self-Determination Act (SRS), can deliver measurable results when Federal agencies and county governments work together in earnest.

This testimony will highlight what a genuine Federal-county coordination looks like in practice, what makes that coordination possible and the three roles county governments play in National Forest System management: as the fiscal foundation that makes local partnerships possible, as operational partners who execute on-the-ground work alongside Federal agencies, and as intergovernmental partners whose coordination with the Forest Service produces outcomes neither party could achieve alone.

Counties as Fiscal Partners

The Federal Land Payment Framework

National Forest lands encompass $\frac{2}{3}$ of Modoc County's total landscape. Unlike private land, federally owned acreage generates no property tax revenue for the

county governments responsible for maintaining roads, funding schools and delivering emergency services within and adjacent to those lands. For counties like Modoc, where 1.7 million of 2.7 million acres are federally owned and therefore non-taxable, Federal payment programs are not a discretionary benefit. They are a structural necessity.

The SRS Act provides the primary mechanism through which Congress fulfills its fiscal obligation to these communities. SRS payments flow directly to county governments and are used for a wide range of essential services, including road maintenance, public school support, search and rescue operations and the local administrative capacity that makes Federal-county partnerships possible in the first place. Counties in the West manage landscapes on behalf of the entire nation. Predictable, adequate SRS funding is the minimum necessary for counties to fulfill their mandated responsibilities alongside Federal land management agencies.

Congress most recently reauthorized SRS through the end of FY 2026, with final payments reaching counties in spring 2027. Absent further action, more than 700 timber-dependent counties will again face significant budgetary shortfalls. NACo urges Congress to enact a long-term or permanent reauthorization of SRS before the program lapses again. Counties cannot plan, hire or build lasting partnerships on a year-to-year basis. All three SRS titles serve distinct and essential functions: Title I funds county roads and schools; Title II supports county-led resource advisory committees and on-the-ground forest management projects; and Title III funds county road maintenance and other essential services directly tied to National Forest management. Full and stable funding for all three titles is essential to the Federal-county partnership this Subcommittee is examining today.

What Stable Funding Looks Like: The Modoc RAC and UCCE

The Modoc County Resource Advisory Committee (RAC) is a direct product of SRS Title II and a concrete example of what stable Federal funding makes possible at the local level. The RAC reviews and recommends projects funded through Title II mechanisms, bringing together county government, Federal agencies, ranchers, environmental interests and other stakeholders to direct resources toward on-the-ground priorities.

The RAC has supported projects with lasting impact, including development of wells and retention basins that serve both livestock grazing operations and emergency fire suppression, as well as fuels reduction and habitat restoration work that improves long-term forest resilience. The University of California Cooperative Extension (UCCE) serves as a consistent partner in this process, providing technical expertise and institutional continuity that strengthens the RAC's recommendations.

The fiscal and operational dimensions of the Federal-county relationship are inseparable. The RAC does not function without SRS Title II funding. The workforce partnerships described in the next section do not scale without the institutional relationships the RAC cultivates. Stable Federal payments are the foundation on which every other form of county-Federal coordination is built.

Counties as Operational Partners

Modoc County does not simply receive Federal land management decisions; it helps execute them. The two case studies below illustrate what operational partnership looks like in practice, viewed through two distinct lenses—conservation outcomes and workforce capacity.

Case Study 1: Devil's Garden Wild Horse Territory

The management of the Devil's Garden Wild Horse Territory stands as one of the most consequential conservation achievements in recent Modoc County history and a direct product of county-Federal coordination.

Devil's Garden is the only wild horse unit managed exclusively by the U.S. Forest Service (USFS). A decade ago, the wild horse population had surged to ten times the maximum Appropriate Management Level (AML) for the territory. Overgrazing by horses was severely degrading rangeland and displacing livestock operations. As of fall 2025, through sustained and coordinated management, the territory's population returned to its designated AML of 206 to 402 horses—the first time the territory has been within its legal AML in 55 years, since the passage of the Wild Free-Roaming Horses and Burros Act of 1971. Since 2016, the Modoc National Forest has gathered and placed more than 4,000 horses for adoption.

To support this effort and build public goodwill around responsible management, Modoc County and UCCE partnered with the Forest Service to create the Devil's Garden Colt Challenge. Each year, 25 to 30 youth from 4-H and FFA programs across California, as well as Lake and Klamath counties in Oregon, receive a Forest Service colt, train it and compete in a dedicated horse show at the Modoc County Fair. Participants gain full ownership of their animal upon completion. The program

transforms what could be a politically contentious management challenge into a youth development opportunity with broad community support.

Case Study 2: The Modoc Shared Stewardship Program

Federal staffing vacancies are among the most persistent barriers to effective public lands management across the West. The Modoc Shared Stewardship Program was created specifically to solve that problem.

This innovative agreement pairs the Modoc County Farm Bureau, the Modoc National Forest and UCCE Modoc in a workforce pipeline that delivers qualified, trained personnel directly to the Forest Service. The structure operates as follows:

1. UCCE Modoc recruits and provides comprehensive training for short-term employees.
2. The Modoc County Farm Bureau serves as the formal employer of record for those individuals.
3. The USFS gains immediate, qualified operational capacity without navigating Federal hiring timelines.

The program has now been operational for 5 years. In the most recent field season, it employed 43 workers who logged more than 18,000 hours on the ground. That workforce delivered measurable results:

- **Infrastructure:** More than 700 miles of trail and road maintenance, off-highway vehicle program maintenance and hazard tree removal
- **Resource management:** Vacant grazing allotment surveys, vegetation and fuels management, timber sale preparation and field studies
- **Regulatory compliance:** Archaeology surveys, hydrology and botany studies, wildlife surveys and NEPA document preparation, including specialist surveys for the Wild Horse Environmental Assessment
- **Public access and education:** Campground maintenance, wood permit sales and public education at local events including fire prevention outreach
- **Workforce development:** On-the-job training and pathways to seasonal and permanent Federal employment for rural resident

This model does not merely address staffing gaps; it builds durable local capacity, strengthens interagency relationships and keeps forest management work in the hands of people who live and work in the landscape they are managing.

Counties as Intergovernmental Partners

Federal policy decisions have direct impacts on county governments and the residents we serve. The Modoc County experience demonstrates that when the Federal Government makes genuine coordination with county governments a real priority rather than a procedural checkbox, the results are transformative. Programs like SRS Title II provide the financial foundation that makes local partnerships like the RAC possible. The Shared Stewardship model shows that workforce solutions do not require new Federal bureaucracy; they require flexibility and a willingness to work with county and community institutions that already exist.

The Modoc County/Modoc National Forest Coordination Committee exemplifies what the intergovernmental partnership this Subcommittee is examining can look like when it functions well. On a monthly basis, two members of the Modoc County Board of Supervisors, the county natural resources advisor and the UCCE Modoc natural resources advisor meet directly with Modoc National Forest leadership. This ongoing dialogue ensures local input meaningfully shapes Federal resource management decisions across three core areas:

- Forest health and proactive wildfire risk reduction
- Rangeland management and sustainable grazing solutions
- Infrastructure maintenance, including roads and water development

This structure does not require new legislation to replicate. It requires Federal agency leaders who are willing to show up, listen and act on what they hear. Congress can reinforce that expectation by directing the USFS to formalize coordination structures with county governments as a standard element of National Forest management.

Therefore, NACo urges Congress to:

- Enact a long-term or permanent reauthorization of SRS with full funding for all three titles before the program lapses again at the end of FY 2026, providing the certainty that county governments need to plan, hire and sustain the local capacity that makes Federal-county partnerships work;

- Support legislative and administrative frameworks that enable shared stewardship agreements and workforce partnerships between Federal agencies, county governments and university extension programs, and direct the USFS to develop a framework for replicating the Modoc County model in other rural communities facing Federal staffing gaps; and
- Direct the USFS to establish or formalize regular coordination structures with county governments as a standard component of National Forest management planning, recognizing counties as essential intergovernmental partners in achieving forest health, wildfire resilience and rural economic stability.

The Modoc County experience proves that when a Federal forest leadership team genuinely coordinates with a local county government, the results benefit both public lands and rural communities. Proactive wildfire management, restored rangeland health, expanded workforce capacity and youth development programs are concrete results that coordination produce when it is taken seriously by both partners.

A strong Federal-state-local partnership is essential to the long-term health of our forests, our rangelands and the communities that depend on them. NACo appreciates the Subcommittee's attention to this important issue and stands ready to work with Congress to strengthen that partnership.

Respectfully submitted,

Supervisor NED COE,
Modoc County, California;
Second Vice President, WESTERN INTERSTATE REGION,
National Association of Counties.

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you, Mr. Coe. I appreciate that very much. Next, I would recognize Mr. Glover. You may begin when you're ready. Thank you.

STATEMENT OF HON. TRACY GLOVER, SHERIFF, KANE COUNTY, UTAH; PRESIDENT, WESTERN STATES SHERIFFS' ASSOCIATION, KANAB, UT

Mr. GLOVER. Thank you, Chairman Newhouse, Ranking Member Salinas, and Members of the Committee. My name is Tracy Glover. I'm the Sheriff in Kane County, Utah, the President of the Utah Sheriff's Association, as well as the President of the Western State Sheriff's Association who I represent here today. Our association of western states covers 19 western states and over 1,100 sheriffs.

As you know, the U.S. Forest Service manages about 200 million acres of land and National Forests that are truly a national treasure. These lands deserve resource protection and sound management. America's sheriffs invest time and treasure every day to support that National Forest management. There is ample evidence that sheriffs are all in as viable partners in this important work. We have great respect for the U.S. Forest Service law enforcement officers that we work alongside every single day in the field, and we commend them for their work. At the management level, however, our relationship is fracturing. I'm here today to ask Congress through this Committee to help sheriffs move forward and recover these relationships, returning to a level of mutual respect.

I want to touch on three quick things to that point: first, criminal jurisdiction and police power. In our country, states and, therefore, local subdivisions hold the authority to police the people. While sometimes confusing, criminal legislative jurisdiction is reserved to state and local governments. As the only elected law enforcement branch within any form of government, sheriffs are often in the position of holding the line on these matters. While we appreciate the interest in limited Federal law enforcement jurisdiction by Congress, agencies within the Executive Branch have generally pushed

back and, with some success, passed rules and regulations that are sort of a workaround to the principles of limited jurisdiction.

We are here today to ask this Committee to work with sheriffs to arrive at a solution to one such issue: the Criminal Prohibitions Rule. A little bit of background, in 2011, the Forest Service law enforcement folks reached out to our association with their intent to institute this Criminal Prohibitions Rule. It would dramatically increase the stance of Federal law enforcement and their authority on Federal National Forests. After some difficult, negotiations, and meetings, we pushed back, and the idea was shelved.

Fast forward, in 2024, a slightly watered-down version of the rule was put forward in the *Federal Register*. This time, sheriffs were not given any significant notice. Our association and others participated by providing public comment on the *Federal Register*, and while the rule disproportionately affects sheriffs, we were not afforded any appropriate level of coordination. After providing public comment asking for specific changes to be made, the final rule was adopted and published on December 26 of 2024 with no significant modifications. At that time, we met with the U.S. Forest Service administrators who appear, at least so far, to not have any interest in modifying the rule. A CRA was filed by Congresswoman Celeste Maloy, but with the difficult timing of the government shutdown, it ended up timing out without action. Representative Maloy then filed H.R. 6802 (Community Law Enforcement Authority Restoration Act of 2025 (CLEAR Act of 2025)) in this Congress, which is active and, I believe, assigned to this Committee and would simply require that the Criminal Prohibitions Rule would not have any force or effect.

The primary reason I'm here today on behalf of American sheriffs is to ask this Committee to advance H.R. 6802 as a priority bill, help sheriffs hold an important baseline of local jurisdiction and find a better path forward. We are committed to working together with the agency to come to a more appropriate solution if we get the chance.

Shifting gears, I want to touch just briefly on a different program called the Cooperative Law Enforcement Agreement Program. As many of you know, sheriffs across the country provide law enforcement services on our National Forests under cooperative law enforcement agreements. A little context: in 1985, the program was funded at about \$7.5 million nationwide, and in 1993, that amount dropped to \$5 million. Today, roughly 41 years later, the funding remains at \$5 million. During that time frame, you can imagine sheriffs have dealt with marked cost increases in our operations. For example, I looked at the Social Security Cost of Living Index, and cost of living adjustments have increased by 138 percent in that same time frame. The cost of a Ford F-150 truck in 1985 was about \$15,000. Today, it's about \$70,000 to get it fully equipped. With U.S. Forest Service staffing shortages and special assignments, fire details, *et cetera*, sheriffs are being asked to do more and more on National Forests, which we embrace to a degree. We respectfully ask that this Committee review the program and bring it up to a 2026 funding standard.

And with that, I appreciate your time, and I look forward to answering any questions.

[The prepared statement of Mr. Glover follows:]

PREPARED STATEMENT OF HON. TRACY GLOVER, SHERIFF, KANE COUNTY, UTAH;
PRESIDENT, WESTERN STATES SHERIFFS' ASSOCIATION, KANAB, UT

Chairman Newhouse, Ranking Member Salinas, and Members of the Committee,

My name is Tracy Glover, and I serve as the Sheriff in Kane County in the State of Utah.

I am here today to testify on behalf of the Western States Sheriffs['] Association (WSSA), and more than 1,100 Sheriffs in the 19 western states we represent.

The nearly 200 million acres of Federal land managed by the United States Forest Service (USFS) represent a national treasure of incredible value. A treasure that deserves sound management and resource protection.

The U.S. Forest Service along with their dedicated Law Enforcement Officers (LEOs) has been tasked with that management and resource protection.

The elected Sheriff of those counties within the 19 states we represent are tasked with providing primary law enforcement services throughout their area of jurisdiction which includes our National Forest System.

Sheriffs, by and large, enjoy strong working relationships with those USFS LEO's on the ground in their county. The ability to relay a strong understanding of the public safety philosophy of the Sheriff is often absorbed by USFS LEO's through their relationship with those county deputies with whom they work.

At the management level however, our relationship is fracturing. I am here to ask Congress, through this Committee to take the first step in helping sheriffs move toward recovering this important relationship, returning to a level of mutual respect.

Over the past 30 years the USFS Law Enforcement and Investigations (LE&I) division has shifted their focus from "resource protection" to other policing functions best left to local law enforcement. As time progressed through the 1990's and into the early 2000's, additional LEOs have been added to the patrol efforts of the USFS and funding that was provided to Sheriffs for cooperative law enforcement contracts has remained stagnant.

While we purport to maintain a solid working relationship with the USFS LE&I division, there have been instances over the years where we have found significant differences in our beliefs regarding jurisdiction and authority. In 2011, the USFS submitted a proposed rule to expand their enforcement authority off National Forest System lands. In addition to this proposed expansion, there was proposed assimilation of state laws to expand the treasure chest of enforcement. There was a less than harmonious relationship for several months as Sheriffs in the West fought against the implementation of this proposed rule. After a long and difficult period, the USFS LE&I put the proposed rule on the shelf, and we worked together to create a National Memorandum of Agreement to address many of the issues the Forest Service believed existed. This was all accomplished while maintaining the proper authority of the elected Sheriff. This National Memorandum of Understanding was promulgated through a joint effort of the WSSA and USFS LE&I. It was through this document that the USFS ultimately recognized the Sheriff as the Chief Law Enforcement Office of the county. Through the document, several avenues were created to provide the County Sheriff with the ability to utilize USFS LEO's within the county to assist with many of the issues spelled out in the proposed rule change now being considered. We are convinced that this document continues to provide the necessary means for the Sheriff to obtain the necessary assistance needed from the USFS law enforcement resources while at the same time retaining the legal obligation to the Office, we are elected to serve. This MOU should stand as the guiding document moving forward and a concerted effort should be made by both the WSSA and the USFS to expand its use to serve more effectively those whose utilize the public lands of the western U.S. A copy of the now expired MOU is included as a supplement to this written testimony.

Unfortunately, in 2023, this rule was modified and submitted to the *Federal Register* again. WSSA was left to submit written comments along with the public on the matter. WSSA made several attempts to meet with the Forest Service to try to negotiate the language in the rule and were turned away at each attempt. The "Criminal Prohibition" rule was finally promulgated in December of 2024. This new rule assimilates state law, expands authority and exhibits disregard for the sovereignty and authority of the elected office of Sheriff.

This administrative rule takes a direct route toward assimilating state law into the *Code of Federal Regulations*. Through this assimilation and, by channeling a large portion of Subpart B orders to the category of Subpart A orders, the nationalization of enforcement of rules becomes troubling. While we recognize that Congress

provided the USFS with the authority to create needful rules and regulations to effectively manage NFS lands, we stand firm in the belief that the law prohibits assimilation of state law on those lands held in proprietary interest. Most lands managed by the USFS in the western United States fall under the definition of proprietary interest. We oppose this effort to bolster the Federal enforcement tool chest through the assimilation of state law and in fact, we believe by doing so, the USFS may create significant legal challenges across the lands they manage in the western United States. The County Sheriff, working within the legal systems in each of the western states, is best suited to address crimes against people and property. The various legal ramifications for any person charged with alcohol and drug offenses in a state are designed to carry long term impacts associated with not only a citation, but several other requirements related to rehabilitation of the offender and long-term consequences that state legislatures have implemented to increase the safety to the public. The Federal Government has not legislated in the same manner and is therefore not designed to effectively address these lesser offenses.

Collectively, we find common ground in those specific rule changes that seek to address the use of fireworks on NFS lands as well as use of exploding targets as a commonsense approach to the safety of people and the public lands they use. However, we urge caution in a global approach that may lead to the creation of national ban on the practice of recreational shooting on public lands. Further, we hold some reservations that the banning of these practices will lead to arbitrary enforcement through traffic stops on county and state highways that traverse NFS lands.

The change amending CFR 261.50(a) and (b) to expressly authorize persons holding positions that are specified in the paragraph, to delegate the authority to persons serving in an acting capacity or to their deputies, appears to contradict and exceed the opinion of the 9th circuit court of appeals. As stated in the document published on the *Federal Register*, the court interpreted in *United States vs. True* 946 f.2d 682, 687 that only those persons *holding* the position, or *acting* in the position, can issue orders under 36 CFR 261 subpart B. By amending this definition, it opens the door to a plethora of individuals who could potentially have authority to issue special closure orders. Sheriffs have long recognized the negative impacts of special closures on public lands, and we have argued that Counties should be afforded all opportunities for coordination in these decisions. Great strides should be taken to ensure those who have authority to limit the public use of public lands should be provided with a level of understanding of the impacts of restrictions through the actions of special closure orders. In most cases, the County Sheriff and legislative bodies of the county can provide perspective and alternatives that will least impact the ability to provide public safety services and continue to allow for public access.

The Western States Sheriffs' Association has remained active over the past 18 months in attempting to have this rule voided. We have requested direct assistance from the USFS LE&I division to no avail. The appropriate steps were taken to secure a review by Congress under the "Congressional Review Act" and this effort timed out with no action taken by Congress. Currently, H.R. 6802 serves as our most recent effort to negate the effects of this administrative rule. H.R. 6802 effectively voids the Criminal Prohibition rule. We believe this needs to be the first step toward the restoration of trust and relationship with the leadership of the USFS LE&I divisions.

Sheriffs across the West want a strong working relationship with our Federal land managers and the associated law enforcement components. In many cases, Sheriffs are willing to enter into deputation agreements with Federal officers to bridge any gaps. Instead of pushing the constitutional boundaries of Federal rulemaking, we suggest that MOU's and Deputation agreements are the proper way to deal with shortcomings in efficiency in law enforcement on our National Forests.

The people of west deserve professional and competent law enforcement on our nation's public lands. This philosophy and manner of enforcement should be dictated by those who are elected to provide it. That is the County Sheriff.

Many sheriffs across the nation provide law enforcement services within National Forests under cooperative law enforcement agreements. This money is allocated to Sheriffs to assist with patrol and response to calls for service on NFS lands. On average, most Sheriffs receive \$5,000 to \$7,000 per year. Over the past 40 years, there has been no increase to this annual allocation. In 1985 the program was funded at about \$7.5 million. In 1993, USFS law enforcement stove-piped their line authority and the funding dropped to \$5 million. Today, 41 years later, the funding remains at \$5 million. During that same timeframe, Sheriffs have dealt with marked cost increases. For example, since 1985 according to the social security index, adjusted cost of living alone totals a whopping 138% increase. A fully equipped Ford F150 cost less than \$15,000 in 1985. That same truck is now pushing \$70,000.

Today, with USFS staffing shortages and special assignments, sheriffs are being asked to do more on National Forests the program is literally on life support at the current funding levels.

We respectfully ask that this Committee to review this program and bring it up to a 2026 standard.

The Sheriff's jurisdiction does not end at the boundary of the National Forest System. The enforcement of crimes against persons and property extends well within the boundaries of the National Forest. The decrease in revenues from the curtailment of natural resource management has had devastating economic impacts on counties that contain large portions of NFS lands. It is beyond time that Congress addresses this lack of adequate funding to assist with public safety on our nation's public lands. Many of these public lands can be found in the American west. Our member Sheriffs are tasked with providing services to areas that now attract millions of visitors each year. These visitors are often taking advantage of high risks activities that put them in danger and often require an emergency response from the Sheriff and local Search and Rescue teams to conduct sometimes dangerous rescues and recovery. The ability to perform these services at the highest level comes with a cost that is proving to be a heavy burden for small rural counties.

There should be no question, as a matter of state statute, as to who the Chief Law Enforcement Officer of the County is. The elected sheriff is responsible for determining the law enforcement philosophy of the unincorporated land mass of the county including our National Forest lands.

The Western States Sheriffs^[7] Association does not dispute the legitimacy of the USFS law enforcement component but does hold the belief, based on state law, that the Sheriff is the Chief Law Enforcement Officer of the county. The ongoing use of administrative rulemaking by not only the forest service, but other Federal agencies as well, to circumvent Congress and its intent is both dangerous and counter-productive to solid working relationships and to the public we serve. There should be no question that this effort of expansion of authority is being conducted in clear contradiction to those rights reserved by the states.

That belief is firmly held by our membership. The county Sheriff, an elected representative of the people, is responsible for determining the law enforcement philosophy as it relates to the protection of life and property within their jurisdictional boundaries.

This philosophy should extend to all policing efforts on federally managed lands. This philosophy should be instilled into the leadership of the USFS. We cannot serve the county residents and visitors who use our nation's public lands when we are divided on the philosophy, method, and in the way we treat the people we serve.

Both County Sheriffs and the managers of Federal law enforcement agencies deserve a positive working relationship and open lines of communications. I submit there are several effective remedies that must be considered:

1. The first of these remedies is for Congress to advance H.R. 6802 to a vote. The administrative rule titled "Criminal Prohibitions" must be negated and the USFS LE&I division must be directed to the table to work with western Sheriffs to craft a reasonable and legal solution. This solution may manifest itself in the update of the National Memorandum of Agreement and the creation of local Law Enforcement Councils (LECs). In this model, the county Sheriff chairs the Council which is comprised of adjoining county Sheriffs and local USFS law enforcement leadership. These LECs provide the greatest opportunity for open communication on a variety of issues, and all occurs at the local level where it stands the best chance of being effective.
2. Conduct a widespread review of the *Code of Federal Regulations* currently in use by USFS law enforcement. Every effort should be made to eliminate language that assimilates state crime or state statutes into USFS enforcement. The enforcement of crimes against persons and personal property crimes is, and should continue to be, the primary role of the county Sheriff.
3. Examine the staffing levels of the USFS law enforcement agencies. We believe that funding for those positions that are budgeted, yet unfilled, should be reallocated to the Cooperative Law Enforcement Agreement line item within the USFS annual budget. This additional funding would potentially allow the county Sheriff a better ability to respond to and investigate criminal activity on our public lands.

We continue to be vigilant to ensure there is no expansion of authority and that the USFS law enforcement continues to recognize the authority and responsibility of the county Sheriff.

The Sheriff is chosen by the people of the county to serve as their elected law enforcement representative. The people did not choose the Forest Service for this function. If the local sheriff desires the assistance of the Federal law enforcement officers, there is a mechanism in place to accomplish this. Sheriffs, under state statute, have the authority to cross-deputize LEOs. As mentioned earlier, this can also be accomplished through an agreed upon National Memorandum.

The health of our National Forests has been on the decline for the past 20 years. This effect has led to a decline in local economies, a reduction in local and state government services, and has had a severe impact on public safety services in many counties across the West.

The original function of resource protection and timber related criminal investigations appear to no longer be the priority of the USFS LE&I division. This may be due to decline in management of our National Forests. However, the desire to morph into a traditional police force has been realized and perpetrated in counties across the West. It is possible this was intentionally carried out to preserve and grow the USFS law enforcement component during a time when the normal, recognized functions of the agency were, and have continued to suffer.

While these hearings are important to expose the issues and openly debate them, right now is a time for action. Now is the time to take a substantial step to rebuild trust among Sheriffs and our Federal partners. Now is the time to truly evaluate the levels of enforcement capabilities of our National Forests law enforcement providers and to fully realize that the county Sheriff is in the best position, from a matter of law, to effectively deal with crime on our nation's forest. I urge this Committee to take the time to review all the written testimony. I am hopeful that you will recognize and appreciate our position and reach out to our leadership and the USFS law enforcement leaders. By doing so, we will continue to have opportunities to dialogue with each other and hopefully reach consensus regarding a course of action that improves our public safety services to citizens who recreate and visit our National Forest lands.

The WSSA values the relationship that has been built with the USFS LE&I division. We share a common commitment to addressing the issues arising on public lands that affect the use and enjoyment of these lands. We will continue to advocate for the Office of Sheriff and the responsibilities each Sheriff has on all lands within their respective jurisdiction. The transition of management priorities of the USFS over the past 30 years is evident when viewing the transformation of the Congressionally approved original charter of the USFS LE&I division. Created for the purpose of enforcing rules and regulations related to fire and resource management, the division has evolved into a more traditional "policing" function. We continue to monitor, with great concern, the deviation from its original mission and feel it should be the subject of a great deal of scrutiny moving forward.

Respectfully submitted,

Sheriff TRACY GLOVER,
Kane County, Utah,
President, Western States Sheriffs Association.

ATTACHMENT 1

13-MU-11136015-507

Memorandum of Understanding Between the Western States Sheriffs' Association and USDA Forest Service Law Enforcement and Investigations

This **Memorandum of Understanding (MOU)** is hereby made and entered into by and between the Western States Sheriffs' Association, hereinafter referred to as "WSSA", and the USDA, Forest Service Law Enforcement and Investigations, hereinafter referred to as "LEI".

I. Purpose

The purpose of this Memorandum of Understanding ("MOU") is to establish a template for an Operational Agreement that may be used by USDA Forest Service Law Enforcement and Investigations (LEI) and County Sheriffs (Sheriff) represented by the Western States Sheriffs' Association to define operational procedures and protocols for coordination of certain Federal, state, and local law enforcement operations within a member Sheriff's county.

A. Definitions

"Criminal Violations/Criminal Law" means suspected violations of laws, other than Traffic Laws, where conviction may lead to a penalty of fine and/or imprisonment.

“Enforcement Action” means stopping, detaining, citing or arresting a person suspected of committing a violation of law.

“LEI” means Law Enforcement Officers or Criminal Investigators employed by the United States Department of Agriculture—United States Forest Service.

“Sheriff” means the elected Sheriff of the various counties.

“OA” means Operational Agreement.

“Traffic Laws” means state, local and Federal laws, ordinances and regulations that pertain to the operation of motor vehicles on roads.

“WSSA” means the Western States Sheriffs’ Association.

II. Statement of Mutual Benefits and Interests

The Sheriff and LEI share a mutual interest in protection of property and public safety, and therefore recognize that it is appropriate for LEI and Sheriffs to coordinate their enforcement actions to provide an effective deterrent to unsafe motor vehicle operation, and criminal activity. In addition, it is desirable to coordinate certain other law enforcement operations conducted by the Sheriff and LEI within individual counties in order to utilize law enforcement resources efficiently, avoid conflicts, plan for staffing and allocation of resources, set priorities, and provide backup and support. The OA also addresses coordination of other specifically enumerated law enforcement activities between LEI and Sheriffs.

LEI does not take enforcement actions under state and local laws, regulations, or ordinances unless designated by the Sheriff as special deputies or cross designated by other state or local law enforcement agencies, and when acting in accordance with any pertinent restrictions imposed by such designations, in accordance with state law. A designation agreement may be entered upon mutual agreement between the Sheriff and LEI, and any enforcement actions by LEI under state or local laws will be governed by that agreement.

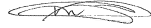
III. It Is Mutually Understood and Agreed By and Between the Parties Hereto That:

- A. The OA attached hereto as Exhibit A sets forth operating procedures and protocols for coordination of law enforcement by LEI and Sheriffs that provide for public safety and are consistent with Federal, state, and local law enforcement authorities.
- B. The OA also provides for coordination of other law enforcement operations.
- C. Entry into the OA will be at the discretion of LEI and Sheriffs.
- D. The WSSA and LEI endorse the use of the OA by Sheriffs.
- E. LEI and the WSSA hereby designate the following contacts for matters arising under the this MOU.

WSSA Program Contact	WSSA Administrative Contact
Name: Johnny Valdez, President/Sheriff Address: 515 West High Street City, State, [ZIP]: Grants, NM 87020 Telephone: 505-876-2040 FAX: 505-876-2090 Email: <i>jvaldez_cosa@yahoo.com</i>	Name: Jim Pond, Sheriff (Ret.) Address: 474 Rogers Canyon Road City, State, [ZIP]: Laramie, WY 82012 Telephone: 307-760-4075 FAX: Email:
U.S. Forest Service Program Manager Contact	U.S. Forest Service Administrative Contact
Name: Tracy Perry, Deputy Director Address: 1621 N. Kent St., Suite 1015 City, State, [ZIP]: Arlington, VA 22209 Telephone: 703-605-4690 FAX: 703-605-5112. Email: <i>tperry@fs.fed.us</i>	Name: Kenneth Pearson, Assistant Director Address: 1621 N. Kent St., Suite 1015 City, State, [ZIP]: Arlington, VA 22209 Telephone: 703-605-4527 FAX: 703-605-5112 Email: <i>kenpearson@fs.fed.us</i>

- F. Nothing in this MOU is intended to alter, limit, or expand the agencies’ statutory and regulatory authority.
- G. Any of the parties, in writing, may terminate this MOU in, whole, or in part, at any time before the date of expiration.
- H. By signature below, each party certifies that the individuals listed in this document as representatives of the individual parties are authorized to act in

their respective areas for matters related to this MOU. In witness whereof, the parties hereto have executed this MOU as of the last date written below.



09/09/13

JOHNNY VALDEZ, *President*
Western States Sheriffs' Association

Date.

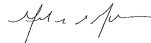


09/16/13

DAVID L. FERRELL, *Director*
U.S. Forest Service, LEI

Date.

The authority and format of this award have been reviewed and approved for signature.



09/6/13

MELISSA MOREIRA,
U.S. Forest Service Grants Management Specialist

Date.

Exhibit A to MOU Between Forest Service LEI and the Western States Sheriffs' Association Operational Agreement Between the _____ County Sheriff and USDA Forest Service Law Enforcement and Investigations

Purpose

The purpose of this Operational Agreement (OA) is to establish operational procedures and protocols for coordination of certain Federal, state, and local law enforcement operations by USDA Forest Service Law Enforcement and Investigations (LEI) and the Sheriff of _____ County, _____ (the Sheriff).

Definitions

"Criminal Violations/Criminal Law" means suspected violations of laws, other than Traffic Laws, where conviction may lead to a penalty of fine and/or imprisonment.

"Enforcement Action" means stopping, detaining, citing or arresting a person suspected of committing a violation of law.

"LEI" means Law Enforcement Officers or Criminal Investigators employed by the United States Department of Agriculture—United States Forest Service.

"Sheriff" means the elected Sheriff of the various counties.

"OA" means Operational Agreement.

"Traffic Laws" means state, local and Federal laws, ordinances and regulations that pertain to the operation of motor vehicles on roads.

"WSSA" means the Western States Sheriffs' Association[.]

Mutual Benefits and Interests

The Sheriff and LEI share a mutual interest in protection of property and public safety, and therefore recognize that it is appropriate for LEI and Sheriffs to coordinate their enforcement actions to provide an effective deterrent to unsafe motor vehicle operation, and criminal activity. In addition, it is desirable to coordinate certain other law enforcement operations conducted by the Sheriff and LEI within _____ County in order to utilize law enforcement resources efficiently, avoid conflicts, plan for staffing and allocation of resources, set priorities, and provide backup and support. This OA also addresses coordination of other specifically enumerated law enforcement activities between LEI and the Sheriff.

LEI does not take enforcement actions within _____ County under state and local laws, regulations, or ordinances unless designated by the Sheriff as special deputies or cross designated by other state or local law enforcement agencies, and acting within the scope of any pertinent restrictions of such designations, in accordance with state law. A designation agreement may be entered upon mutual agreement between the Sheriff and LEI, and any enforcement actions by LEI under state or local laws will be governed by that agreement.

The Sheriff's Operating Procedures

- A. The Sheriff has primary authority for enforcement of state and local laws within _____ County, and may respond to and take enforcement actions for violation of state and local laws within a National Forest as allowed by

available resources and as the Sheriff deems appropriate. Federal law recognizes that state jurisdiction over persons within National Forests is not affected or changed by the creation of the National Forest, except as against the United States, under 16 U.S.C. 480.

- B. When LEI makes an arrest consistent with this OA, the Sheriff will provide LEI with access to jail facilities for booking the violator. In the event the Sheriff is not responsible for the administration of the Jail in the County, LEI should negotiate with responsible jail administrator for housing needs.
- C. The Sheriff may designate LEI officers as special deputies in accordance with state law as the Sheriff deems appropriate, and the operations of designated LEI officers will be governed by a separate designation agreement.
- D. The Sheriff will provide opportunities for LEI officers that operate within _____ County to attend the Sheriff's regularly scheduled in-service training at no additional cost to the Sheriff.
- E. The Sheriff may create a local Law Enforcement Council (LEC), consisting of representatives from the Sheriff's office, Forest Service LEI, and other law enforcement agencies.
- F. The Sheriff may utilize the LEC as a forum to create and review an annual law enforcement coordination plan among the agencies involved in the LEC.
- G. If the Sheriff designates LEI officers as special deputies, the designation agreement will set forth respective responsibilities for booking and completing necessary reports.

LEI Operating Procedures

- A. LEI will take enforcement action for violation of Federal traffic laws within _____ County, subject to the following provisions:
 - 1. Inside the exterior boundaries of a National Forest or National Grassland
 - 2. Outside the exterior boundaries of a National Forest or National Grassland, LEI will take enforcement actions for violation of Federal traffic laws only when:
 - a. Within rights-of-way owned by the United States and administered by the Forest Service; or,
 - b. When in fresh pursuit of a violator from within the exterior boundaries of a National Forest or National Grassland; or,
 - c. Federal traffic laws apply to the violation; and
 - 1. There is an immediate threat to public safety or to property; or,
 - 2. When requested by the Sheriff or official designated by the Sheriff
 - 3. LEI will contact the appropriate dispatcher upon observing or receiving a report of a traffic violation of state or local law outside of the National Forest on a road that is subject to both state/local and Federal traffic laws, prior to taking enforcement action under Federal law.
- B. LEI will provide the Sheriff with contact information and procedures for filing citizen complaints regarding LEI officer conduct.
- C. LEI will accept designation for LEI officers as special deputies when offered by the Sheriff and as deemed appropriate by the Forest Service LEI under Federal law, and the operations of designated LEI officers will be governed by a separate designation agreement.
- D. LEI will participate in LEC meetings.
- E. LEI will meet with the Sheriff at least once per year to discuss mutual operational matters related to National Forest lands within _____ County.
- F. Nothing in this OA shall preclude LEI from taking appropriate action to respond to immediate threats to public safety.

Joint Operating Procedures

- A. The Sheriff and designated representative of LEI will meet at least once per year to exchange information regarding mutual law enforcement activities on National Forest lands in _____ County and agree upon an annual plan for law enforcement activities within National Forests and National Grasslands in the upcoming year.
- B. The Sheriff and LEI will keep one another informed of important events, decisions, and law enforcement operations that may require coordination or addi-

tional personnel, resources, or equipment on National Forest lands within _____ County.

- C. LEI or the Sheriff may terminate this OA by providing 30 days written notice to the other party. Otherwise, this agreement shall continue in effect for as long as the Sheriff holds office, and shall terminate when the Sheriff leaves office.
- D. This OA may be modified or amended by mutual written agreement of the Sheriff and LEI.
- E. The Sheriff may request an “after action review” of incidents where LEI took enforcement action for a violation under Federal laws within the county. All such incidents will be reported by LEI and discussed at the annual meeting between the Sheriff and LEI representatives, whether or not an after action review is conducted for the incident.
- F. The OA is not a contract of employment, and does not designate any LEI officers as special deputies. Each party is responsible for the wages, benefits and liabilities of their respective employees. Any designation of LEI officers as special deputies will set forth respective responsibilities for wages, benefits, and liabilities of respective employees.
- G. LEI and the Sheriff hereby designate the following contacts for matters arising under this OA:

LEI

The Sheriff

ATTACHMENT 2

December 4, 2024

Members,
United States Congress,
Washington D.C.

Honorable Members of Congress,

The Western States Sheriffs['] Association (WSSA) is an organization representing over 1,200 Sheriffs in 18 states west of the Mississippi. Our mission is to assist Sheriffs with Federal, state and local legislative issues and work to keep the Office of Sheriff strong.

Over the past year our organization has been working to halt the promulgation of RIN 0596-AD57, proposed changes to 36 CFR 261, U.S. Forest Service Proposed Criminal Prohibition Rule. This rule, if implemented, would provide the law enforcement officers within the U.S. Forest Service Federal authority over personal property crimes and crimes against persons on all National Forest System lands managed by the USFS.

The leadership within the WSSA has reviewed this rule and has vigorously argued against its implementation. The rule is wrought with legal and constitutional hurdles that we feel cannot be overcome by its passage. The Assimilation of state crime into Federal code is not legal nor can it be allowed on lands of proprietary interest. With some limited exceptions in the east half of the United States, all lands managed by the USFS are lands of proprietary interest and therefore cannot be subject to assimilation standards as might normally be applied.

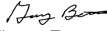
In our conversations with leadership within the USFS, we are told they are happy to cede jurisdiction of personal property crimes and crimes against persons in those counties where the Sheriff indicates the desire to be the first responder. This philosophy is flawed in that the primary jurisdiction for crimes against persons and property already rests with the Sheriff. The USFS cannot delegate authority they do not have.

We feel it is in the best interest of the citizens of the western United States that this rule be struck down in the Congressional review process at this time. An alternate course of action is to engage the leadership of the USFS and the WSSA to promulgate a National Memorandum of Understanding to provide a clear path forward for the collaborative enforcement efforts on National Forest System lands.

We ask that those responsible within Congress take the appropriate actions now to stop this rule and allow for open and frank conversation moving forward that protects the sovereign authority of the Sheriff while retaining a focus on serving the public who visit and recreate on NFS managed lands.

Please contact us should you have any questions

Sincerely,



GARY BETTENCOURT, *Sheriff*
Gilliam County, Oregon
President, WSSA

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you, Mr. Glover. Mr. Joseph, you may begin when you're ready.

**STATEMENT OF TRAVIS JOSEPH, PRESIDENT AND CHIEF
EXECUTIVE OFFICER, AMERICAN FOREST RESOURCE
COUNCIL, PORTLAND, OR**

Mr. JOSEPH. Chairman Newhouse, Ranking Member Salinas, Members of the Committee, good morning. I thank you for this opportunity. My name is Travis Joseph. I'm the President and CEO of the American Forest Resource Council. We have the privilege of representing the forest product sector, many of the mills, the loggers, the truck drivers, the contractors, and the supply chains that actively manage and steward our National Forests that belong to all Americans. We are critical partners of the Forest Service, and we have been since the agency's founding 120 years ago. We want to be partners to help manage National Forests for another 120 years.

Our members buy Federal timber on the most regulated lands on planet Earth: our National Forests. We harvest using the best science and the most advanced forest practices in the world. We bring Federal timber to local mills, and we make all kinds of wood products that are essential to society, from housing and construction, to paper and packaging, to medicine and food, and renewable energy and fuel. That's just the start. We do so much more. Our members grow and plant millions of seedlings on private and Federal lands. We do wildfire detection and suppression. We do wildfire prevention work. We do fish and wildlife habitat restoration work, trail and construction, road repair and maintenance.

Across this country, the forest product sector employs tens of thousands of certified foresters, engineers, scientists, welders, mechanics, heavy equipment operators, IT professionals, accountants, lawyers, and drone pilots, just to name a few. We care deeply about our health and the resiliency of our National Forests. The plight of our communities and our businesses are intertwined with the plight of our Federal forests. It's where we hike, it's where we camp, it's where we hunt, it's where we fish, it's where we work, and as those who work in and near our National Forests every day, we can tell you that the scale of our Federal forest and health crisis is staggering.

It's now estimated that between 80 and a hundred million acres of National Forests are at high risk of catastrophic wildfire, disease, and insect infestations. We stand at a critical moment. The *status quo* is not working, and it's putting these public forests and all their invaluable benefits to society at risk. It's a threat to countless rural communities, to public health, to public safety, to our neighbors and to our businesses. We can and we must solve this, and we can together. The forest products industry, states, counties, Tribes, and other partners, we have the expertise, we have the ca-

capacity, we have the infrastructure, we have the people, we have the will. We're problem solvers. We share common interests: managing our National Forests and taking care of our communities.

[See, photo on p. 30.]

Mr. JOSEPH. We have two pictures in front of you. The one right now is up on the screen. You have two pictures in your packets. This first one here is from the Archie Creek Fire in Oregon. This forest stand is dead, and the forest stands as far as you can see from the ridge top are dead. I took this picture myself 2 weeks ago. That fire occurred 6 years ago. It's a shocking sight to see in person. That area will likely never regenerate naturally because the fire burned so hot, and that's what that forest stand will look like in the future for your kids, and your grandkids, and your great grandkids. This is not environmentalism. This is not good stewardship. It's neglect, and it's wrong.

That's one picture of one fire during one year on one National Forest, and I'm sharing it with you because I want you to see where the *status quo* of Federal forest management is taking us. Similar environmental catastrophes like this exist on National Forests in all western states.

[See, photo on p. 32.]

Mr. JOSEPH. The second picture is a picture of a shaded fuel break in northern California along a major highway corridor, and this is what a successful partnership looks like. In this case, a neighboring private forest landowner, Sierra Pacific Industries—SBI—worked with the Forest Service, CAL FIRE firefighters, and experts and partners on the ground to create defensible space and strategic locations to help prevent the kinds of wildfires that have wiped out entire forests and communities in California. I took this picture last week. This is important work. It's proactive, it's intentional, it can save property and infrastructure, taxpayer dollars, and most importantly, it can help save communities and lives.

That's one picture of one partnership, on one at-risk landscape on one National Forest, and I'm sharing it because it represents what's possible. One forest products company or other forest products company and members of AFRC, we're doing amazing work like this all over the West. We need to do more, and we need to do it faster. If the Forest Service was able to fully leverage the assets and expertise of all of its partners, the potential is limitless. That's the exciting part, and that's also where Congress comes in, right?

We're not oblivious to all of the challenges that are in front of the Forest Service right now. We're asking Congress to zoom out to look at the current system of how we manage National Forests. We need to rethink our approach. We need to ask important questions. What outcomes do we want from our National Forests? Are we achieving those outcomes? If not, why? And how do we align and modernize our approach, our laws and regulations to deal with 21st century challenges to create new opportunities and new partnerships on National Forests? Creative, powerful relationships and solutions exist. Good forestry and good forest stewardship is not a partisan issue. Partnerships are essential. In fact, I would argue it's the only way that Congress and the Forest Service is going to

be able to deliver better environmental, social, and economic outcomes for the American public.

Count the forest products industry in. We're here. We're at the table. We want durable, bipartisan solutions. We want healthy forests and healthy communities. We're here to ask, how do we help you, Congress, to build and grow partnerships into the future? Thank you.

[The prepared statement of Mr. Joseph follows:]

PREPARED STATEMENT OF TRAVIS JOSEPH, PRESIDENT AND CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER, AMERICAN FOREST RESOURCE COUNCIL, PORTLAND, OR

Chairman Newhouse and Ranking Member Salinas, and Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for this opportunity. On behalf of the forest products industry and those that steward our Federal lands, it is an honor and privilege to share our perspective on the power and importance of partnerships to actively manage our National Forests.

Our messages are simple:

- (1) The current management paradigm of National Forests is not working.
- (2) Active management is the solution.
- (3) Partnerships are the key to implementing active management *at scale*.

AFRC and FTPC represent the Partners of the Forest Service

I am Travis Joseph, the President and CEO of the American Forest Resource Council (AFRC). AFRC is a nonprofit trade association representing the forest products sector in the West, including members in Montana, Idaho, Washington, Oregon, California, and Nevada. We work on behalf of the mills, loggers, contractors, truck drivers, and working family businesses—small, medium, and large—that help steward America's Federal forests.

I also currently serve as the President of the Federal Timber Purchasers Coalition (FTPC), a *national* unified voice of Federal timber purchasers and contractors with the goal of improving the quality, quantity, and operational viability of active management projects on Federal lands. FTPC was originally formed in 1962 (called the Federal Timber Purchasers "Committee") at the behest of then-Secretary of Agriculture Orville Freeman who sought a group to be the principal point of contact and communication between the Forest Service and the forest products industry relating to timber sales and timber sale contracts.

These two organizations **represent the partners of the Forest Service**. Our relationship with the Forest Service and Federal forests is symbiotic: if our forests go away, so do many of our members. If the Forest Service fails, our businesses and communities suffer. If the forest products industry goes away, the Forest Service will be unable to steward, conserve, and protect our forests. We make up the critical infrastructure—physical and human infrastructure—needed to help address our forest health and wildfire crises on Federal lands.

The Current Management Paradigm is not Working

The current approach on Federal lands is not working. The Forest Service is relying on a 20th Century "passive" management paradigm to address dynamic, 21st Century ecological, economic, and social challenges. Passive management refers to an approach that minimizes human intervention and relies on natural ecological processes to drive forest outcomes. The most obvious example of this approach is the Northwest Forest Plan, which governs approximately 24 million acres of Federal forests in Western Washington, Western Oregon, and Northern California.

The Northwest Forest Plan was developed and adopted by the Clinton Administration—not Congress—in 1994 with the goal of saving the Northern Spotted Owl (NSO) from extinction and providing a predictable volume of timber for local economies. The Plan placed static lines on a map prohibiting or restricting science-based, active forest management on more than 80% of the National Forests in the Pacific Northwest.

The Plan has not achieved its stated objectives, yet it has not been updated or modernized since its adoption 30 years ago. The NSO is at serious risk of extinction because of competition from the barred owl and catastrophic wildfires that are destroying millions of acres of old growth forests and owl habitat—not logging.

Even though the Plan projected an 80% reduction in timber harvest levels in the Pacific Northwest, the Forest Service has fallen far short of meeting the Probable

Sale Quantity, the amount of timber that can be sustainably harvested, outlined in the Plan over the past 30 years. Mills, workers, supply chains, and rural counties and communities that are adjacent to and rely on healthy, productive Federal lands have suffered deeply and consistently because of these policy decisions.

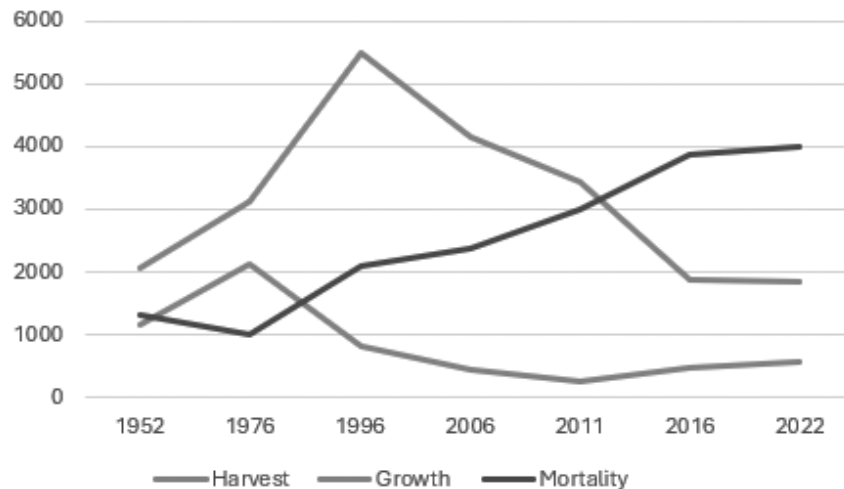
Policy Recommendation

The Biden Administration started a process to narrowly amend the Northwest Forest Plan in 2023. The Trump Administration has continued the process. The Northwest Forest Plan was developed for the conditions and scientific understanding of 1994. Thirty years later, the Forest Service should not settle for an amendment that reinforces the existing framework. The agency should rescope the effort and pursue a broader revision that supports active management, empowers Tribal voices, reduces wildfire risk, improves forest health, and restores sustained-yield timber production.

Unfortunately, the trends highlighted above are not unique to the Pacific Northwest. If you zoom out and examine national trends of forest health, wildfire, and timber outputs over the last 60 years, the outcomes are equally sobering:

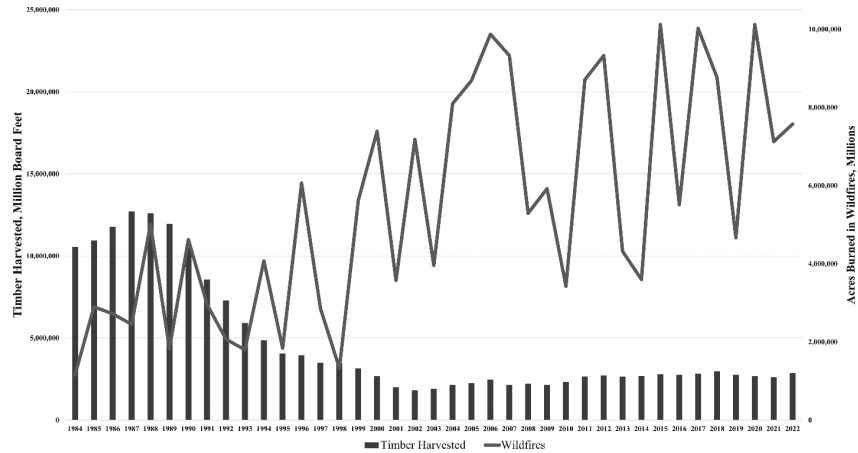
Over the last 6 decades, despite an 80% reduction in timber harvests nationally, our National Forests are growing *less* and *dying* more.

Annual Harvest, Net Growth, and Mortality on NFS Lands 1952–2022



The Federal forest health and wildfire crisis trends can also be expressed by comparing timber harvests levels—*one tool* of active management—to acres burned:

Timber Harvested vs. Burned on Federal Forests



In both graphics, we see significant spikes in wildfires, forest mortality, and loss in net growth occurring in the late 1990s and early 2000s. This is when the Forest Service made a policy shift to *passive* forest management. A quarter-century later that policy shift continues to impact Americans, businesses, communities, and society in ways we never anticipated or could have imagined.

Consider the public health impacts of wildfire and smoke:

- We now know that wildfire smoke exposure is associated with asthma exacerbations, pulmonary disease, respiratory infections, heart disease, heart failure, pulmonary embolism, strokes, out-of-hospital cardiac arrests, and all-cause mortality. It impacts our brains, lungs, and hearts. It impacts our most vulnerable populations—children, seniors, pregnant women, families in poverty, people with mobility challenges—the hardest and disproportionately.
- A 2024 study found that more than **50,000 people** died prematurely in California alone over a decade due to exposure to toxic particles in wildfire smoke. Over the same period, Californians paid at least **\$432 billion in health expenses** associated with smoke exposure.
- In 2010, less than 350,000 Americans were exposed to at least 1 day of unhealthy levels of exposure to particulate matter pollution (PM_{2.5}) from smoke. In 2020, that number increased to **8.3 million Americans exposed to unhealthy levels of PM_{2.5}**.

Consider the environmental consequences of catastrophic wildfires:

- According to data from the National Interagency Fire Center and CALFIRE, between 2001 and 2024, **11.75 million acres out of 15.5 million acres of National Forest system forestland in California burned**, including many acres at a high severity.
- A recent study in the journal *Frontiers in Forests and Global Change*¹ found that about **3 million acres of medium-to-high priority forestlands in California are on track to convert to brush fields due to a lack of reforestation following wildfire**. Let that sink, 3 million acres deforested from wildfire.
- A University of Chicago study found that a single year of **wildfire emissions is close to double the carbon emissions reductions achieved by California over the previous 16 years** through regulation. The researchers looked at the financial costs and calculated the **carbon emission released from 2020 in California alone caused \$7 billion in total global damages**, or about \$986.9 million in damages to the United States. These damages are in addition to fire control costs, damages from air pollution, and direct costs to life and property.

¹ <https://www.frontiersin.org/journals/forests-and-global-change/articles/10.3389/ffgc.2026.1764379/full>.

Consider the consequences to small business, working people, recreation, and access:

- Research has found that hospitality employment declines following major wildfires, with the greatest impacts occurring in communities closest to burned areas. Wildfire smoke also reduces worker productivity and earnings across multiple sectors of the economy. Researchers at Stanford University estimated that **smoke exposure reduces labor income by roughly \$125 billion annually**. The economic impacts extend far beyond the fire perimeter, affecting businesses, workers, and local economies alike.
- Severe wildfires reduce access to public lands and harm recreational opportunities. Research from the University of Colorado found **visitation declined by 15% to 20%** in areas affected by high severity wildfire. In California, **visitation fell by an average of 18%** in the first year after a fire. In areas burned at high severity, **visitation losses reached 33% and showed no recovery even 5 years later**. Healthy forests support recreation. Catastrophic wildfire closes trails, damages campgrounds, drives away visitors, and leaves lasting impacts on communities and small businesses.
- Notably, the University of Colorado research also found **visitation often increased in areas where forest management treatments had occurred**.



A popular hiking trail on the Umpqua National Forest in southwest Oregon remains closed 6 years after the Archie Creek fire burned 131,000 acres due to hazard trees and public safety risks.

Active Management is the Solution

Reversing these trends requires modernizing our approach to Federal forest management. It means pivoting from the current passive, preservation management approach to *active management*.

What is active management? Active management is about applying the right treatment, in the right place, at the right time. Active forest management includes a range of forestry and silviculture tools. This includes commercial timber harvests, thinning, prescribed burning, selective harvesting, and mastication. Active management is about action. It is intentional.

The science and data are clear and indisputable: active forest management works. It can help protect communities, public health, public safety, and human lives from catastrophic wildfires. Active management is a wise investment that saves taxpayer dollars before, during, and after fires.

A new study published in *Science*² last month by researchers at the University of California, Davis found that **every dollar spent on forest health treatments saves about \$3.75 in wildfire damages**. The study is the first to look at the eco-

²<https://www.science.org/doi/10.1126/science.aea6463>.

conomic value of Forest Service fuel treatments across the West at a large scale. The study estimated that **active management, such as thinning and prescribed burns, prevented \$2.8 billion in losses, reduced wildfire spread and severity.**

A recent meta-analysis published in *Forest Ecology and Management*³ reviewed dozens of studies across western conifer forests and found that active management treatments including **mechanical thinning and prescribed fire reduced subsequent wildfire severity by 62% to 72% compared to untreated areas.** The researchers found these treatments were effective across multiple forest types and a wide range of fire weather conditions. The study concluded that active forest management facilitates better outcomes for both forests and people during future wildfire events.

Another study published in *Frontiers in Forests and Global Change*⁴ last year found that **treated forests are 88% less susceptible to high severity wildfire than unmanaged forests,** and can recover carbon stocks in only 7 years, a conclusion reached after reviewing over 200 thinning projects implemented in California over the last decade.

*Research*⁵ has also shown that larger forest management projects deliver the greatest benefits. Treatments covering more than 2,400 acres produced stronger wildfire resilience outcomes compared with smaller projects.

Policy Recommendation

The Forest Service took a major step forward to modernize the management paradigm of National Forests in May 2025 when it released the *National Active Forest Management Strategy*.⁶ The Strategy describes priority actions under four main subject areas: Capacity Building and Streamlining Implementation; Environmental Compliance; Shared Stewardship, Partnerships, Contracting, and Markets; and Salvage and Reforestation. Congress should endorse the National Active Forest Management Strategy and work with the Forest Service to identify and remove barriers to its implementation.

The Power and Success of Partnerships

Active management of National Forests—responsibly stewarding and caring for 193 million acres of multi-use Federal lands—***is only possible through partnerships.***

The Forest Service is going through dynamic change: workforce reductions, an agency-wide reorganization, and years of flat or declining Congressional appropriations. At the same time, the Forest Service is being asked to do more: increase capacity for wildfire prevention, protection, and suppression, increase acres treated and timber harvest levels; maintain and increase public access and recreational opportunities.

In other words, the Forest Service is being asked by Congress and Administrations to do more, with less. The only way the agency will be successful in achieving and delivering those outcomes to the American public is by building and investing in existing and new partnerships. Here are a few examples of successful partnerships that can and should be replicated across the West:

Tribal Partnerships and Co-Management

For decades, the Federal Government has excluded Tribes from meaningful collaboration and consultation in informing, planning, executing, and monitoring decisions on public lands. This is morally wrong and must change. Tribes are critical partners to restoring active management and stewardship to Federal forests. We strongly support the Forest Service's current efforts to expand Tribal partnerships and co-management.

For example, this year, the Cow Creek Band of Umpqua Tribe of Indians (Cow Creek Tribe) and the Forest Service signed a groundbreaking stewardship government-to-government agreement to accelerate wildfire mitigation and forest health treatments across 155,000 acres of the Umpqua National Forest and Rogue River-Siskiyou National Forest.

Over the last decade, nearly 1 million acres within the Cow Creek Tribe's ancestral lands have burned. The agreement provides the Cow Creek Tribe with the op-

³<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S037811272400197X>.

⁴<https://www.vibrantplanet.net/insights/the-forest-fire-paradox-remove-trees-to-protect-forest-carbon-sinks>.

⁵https://www.perc.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/05/PERC26_BeyondWildfireSuppression.pdf.

⁶<https://www.usda.gov/sites/default/files/documents/national-active-forest-management-strategy.pdf>.

portunity to be active participants—and active managers—to exercise its expertise in forest management to protect cultural lands and resources. The remarks of the Chairwoman of the Cow Creek Tribe, Carla Keene, at the signing are worth noting:

“Our ancestors understood what we know today: that healthy forests require active management, cultural knowledge, and a commitment that extends far beyond any one generation. This agreement doesn’t only mark an important moment in our Tribal history, but for anyone in Oregon who wants fewer wildfires, less smoke, and healthier forests” (emphasis added).

Shared Stewardship opportunities directly support long-term shared goals by allowing Tribes and Federal agencies to work together at a meaningful scale. For the Cow Creek Tribe, this work aligns closely with the Tribe’s priorities of wildfire prevention, ecological protection, and community advancement. It also supports the Forest Service’s goals of improving forest resilience, restoring healthy ecosystems, and strengthening local communities. At the heart of this partnership is a shared commitment to the same outcomes: healthier forests, safer communities, and more effective stewardship of the land.

Tribes throughout the Pacific Northwest and West are eager to pursue similar opportunities and partnerships.



The 2020 Archie Creek fire 6 years later. A dead National Forest—and Roadless Area—as far as you can see. This picture was taken on June 12, 2026. Current laws and regulations, such as the Roadless Rule, do not encourage timely, active management and restoration after a catastrophic wildfire event. It is unlikely this forest stand will naturally regenerate and may be converted to brush.

Policy Recommendation

Congress should look to expand Tribal co-management authorities over adjacent Federal lands. The Indian Trust Asset Reform Act (ITARA) and The FORESTS Act provide promising management tools, efficiencies, and authorities that would increase Tribe-led active management of at-risk public lands while still complying with Federal environmental laws.

State and County Partnerships: Shared Stewardship/Good Neighbor Authority

States and counties are, and will continue to be, essential to actively managing Federal forests to address wildfire and forest health threats. Montana is a great example of the progress and potential for Federal-state cooperation, particularly of the Good Neighbor Authority (GNA).

The Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation (Montana DNRC) and the Forest Service have grown the Montana GNA program significantly since its first year in 2018, when there was a single project. Seven years later, in Fiscal Year 2025, there were over 70 projects and 54 million board feet of timber sold through the Montana GNA.

Shared stewardship allows land managers to collaboratively identify needs, set priorities, and coordinate work across boundaries. By combining expertise, projects can move more efficiently from planning to implementation. A year ago, Montana DNRC and the Forest Service signed an agreement establishing a new framework for coordinated, cross-boundary active forest management between the agency and the state. The first two priority landscapes include over 400,000 acres within the Flathead, Kootenai and Bitterroot National Forests. This year, another 345,000 acres were added to the Shared Stewardship agreement for a total of 750,000 acres in Montana.

Similarly, in neighboring Idaho, the state has over 6 million acres of forestland designated as “high risk” for insect and disease outbreaks and potential catastrophic wildfire. The State of Idaho collaborated with the Forest Service to achieve a Shared Stewardship agreement signed in 2018.

The Idaho Department of Lands, the Forest Service and the Natural Resources Conservation Service are sharing staff, funding and are joining with a governor-appointed advisory group to identify mutual priorities and cross-boundary forest management opportunities. The *Idaho Forest Action Plan*⁷ serves as a path forward for identifying and addressing forest threats across the state. The Idaho Shared Stewardship initiatives include the all-lands strategies, GNA projects, and cross-boundary project work to mitigate these threats across forested lands in Idaho.

Under Chief Schultz’s leadership, the Forest Service is now renewing and expanding Shared Stewardship agreements with all 50 states, several territories, Tribes, and other partners. We strongly support these efforts. We believe Federal-state partnerships are essential to increasing active management of National Forests.

Policy Recommendation

Currently, GNA cooperators are authorized to repair, construct, decommission, and restore Forest Service roads, or construct temporary roads necessary to complete authorized restoration work. However, construction of permanent roads is *not authorized*. This blanket prohibition—regardless of the conditions on the ground—has been a roadblock to GNA partners to expanding and completing needed restoration and fuel reduction work in some areas. Removing this roadblock is a major priority for proactive GNA states and partners throughout the country.

We strongly support a targeted technical fix to Section 2113a(a)(4)(B)(i) of the GNA authority to clarify a bipartisan goal (restoration) and reduce ambiguity and legal risk.

Partnerships with the Forest Products Industry

On National Forests, the forest products industry is the contractor that executes the active management work and multiple-use mission of Federal land management agencies. The Forest Service has depended on our sector to achieve the agency’s land management and conservation goals since its founding in 1905.

We are critical partners of the Forest Service and we have been for over 120 years.

We buy Federal timber on the most regulated lands on planet [E]arth. We harvest using the best science and most advanced forest practices in the world. We bring it to local mills and make all kinds of wood products used for everything you can think of: from housing and construction, to paper and packaging, to pharmaceuticals, food, and renewable energy and fuel.

That’s just the start. We do so much more. Our members grow and plant millions of seedlings every year on Federal lands. We do **wildfire detection** and **suppression**. **Wildfire prevention** work. Fish and wildlife habitat restoration. Trail construction. Road repair and maintenance.

Across the country, our members employ tens of thousands of certified foresters, engineers, scientists, welders, mechanics, heavy equipment operators, IT professionals, accountants, lawyers, and drone pilots—just to name a few.

We have the expertise. The capacity. The will. The motivation. The innovation. The creativity. We’re problem solvers. We share common values and interests. The forest products industry—my members—are here to work with you, Congress and

⁷ <https://www.idl.idaho.gov/about-forestry/shared-stewardship/forest-action-plan/>.

the land management agencies, as partners to responsibly steward our Federal lands and forests; reduce the risk of catastrophic wildfire; and improve forest health.

Here are a few examples of our success stories:

Shaded Fuel Breaks



The above picture is of a shaded fuel break in northern California along a major highway corridor. It grew out of an agreement with the Department of Agriculture last year that was made possible by Congressional funding. In this case, a private forestland owner worked with the Forest Service, CALFIRE firefighters, and other experts to create defensible space in strategic locations to help prevent the kind of wildfires that have wiped out entire communities in California.

The project is happening right now with the goal of establishing a comprehensive fuel break network over the next 3 years to protect lives, property, critical water infrastructure, and the environment.

Fuel breaks have a 68% *success rate*⁸ in containing fires when coupled with the proper suppression resources. The cost of maintaining fuel breaks is a fraction of the cost of wildfire suppression. In California, the communities of Butte Meadows and Forest Ranch were protected in the 2024 Park Fire due to the *Highway 32 Fuel Break*⁹ (video). San Diego County benefited from a federally managed *fuel break*,¹⁰ slowing down the progression of the 2024 Grove 2 Fire.

I took this picture last week and saw, firsthand, the effectiveness and potential of shaded fuel breaks. It is just one project, one partnership, on one at-risk landscape. This example represents what is possible. It represents opportunity. *Other forest product companies and partners—AFRC members—are doing shaded fuel breaks throughout the West.* This is good forestry. These are smart investments. This is proactive management. We need to do more, and faster.

Policy Recommendation

Congress should authorize and appropriate specific, consistent, annual funding for strategic fuel breaks systems across ownership boundaries focusing on the most at-risk landscapes and communities.

⁸ https://www.fs.usda.gov/rm/pubs_journals/2023/rmrs_2023_gannon_b001.pdf.

⁹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g-3TXqY3ugY>.

¹⁰ <https://www.blm.gov/blog/2025-01-07/how-fuel-breaks-helped-wildfire-agencies-contain-grove-2-fire-eastern-san-diego>.

Congress established a fuel break CE of up to 1,000 feet wide and encompassing up to 3,000 acres in the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act. Congress should expand the size of this critical wildfire prevention tool to match conditions and needs on the ground.

Hazard Tree Removal

Catastrophic wildfires, disease and insect infestations, and weather events are not only destroying and deforesting millions of acres of National Forests, they are closing tens of thousands of miles of roads and trails that are essential to public access of public lands. This means long-term or permanent closures to some of the most popular campgrounds, hiking trails, boat launches, and other recreational sites across the West—not to mention critical access and control lines for firefighters.

On the Forest Service *webpage*,¹¹ the agency is clear about the dangers of hazard trees: “Dead and dying trees, or snags, pose a major threat to wildland firefighter safety. *Tree strikes are among the most frequent causes of severe injury and sometimes death*” (emphasis added).

The dangers and risks are not limited to firefighters in the backcountry. Tragically, in 2023, a hazard tree—a dead tree on the side of Idaho Highway 55 near Horseshoe Bend—fell and hit a car killing an 8th grader named Colton Jones.

The scale and scope of hazard trees across National Forests is almost incomprehensible. The Forest Service estimates that there are over **100 million trees** killed or weakened by drought and bark beetles that **are a falling hazard in the Pacific Southwest Region alone**. The Forest Service maintains a *National Snag Hazard Map*¹² to help the public and firefighters identify areas with the highest risk of severe injury or death.

In 2021, the Forest Service attempted to reopen 170,000 acres of the Willamette National Forest to the public that were impacted by the 2020 Labor Day Fires. The Forest Service planned to remove hazard trees along 400 miles of forest roads. Anti-forestry groups sued. A Federal judge halted the plan and questioned the agency’s analysis and expertise to identify and remove trees that pose the highest risk to the public and firefighters. *Cascadia Wildlands v. Warnack*, 570 F. Supp. 3d 983 (D. Or. 2021). The project didn’t happen.



Hundreds of miles of roads and trails remain closed on the Willamette National Forest in western Oregon, 6 years after the Labor Day Fires burned over 1 million acres across the state. Courtesy: *Statesman Journal* File, published November 5, 2021.

A year before in 2020, the Forest Service attempted to remove fire-damaged trees on 7,000 acres in the Mendocino National Forest in response to the 2018 Ranch Fire, the then-largest wildfire in California history that burned 410,000 acres, including 288,000 acres in Mendocino National Forests (the August Complex Fire burned 1.032 million acres in 2020 across seven counties and is now the largest wildfire in California history). An anti-forestry group sued and sought a preliminary injunction. A split Ninth Circuit panel opinion reversed the district court and granted the preliminary injunction, ultimately blocking the time-sensitive project. Two judges opined that the anti-forestry group was likely to succeed on the merits of its claims that the Forest Service’s choice to rely on the road maintenance Categorical Exclusion (CE) to clear all trees deemed hazardous within 200 feet of the road was arbitrary and capricious. The work did not get done. *Env’t Prot. Info. Ctr. v. Carl-*

¹¹ <https://research.fs.usda.gov/rmrs/products/dataandtools/national-snag-hazard-map>.

¹² <https://research.fs.usda.gov/rmrs/products/dataandtools/national-snag-hazard-map>.

son, 968 F.3d 985 (9th Cir. 2020). The roads, trails, and impacted forests are still closed and dangerous.

The Forest Service currently lacks a streamlined authority to remove hazard trees, which has forced the agency to close roads, trails, and campgrounds and simply walk away. These outcomes are unacceptable, and unsustainable.

The forest products industry regularly, effectively, and safely removes hazard trees on neighboring private, county, and state forestland and roads throughout the West—and on Federal land and roads when given the chance. If done quickly, mills can recover economic value in hazard trees and actually *pay the Forest Service* to remove the hazards, open the roads, and reduce fuels. Those payments can be used to conduct additional post-fire restoration work.

On the other hand, if delayed, that value is lost and taxpayers have to pick up the bill to cut down hazard trees, leave them on the ground to fuel the next fire, or accept the permanent closure of the road network.

We stand ready to help the Forest Service to quickly clean up and remove hazard trees along critical forest roads and trails after catastrophic events so the public can access their lands, and firefighters have safer access to protect National Forests and communities.

Policy Recommendation

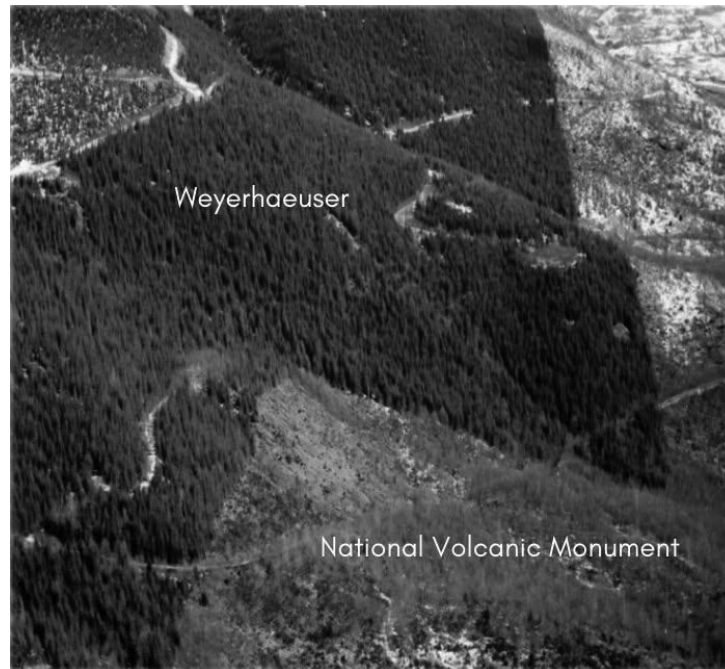
Congress should *legislate* a hazard tree CE to give the Forest Service flexibility and legal certainty to remove hazard trees that pose a risk to the public, firefighters, and public access. In the bipartisan House and Senate versions of the Fix Our Forest Act the type of CE needed by the Forest Service is *described*, but the bill directs the Secretary of Agriculture to promulgate the CE within 1 year. Finalizing a new hazard tree CE through the administrative process will take years to complete, be litigated, and likely not be given the same deference as a legislated CE in court. Congress should provide clarity, predictability, and direction to the Forest Service through legislation.

Post Wildfire Restoration and Reforestation

Similarly, after major wildfires, drought, wind or ice events, volcanoes (see below), insect infestation, or disease impact forests, the Forest Service is unable to remove dead and dying trees from devastated landscapes, leaving millions of dead trees to fall, rot, and become dangerous fuel loads for future wildfires on millions of acres of Federal forests. Inaction to “salvage” high mortality landscapes is a public safety and environmental hazard, and impedes the agency’s ability to safely and successfully replant Federal forests—leading to massive deforestation.

There is no better visual of the consequences of action *vs.* inaction than the 1980 eruption of Mount St. Helens and its impact to surrounding Federal and private forestland. Dead and dying trees on private forestland (Weyerhaeuser) were immediately harvested and replanted with seedlings. Beginning in 1981, more than 18 million seedlings were planted across 45,000 acres of private land. Weyerhaeuser’s lands are reforested and have even been thinned and managed since the eruption.

Congress took a different course in 1982 and established the blast zone as the Mount St. Helens National Volcanic Monument. The monument is “managed” by the Forest Service. Dead and dying trees were not removed and the area was not replanted. What outcome (see below) do you think the American public would prefer today, more than 45 years later?

Mount St. Helens*Blast Zone Reforestation*

Even when the Forest Service does attempt to move forward to salvage and restore Federal forests after these events, current processes and litigation prevent the agencies from doing so in a timely manner (within 1–2 years after an event). This prevents or discourages the agencies from removing dead and dying trees and selling them to local mills and utilizing the revenue to restore National Forests. It also makes reforestation extremely expensive and difficult to achieve—or it does not happen at all due to safety and operational concerns posed by dead trees.

Unfortunately, the Forest Service only annually reforests 6% of its burned lands. The result is a backlog of nearly 4 million acres of unmet reforestation needs. Failing to restore, rehabilitate, and replant millions of acres of Federal forests after catastrophic events—land owned by the American public—is unacceptable and would be unconscionable on private forestland. As a consequence, we are losing Federal forests to conversion.

As mentioned above, a California study found that about 3 million acres of medium-to-high priority forestlands are on track to convert to brush fields. That's over 60% of the size of the State of New Jersey. If the recent trend continues, the study found that we are looking at the widespread loss of conifer forests in California. Sadly, we know Federal forests face a similar crisis in other Western states. High-severity wildfires are now driving 81% of the reforestation need across the U.S.

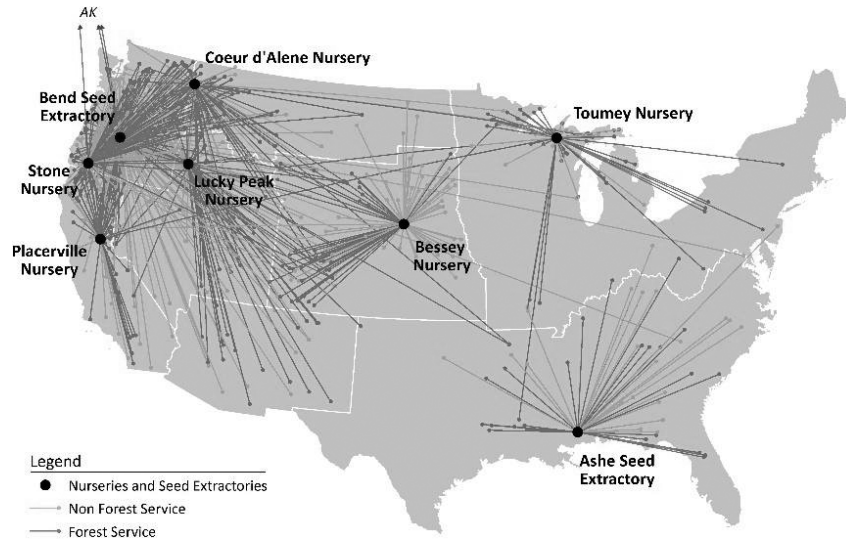
The forest products industry regularly, effectively, and safely salvages, restores, and replants neighboring private, county, and state forestland throughout the West after catastrophic events.

For example, after the 2020 Labor Day Fires in Oregon, the Forest Service replanted 75,000 acres of the 215,000 acres burned at medium to high severity, or about 34%. Large private landowners replanted approximately 180,000 acres out of 187,000 acres burned at medium to high severity, or 95%. We know how to do restoration.

We also know how to grow and replant seedlings. In 2021, Oregon produced 86 million seedlings. Washington produced 53 million seedlings. California produced more than 25 million seedlings. Idaho and Montana added another seven million seedlings. The Forest Service will increasingly rely on private nurseries and seed extractories to meet the growing reforestation needs and backlog.



Forest Service Nursery and Seed Extractory Network



We stand ready to help the Forest Service—and Congress—address our post-disturbance restoration and replanting roadblocks.

Policy Recommendation

To expedite and encourage the Forest Service to remove dead and dying trees, recover and capture the economic value of dead trees in a timely fashion, and improve conditions necessary to replant after disturbances, the Forest Service needs a legislative tool to take quick action after a catastrophic event. Currently, the Forest Service can use a CE to treat, or “salvage,” a maximum of 250 acres. The limited scope of the current CE prevents the agencies from addressing the scope and scale of 21st Century wildfire, wind and ice storm events, footprints that commonly exceed hundreds of thousands of acres.

Policy Recommendation

One of the greatest risks to the Forest Service’s ability to complete science-based, active forest management with partners at scale is litigation. The Forest Service is the most litigated agency in the Federal Government. Litigation often stalls, delays, or stops active management, even though the Forest Service successfully defends and wins a majority of its cases. Litigation is expensive, adversarial, and undermines collaboration and trust with stakeholders and partners.

While not under the exclusive jurisdiction of this Committee, Congress must consider common sense reforms to reduce anti-forestry litigation. In order to attract the necessary public-private investments, people, technical skills, and equipment and infrastructure needed to restore National Forests, targeted litigation reform is needed to create a more predictable, stable, and less risky environment for partners. For reference, I provided extensive *testimony and recommendations*¹³ during a House Natural Resources Oversight and Investigations subcommittee hearing on December 10, 2025.

Conclusion

As those who work in and near National Forests every day, we can tell you the scale of our Federal forest and wildfire crisis is staggering. The *status quo* is broken, putting these public forests and all their invaluable benefits at unacceptable risk. It’s a threat to countless rural communities. To public health and safety. To our neighbors. To our businesses.

¹³ <https://www.congress.gov/119/meeting/house/118696/witnesses/HHRG-119-II15-Wstate-JosephT-20251210-U1.pdf>.

We are asking Congress to zoom out. Look at the current system and paradigm. We need to rethink our approach, entirely and holistically. We need to ask important questions:

What outcomes do we want from our Federal forests?

Are we achieving those outcomes? If not, why?

How do we align and modernize our laws and regulations to address 21st Century challenges and create new opportunities on our National Forests?

We can and must solve this—together. Creative, powerful solutions exist. Good forestry and good forest stewardship are not partisan issues. Partnerships are essential—in fact the only way—that Congress and the Forest Service will be able to deliver better environmental, health, and economic outcomes to the American public. These lands belong to all Americans.

Count the forest products industry in. We're here. We're at the table. We want durable, bipartisan solutions. We want healthy forests and healthy communities.

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you, Mr. Joseph. Ms. Whitney, please begin when you're ready.

**STATEMENT OF MOLLY WHITNEY, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR,
CASCADE FOREST CONSERVANCY, VANCOUVER, WA**

Ms. WHITNEY. Chairman Newhouse, Ranking Member Salinas, and Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to join you today. I'm Molly Whitney, the Executive Director of the Cascade Forest Conservancy. For 40 years, my organization has worked to protect and sustain forest, streams, wildlife in the communities in southwest Washington Cascades. We do this through conservation, education, restoration, and advocacy. Conservation NGOs like the Cascade Forest Conservancy provide oversight, accountability for actions impacting our public lands. In the past, that role has often put us at odds with the Forest Service and led to litigation, but today, we increasingly engage with the agency as a collaborative partner. We work closely with the Forest Service on forest management, watershed restoration, and economic resilience.

My organization is an active and founding member of two forest collaboratives that have improved forest management and community outcomes throughout our region: the South Gifford Pinchot Collaborative and the Pinchot Partners. These forest collaboratives are stakeholder groups that provide feedback throughout the Forest Service project planning to develop well-balanced, publicly supported projects, and iron out conflicts without slow, costly litigation. The Cascade Forest Conservancy also partners with the Forest Service to implement restoration projects, including aquatic habitat restoration, beaver relocations, volunteer programs, and we support an initiative that connects local high school students to paid summer partnerships on National Forest lands.

Today, this partnership is being strained through a multitude of cutbacks. Due to uncertainty, organizational restructuring, and staffing cuts that originate at the national level, our Forest Service's ability to plan, collaborate, and execute projects effectively is being critically compromised. On the Gifford Pinchot National Forest, there are vacancies in essential positions for project planning, in timber sale administration and implementation. The interdisciplinary planning teams, which are vital to advancing projects with expert input, have decreased from three to one across the forest. As a result, the agency's capacity to move projects forward has declined, even as production expectations increase. At the same time, we are concerned about the agency's growing resilience on

categorical exclusions, emergency determinations, and exemptions from environmental review requirements. These tools do have a role, but they're increasingly used as substitutes for comprehensive, transparent planning processes with public buy-in.

Environmental assessments in the NEPA process provide meaningful opportunities for collaboration, public involvement, and Tribal consultation. This helps project planners identify problems early, strengthens project design, and reduces the likelihood of conflict. In the absence of these processes, litigation becomes the only tool we have to ensure that projects meet legal standards. Streamlining and specific solutions can be helpful, but shortcuts that sacrifice transparency and public involvement may actually hinder progress and increase our reliance on litigation rather than on collaboration and public input.

Sustaining our public lands requires ongoing public input, strong Federal agencies, and a reliable public investment. Recent shifts, a lack of clarity, and a lack of transparent dialogue among stakeholders and agency staff have diminished public pathways for input. Forest collaboratives have always been useful, but they are now becoming even more essential as other public engagement avenues are limited. By creating a space open to the public for difficult conversations and non-traditional relationships, they promote a shared understanding among diverse stakeholders, they enhance project planning, and they help prevent conflicts before decisions are made. While collaboration does take time, it builds trust and improves project outcomes, and often prevents costly disputes, making the process actually more efficient.

We encourage Congress to support stable, long-term investment in the Forest Service. This includes rebuilding agency capacity through sustainable, consistent funding; supporting collaborative processes; maintaining meaningful environmental review; and addressing longstanding infrastructure challenges, such as the Forest Service road maintenance backlog. Attempts have been made to address Forest Service capacities with issues and partnerships like the Good Neighbor Authority. While GNA can serve as a useful tool, maintaining adequate Forest Service staffing remains a more efficient and accountable approach for carrying out forest management and restoration work on our Federal public lands. Even for GNA to function at its intended capacity, the Authority still requires Forest Service personnel to lead planning, to provide oversight, and to ensure projects align with broader management goals and public interests.

The dedicated staff on our National Forests continue to do remarkable work under difficult conditions. By providing them with adequate resources, consistent direction, and the tools needed to engage the public, we can improve forest health, increase wildfire resilience, support local economies, and ensure that our public lands are managed effectively for future generations. Thank you for the opportunity to testify, and I look forward to answering your questions.

[The prepared statement of Ms. Whitney follows:]

PREPARED STATEMENT OF MOLLY WHITNEY, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, CASCADE FOREST CONSERVANCY, VANCOUVER, WA

Chairman Newhouse, Ranking Member Salinas, and Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to join you today to discuss partnerships on the National Forest System. I am speaking on behalf of the Cascade Forest Conservancy, an environmental nonprofit organization. For over 40 years, my organization has worked to protect and sustain the forests, streams, wildlife, and communities of the southern Washington Cascades through conservation, education, restoration, and advocacy. Throughout this tenure, we've worked closely with the United States Forest Service (USFS) on forest management, watershed restoration, and economic resilience in southwest Washington.

Conservation NGOs like the Cascade Forest Conservancy (CFC) have a complex relationship with the Forest Service. We provide oversight and accountability for actions impacting public lands. In the past, that role often put us at odds with the Forest Service and led to litigation. That relationship has evolved over the years by leaning into collaboration, and we have become a strong partner while still providing oversight when needed. This partnership is evident throughout the forest, as we collaborate on aquatic restoration projects and beaver relocation efforts. Since 2019, CFC has worked with the Cowlitz Indian Tribe and the USFS to restore beavers to suitable habitats across the Forest, aiming to enhance watershed health and climate resilience. We have relocated 62 beavers to ten sites throughout the Forest, with active populations remaining at eight of those locations. These beavers build dams and wetlands that slow water flow, increase soil moisture, improve riparian habitats, and help create natural buffers against drought and wildfire, while avoiding impacts to Forest Service infrastructure.

Our long-standing relationship with the Forest Service is now at risk due to uncertainty, organizational restructuring, and staffing cuts originating from the national level that impact the entire agency. This uncertainty is causing confusion and instability, hampering the Forest Service's ability to plan, collaborate, and execute projects effectively.

A Multitude of Cutbacks are Hampering the Forest Service's Effectiveness

Recent staff reductions have severely impacted the agency's capacity. For example, on the Gifford Pinchot National Forest, interdisciplinary planning teams that previously advanced projects with expert input decreased from three to one. Leadership changes are making it harder for staff to manage public lands effectively with public input.

We are also concerned that the Forest Service is undermining the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) and other safeguards using emergency declarations, wildlife survey exemptions, and categorical exclusions to expedite projects, bypassing environmental reviews and public participation. We believe these methods may be unlawful and that the agency should return to comprehensive planning that fully analyzes impacts with public involvement and Tribal consultation. Without these critical components, we are increasingly likely to have projects that lead to legal challenges, harm to cultural and natural resources, loss of public trust, and, in general, poorer project outcomes. Clear NEPA review processes have been shown to help agencies refine their projects, making them stronger.¹

Contrary to many talking points, we believe that NEPA is not the primary bottleneck in project delivery; rather, internal staffing cuts within the Forest Service and the resulting constraints are what stall mission-critical work on the ground. The main obstacle being the lack of key positions in the timber program responsible for planning and administering timber sales. NEPA rollbacks are also leading to reduced or eliminated public involvement and input on the management of their public lands, reducing opportunities for collaboration between the agency and stakeholders. For example, USDA's removal of the Schedule of Proposed Actions (SOPA) in its revised NEPA regulations² has further reduced transparency, making it difficult for the public to track upcoming projects. Without notice, communities may first learn of a project only when work begins on the ground. That can erode trust, disrupt forest use, and create conflict.

¹ Ashley Stava, *et al.*, *Quantifying the Substantive Influence of Public Comment on United States Federal Environmental Decisions under NEPA*, 20 ENVTL. RES. LETTERS 074028 (2025) ("Our analysis revealed that public comments resulted in substantive decision alterations in 62% of cases, with 64% showing modifications to alternatives, 42% showing modifications to mitigation plans and 11% leading to the selection of an entirely new preferred alternative.")

² National Environmental Policy Act, 91 *Fed. Reg.* 17,062, 17,091 (Apr. 3, 2026) (to be codified at 7 CFR pts. 1b).

There also seems to be growing inconsistency across National Forests now that public notice and engagement are at the discretion of individual Forests. Varying interpretations and external communication approaches undermine predictability. Without consistency, local communities, members of the public, and those who contract with the agency will find it more difficult to partner effectively with the agency.

Overall, these shifts are contributing to a decline in public trust, especially after years of effort to build stronger engagement and confidence in the agency's planning processes. While Forest and Regional Office staff continue to step up, they can only do so much under these difficult circumstances. The current approach creates barriers that threaten the agency's and partners' effectiveness and result in weaker projects that neither enjoy public support nor are legally durable.

Categorical Exclusions Are Not a Viable Replacement for Environmental Assessments

Categorical Exclusions (CEs) under NEPA are designed for smaller, more limited projects, whereas Environmental Assessments (EAs) are intended for larger, landscape-scale actions and provide a more comprehensive analysis of forest conditions, treatments, and outcomes, which lends legal durability to these projects. CEs often lead to the segmentation of a larger project into smaller parts, undermining the agency's ability to understand cumulative impacts across the full landscape. Additionally, there is little evidence that CEs provide meaningful time savings in acres treated, as both CE and EA processes require similar time per acre. An analysis found that CEs take an average of 162.3 days per 1,000 acres and EAs take an average of 160.5 days per 1,000 acres.³

Per Forest Service and USDA leadership, the Forest Service is leaning into Emergency Situation Determination (ESD) areas to increase logging and forest management projects without meeting the legal standard for a true emergency. This newly envisioned designation now covers approximately 59% of National Forest lands⁴ and is based on broad and often unconnected references to wildfire risk and forest health conditions. We understand that it is this Administration's policy to increase timber production by 25% over the next several years, rather than to address an immediate threat to people, property, or natural resources.⁵ We think this is inconsistent with Federal law, which limits emergency authorities to situations involving urgent and immediate danger requiring swift action. Rushing the work can backfire, leaving behind drier ground, more fire-prone invasive plants, and a higher long-term wildfire risk.

Along with the expanded Emergency Situation Determination declarations, the Forest Service is applying a new interpretation of its rules to bypass Survey and Manage (S&M) requirements, which are pre-disturbance surveys used to identify rare or sensitive plant and animal species before activities such as logging or road building decrease their viability to the point where listing under the Endangered Species Act is necessary.

The agency is asserting that the new Emergency Situation Determination may qualify for an "unusual circumstances" exception to the survey and manage requirement, which would allow it to forego these surveys and proceed with projects more quickly.⁶ However, the Forest Service is now applying this exception across millions of acres based on a broad, programmatic so-called emergency basis rather than evaluating conditions project-by-project. These exemptions are increasingly used for all projects, meaning that the "unusual circumstances" are no longer "unusual" but rather a new standard practice. This approach is legally suspect and further undermines future project delivery.

³Appendix 5: Days of Analysis Per Acre by Decision Type, Comments and Appendices submitted by WELC, *et al.* on the Forest Service Proposed Rule for NEPA Compliance (84 *Fed. Reg.* 27,544, June 13, 2019).

⁴USDA, Secretary's Memorandum 1078-006, *Increasing Timber Production and Designating an Emergency Situation on National Forest System Lands*, 2 (April 3, 2025) (Designating 66,940,000 acres under "very high or high fire risk" and 78,800,000 acres as experiencing or at risk of insect and disease infestations).

⁵U.S. Forest Service, Implementation of Secretarial Memo 1078-006, 1 (April 3, 2025) ("I am directing all Regional Foresters to develop 5 year strategies, tiered to the national strategy, to increase their timber volume offered, leading to an agency-wide increase of 25% over the next 4-5 years.")

⁶USDA Forest Service, *Guidance for Consistent Application of Survey and Manage Pre-Disturbance Survey Requirements while Applying the Emergency Action Determination Authority*, 1 (Oct. 28, 2025).

North Packwood Case Study: 2025–2026

For example, the North Packwood project, in the Gifford Pinchot National Forest, is a local example of how recent agency direction has significantly altered project planning and environmental review under the CE, Emergency Situation Determination, and S&M interpretations, creating uncertainty and extending timelines. Initially, the area was identified as the next planning area, and the Forest Service intended to conduct actions under an Environmental Assessment. However, planning shifted after the April 2025 ESD, which authorized emergency procedures, including emergency and expedited consultation under the Endangered Species Act. This change was then reinforced by a July 8, 2025, letter from the Washington Office NEPA Coordinator encouraging forests to utilize Categorical Exclusions whenever possible and to modify projects to remain at the CE level rather than proceed to more detailed environmental analysis in an EA or EIS.

Subsequently, the Forest requested and received approval to add the Packwood Wildland-Urban Interface to the Emergency Situation Determination on October 1, 2025. After this approval, the Forest Service proceeded to develop the North Packwood project as a Categorical Exclusion under 36 CFR 220.6(e)(6), commonly known as “CE–6.” When a Federal district court invalidated CE–6 in January 2026,⁷ the Forest Service reworked the project under a different Categorical Exclusion focused on fuel-break construction.⁸ The resulting decision, just signed June 15, 2026, encompasses approximately 347 acres, compared with the 5,000 to 7,000 acres that would likely have been included in the original project as part of a landscape-scale Packwood-focused EA. The reduction in size and treated acreage is a concern for the majority of members of the relevant forest collaborative. These CEs do not appear to generate the equivalent long-term shelf stock of timber harvest projects as recent EAs did.

Consistent with recent agency direction, the project did not include a public comment period, relied on expedited consultation procedures under the Endangered Species Act, and did not require S&M pre-disturbance surveys because the entire project area falls within the Emergency Situation Determination boundary. As a result, a project that was originally envisioned as a landscape-scale effort subject to a more comprehensive environmental review process, including robust public engagement and Tribal consultation, ultimately moved forward under a streamlined approach with reduced public involvement and environmental analysis.

Cascade Forest Conservancy does not intend to object to or challenge the current iteration of this project. In addition, the Forest Service has explained how impacts to sensitive species and critical habitats would be mitigated. However, we find it necessary to highlight the challenges this project presents and those future projects, under this current trajectory, are likely to present. Litigation is an important safeguard that ensures projects meet legal standards and protect vital habitats, species, and other public resources. We believe the issues outlined above could lead to increased, unnecessary litigation of this and future projects on this Forest, as well as others in the region that utilize Categorical Exclusions or Emergency Situation Determinations too broadly.

Navigating Confusion and Creating Transparency and Trust: The Importance of Forest Collaboratives

Recent changes have created confusion both externally and within the Forest Service. The public lacks a clear understanding of what is happening, and agency staff themselves are navigating multiple, sometimes conflicting interpretations due to a lack of consistent guidance from leadership. A recent example of this is a lack of clarity from leadership on when to use Categorical Exclusions (CEs) *versus* Environmental Assessments (EAs). While these changes may be framed as deregulation, they are instead contributing to operational confusion and instability rather than improved outcomes, and are likely to lead to long, laborious litigation. All of these factors contribute to the Forest Service’s inability to implement effective projects to address issues such as hazardous fuels and community protection.

Because of the ongoing confusion within the agency and throughout surrounding communities, forest collaboratives are becoming increasingly vital, especially as we face constantly shifting priorities, objectives, and tools for implementation. A fundamental element of collaboratives is the trust and transparency built through relationships, which are essential for achieving a shared understanding of constraints and trade-offs. Though collaboration may initially take more time, it ultimately leads to stronger projects and saves time and resources by reducing costly, lengthy

⁷ *Oregon Wild, et al. v. U.S. Forest Service*, Case No. 1:22-cv-01007-MC (D. Or. Jan. 13, 2026).

⁸ CE Pub. L. 117–58, Sec. 40806.

litigation. Conversations among collaborative members offer a structured method to engage stakeholders early in the planning process, establishing a baseline understanding that can help reduce conflicts before decisions are finalized. Hearing diverse perspectives, the collaborative process enhances the Forest Service's ability to develop balanced proposals that are more likely to succeed without litigation or, at a minimum, minimize administrative objections that could lead to litigation. Additionally, when information and transparency diminish due to the absence of Environmental Assessments, collaboratives serve as an alternative channel for sharing information and public input, easing public concerns and addressing potential challenges before final decisions are made.

Good Neighbor Authority Cannot Replace Sufficient Forest Service Staffing

Over the past few years, the Forest Service has utilized the Good Neighbor Authority (GNA), which, under this Administration, has expanded beyond partnering with the state to include Tribes and counties. The agency and Administration have promoted these partnerships as a major tool to help address the Forest Service's growing workload and staffing challenges. We believe that it can be a valuable tool and partnership, but it's not an effective or long-term substitute for a fully staffed Forest Service. Even for GNA to function at its intended and proper capacity, the authority still requires agency personnel to lead planning, provide oversight, ensure Federal accountability to the American taxpayer, and ensure that projects align with broader management goals and public interests. When responsibilities are transferred through GNA agreements, important sideboards, project intent, and accountability can become diluted, particularly because project documents are often constrained by limited word counts and may not fully capture the context, collaborative discussions, and stakeholder input that shaped a project during the planning process. In addition, the benefits and outcomes of GNA projects are unclear. When projects are completed under Forest Service purview, the layout of timber sales is clearly defined with consistent sideboards, and the funds set aside for restoration have a known path, with local contractors benefiting from stewardship contracts. These connections may be less robust with GNA projects. As a result, while GNA can serve as a useful tool, maintaining adequate Forest Service staffing remains the more efficient and accountable approach for carrying out forest management and restoration work on our Federal public lands.

Right-sizing the Road System is Key for Long-term Success of the Forest Service

Another ongoing issue that highlights a significant systemic problem in partnering with the agency is the Forest Service's increasing difficulty in managing its extensive road network. The road system includes more roads than can realistically be maintained with the available funding, resulting in a significant backlog and a growing financial strain. General budget estimates that we've received from the Gifford Pinchot National Forest capture this trend. They note that they generally allocate \$11.6 million to maintenance each year, but there is a backlog of \$62.3 million in needed maintenance that cannot be addressed. And this doesn't account for the \$6.3 million in updates they'd like to make. As maintenance costs rise and infrastructure ages, the situation is becoming more expensive and difficult to sustain, with deferred maintenance accumulating year after year. Without changing this course of action, conditions will worsen. Instead of expanding the road network, as proposed by this Administration and current leadership, the better option is to strategically reduce the road system by decommissioning roads that are no longer necessary and focusing resources on maintaining and improving the roads that are important for public access, recreation, resource management, and emergency response. For example, FR-25 is a main thoroughfare connecting the north and south parts of the Forest, but it remained out of commission for almost 2 years due to a washout. These kinds of things can be prevented by focusing more on road, bridge, and culvert improvements and less on building new roads into the backcountry, where washouts would be even more common.

Public Lands Benefit From a Stable and Long-term Investment in the Forest Service

Strong partnerships remain one of the most effective tools for achieving durable, science-based, and publicly supported forest management. These partnerships rely on a well-staffed, transparent, and accountable Forest Service that can engage communities, collaborate with Tribes and stakeholders, conduct meaningful environmental reviews, and implement projects effectively.

While local Forest Service staff continue to demonstrate remarkable dedication and professionalism, they are increasingly being asked to do more with fewer resources amid agency disruptions and shifting national priorities. This challenge can

be addressed through increased funding and investment in the Forest Service's capacity, as well as through Forest Collaboratives and Tribal and public engagement processes that foster trust and improve project outcomes. By strengthening the agency and the relationships that sustain it, we can build a successful multi-use forest that meets goals related to natural resource extraction, forest restoration, wildfire resilience, watershed protection, and community safety on our public lands.

Conclusion

I look forward to discussing and reviewing partnerships with the Forest Service to enhance management of the National Forest System with the Subcommittee and answering any questions that the Subcommittee may have. Thank you for the opportunity to share my thoughts and experiences.

Sincerely,



MOLLY WHITNEY,
Executive Director,
Cascade Forest Conservancy,
www.cascadeforest.org.

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you, and thank you all for your testimony this morning. At this time, Members will be recognized for questions in order of seniority, alternating between the Majority and Minority Members and in order of arrival for those who joined us after the hearing convened. You'll be recognized for 5 minutes each in order to allow us to get to as many questions as possible.

I'd first like to recognize myself for 5 minutes, and I'll start with Mr. Joseph if I could.

Certainly, I appreciate your comments and your testimony about how forest products industry is needed for the stewardship and the conservation and protection of our forests. As we know, given that we've lost a significant number of sawmills and logging capacity over the past several decades throughout the Pacific Northwest, my state, in particular, what does this reduction in infrastructure mean for forest health and management? And tell me, in your view, are there ways that that we can help support new infrastructure?

Mr. JOSEPH. Mr. Chairman, thank you for the question. I appreciate it. It's a really important question because I think sometimes we don't quite make the connections that I think you're making, which are when you lose the infrastructure, when you lose the mills, when you lose the people, when you lose the know-how, when you lose the equipment, you lose your ability to manage forests. And that's what's happening in a huge part of the West, not just the Pacific Northwest but the West, and we've seen examples of this. We've seen examples in states, unfortunately, as my colleagues where they reside in Utah, and parts of southern California, and New Mexico, and Arizona that have completely lost their forest products industry infrastructure, and when you do that, you see the environmental consequences.

So, in our part of the world, it's dominated by the Federal Government and the Federal Government managing National Forests and, oftentimes, more than 50 percent of the land base in these states. It's critical that we have a consistent, reliable, higher supply of a raw input to support that infrastructure. The Forest Service manages, as was mentioned, a hundred—this is context. I think this is critical context for Congress that sometimes we just lose sight of. The Forest Service manages 193 million acres. Only 1/3 of

that land base is ever eligible for timber harvest of any kind, and in any single year, the Forest Service is managing $\frac{1}{2}$ of 1 percent of $\frac{1}{3}$ of our National Forests. So, if you want to help the forest products industry, if you want to help rural communities, manage our forests. We'll deliver better economic, environmental, and public safety and health benefits for everybody.

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you. Thank you. Wow. Sheriff Glover, could you take a few minutes to—or no, a few seconds, I should say—to expand on issues that you're currently seeing on the impacts of top-down regulations, and how they're impeding on inter-agency cooperation between local law enforcement departments and the Forest Service?

Mr. GLOVER. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. So, I first want to say our relationships with the U.S. Forest Service law enforcement folks on the ground are solid. We have great respect for each other. We work together every day. We are friends with the folks here in D.C. at the management level as well. We spend a lot of time together. The problem is, is that we weren't heard on this Criminal Prohibitions Rule, and the issue isn't necessarily all of the details of the rule. We had some parts of the rule that we could support. The problem we had was there are some parts of the rule that are clearly outside of the typical guardrails of Federal jurisdiction lands held in proprietary interest.

And our concern there is it's a bit of a camel's nose in the tent kind of a concept where other Federal agencies, like the National Park Service or the Bureau of Land Management, are kind of keeping an eye on that and trying to see how far can we crowd the guardrails as it relates to rulemaking authority in this space, and that's our concern. That's our biggest concern is that it could get out of hand, and it will get out of hand.

The CHAIRMAN. Good. Thank you. Mr. Coe, as a district that receives a good deal of funding from the SRS, or Secure Rural Schools program, could you talk a little bit about how constant delays in reauthorization efforts affect the counties that rely on this funding?

Mr. COE. Thank you, Chairman. Yes, two examples out of the recent time that the SRS expired. One was a local school district in the county that had been years in the process of getting funding, engineering and design, for a new facility at their junior high campus. They were in the early stages of construction when SRS expired. While it was a small portion of the total budget for that project, it was vital and required them to take from other areas of the budget that was education related to complete this construction project. As a county, it's vital for our roads. We had a number of road projects in process when SRS expired. In order to complete those projects, we had to suspend routine maintenance. That's delays in chipseal and repaving, which just further degrades the condition of our roads, which every access point to the National Forest in Modoc County is via county road.

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you.

Mr. COE. Thank you.

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you for that real-life examples. Ranking Member Salinas.

Ms. SALINAS. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and again, welcome, Ms. Whitney and Mr. Joseph, both Oregonians. To start, could you please—this is to Ms. Whitney. To start, could you please share some of what you are seeing on the ground regarding partnerships for management of the National Forest System? And this is in light of the remarkable loss of staff at the Forest Service over the past year, alongside that 25 percent decrease in hazardous fuels reduction on the ground.

Ms. WHITNEY. Yes, we are definitely seeing some changes on the ground, definitely delays and things slowing. For example, our team has been working to move forward a project where CFC actually secured outside funding outside the Forest Service or the Federal Government, and this project focused on aquatic habitat restoration that would be beneficial to the National Forest and create employment for local contractors. But due to severe and unexpected staffing shortages and a lack of clarity on current internal processes within the Forest Service, this work has just been delayed, and that is good work that could have happened with extra partnership funding.

Additionally, staffing cuts and frequent policy changes have forced timber harvests and wildfire preparation projects to adapt during development, resulting in delays. And a recent example of this is the North Packwood project, which I wrote up a case study in my written testimony if you'd like to know more. But it shows how shifting direction from the USDA and the current Administration complicates and delays forest management efforts on the ground. And there were repeated changes in policy guidance, such as environmental review requirements, and legal interpretations of CEs, like CE-6¹ that was legally overturned,² that led the Forest Service to redesign the project multiple times. This reduced scale delayed implementation and caused redundant planning efforts, ultimately resulting in a much smaller treatment area than initially planned, and this uncertainty really hampers the Forest Service ability to efficiently carry out large landscape-scale restoration and wildfire resilience.

Ms. SALINAS. Thank you. And then to just pivot a bit to reorganization, do you see any downside from moving firefighters from the Forest Service to the Department of the Interior's Wildland Fire Service when it comes to delivering more acres of hazardous fuels reduction?

Ms. WHITNEY. I definitely think that there are reasons to be concerned that a reorganization like that could make fuel reduction efforts more difficult. Hazardous fuels reduction is tied to landscape management through coordination among fire personnel, land managers, scientists, Tribes and local communities, and collaborative partners. And this work includes project planning; prescribed fire, if it's allowed, and able to occur; ecosystem restoration; and community engagement. And the proposed U.S. Wildfire Service appears to focus on suppression and, thereby, discounting fire management within land management agencies responsible for long-term stewardship and fuels planning, and this risks creating a dis-

¹ **Editor's note:** 36 CFR § 220.6 Categorical exclusions.

² Opinion and Order, *Oregon Wild, et al. v. United States Forest Service, et al.*, Case No. 1:22-Cv-01007-MC, January 13, 2026.

connect between wildfire response and the proactive work needed to reduce wildfire risk before it occurs.

And because the vast majority of Forest Service personnel are funded in part by dollars associated with wildland fire, transferring that funding, approximately 60 percent to the Wildland Fire Service, would effectively decimate the Forest Service and compromise multiple-use land management mandates. Granted, the current system isn't ideal as Forest Service specialists have to leave their primary role sometimes for several months to serve on fire duty in another district. It would greatly benefit productivity if the continuation of the workflow of specialists would continue their important work without such yearly interruptions.

And a preferred alternative would be to invest in the agency capacity, workforce ability, and prescribed fire on the landscape. This would be a better alternative and would lead to increased hazardous fuels treatments rather than the declines we've been seeing, and large-scale organization transfer that—and benefits that still remain unclear.

Ms. SALINAS. So, if I could just recap for the folks back home and maybe some less technical wording, what I'm hearing from you is perhaps some continuity, some additional collaboration to really emphasize the fuels reduction pieces of this and to balance out so we're not always thinking about suppression. Is that correct?

Ms. WHITNEY. Correct.

Ms. SALINAS. Okay. One last question, hopefully quickly. When it comes to forest management, we often hear that project planning through the National Environmental Protection Act—NEPA—it's time consuming. What is your perspective on the value of the NEPA process and public engagement for responsible forest management, and have you seen any benefits for public trust and reduced litigation from a robust public process? You have 30 seconds.

Ms. WHITNEY. I think the bottom line is public lands deserve public input, and NEPA hasn't always been a hindrance. In fact, I think that the NEPA process actually provides public input, public process, a clear line of process that allows for transparency, public buy-in, and that's beneficial for our lands. And NEPA isn't the process in my written testimony—the process blockage. In my written testimony, I cite some findings that show that NEPA actually is a quicker pathway than being caught in litigation.

Ms. SALINAS. Thank you, and I yield back.

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you, Ms. Salinas. Mr. Moore from the great State of Alabama.

Mr. MOORE. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. It's a pleasure to see all the witnesses here today. Certainly, Doug LaMalfa was a good friend, and Heather and I grieve for his family. We miss Doug. He had a big body and a big heart, and so he was a great man.

Alabama forests supports rural communities, forest product jobs, hunting, recreation, wildlife habitat, public access. The National Forest in Alabama is about 667,000 acres. We have Bankhead, Conecuh, Talladega, Tuskegee, all those National Forests. And so, it requires a Forest Service to obviously work with the states, counties, local law enforcement, private businesses, and people who know these forests best. And I'm thankful for President Trump's focus on expanding domestic timber production, improving forest

health, reducing wildfire risk, and cutting unnecessary delays. The goal should be healthier forests, more work completed on the ground, stronger rural economies, and measurable results for taxpayers.

Mr. Joseph, your testimony explains that active forest management can include commercial timber harvest, thinning, prescribed burning, selective harvesting, and mechanical vegetation treatment. You also endorsed President Trump Administration's National Active Forest Management Strategy, which focuses on building capacity, streamlining implementation, environmental compliance partnerships and markets, as well as salvage and reforestation. Alabama already has a Good Neighbor Authority agreement between the Forest Service and the Alabama Forestry Commission. Under that agreement, the state can help carry out timber harvesting, hazardous fuel reduction, road work, wildlife surveys, and forest restoration projects on Federal land.

What are the biggest barriers keeping partnerships like Alabama's from producing more completed projects, healthier forests, and timber that is actually delivered to American mills? What do you think is the biggest barrier, Mr. Joseph?

Mr. JOSEPH. To delivering timber to mills in America?

Mr. MOORE. Yes, sir.

Mr. JOSEPH. The laws and regulations in the system, the current approach that we have to managing Federal lands. Again, I think context is really important. In the Pacific Northwest, a vast majority of the National Forests that are at risk of fire, disease, insects, they're not available for management. So, even if a collaborative decided, "Hey, we need to go in there and we need to do active management," the regulatory regime that overlays those National Forests oftentimes restricts the ability to actually go in and do the right treatment at the right time at the right place. That needs to be fixed, and that's up to Congress.

Mr. MOORE. So, I remember Ronald Reagan said—it's one of my favorite quotes—he said, the government's idea on the economy is when it's moving, you tax it; if it keeps moving, you regulate it; and when it fails, you subsidize it. But very often, it seems like the regulatory environment is the biggest inhibition to getting the work done and getting the timber to the mills. Is that kind of what you're telling me?

Mr. JOSEPH. And it impacts partners. It's not just the timber industry. It's states, counties, Tribes, other organizations. The regulatory environment is not an incentive right now in National Forests to do business with the Federal Government. It's incredibly complex, and it's risky.

Mr. MOORE. It makes it almost impossible at times, doesn't it, to do it in certain areas, I would assume?

Mr. JOSEPH. It also makes it really challenging, or if you can imagine a private interest that's thinking about building a mill in the West. Why would you come in and build a \$¼ billion mill if your partner's the Forest Service, and based on the policies or politics of varying Administrations, that timber flow is going to change? That's not certainty. That's not predictability. You can't make a business decision off of that uncertainty.

Mr. MOORE. The uncertainty. And so, the photos you showed a while ago, and it was pretty impactful, I thought, the one forest had a fire 6 years ago?

Mr. JOSEPH. Yes.

Mr. MOORE. And what's the holdup? Why is there such a drastic difference between the one where we saw the green trees coming out of the ground, they're getting up on—I don't know how big they were from the photo, but then you see these others that are dead for years and been standing. What's the what's the holdup?

Mr. JOSEPH. Yes, that's it, again, the regulatory environment. So, where I took that picture was from a road that bisects a roadless area near Glide, near Roseburg, in Douglas County, Oregon. A hundred and thirty thousand acres were burned in that fire, and because of the overlying regulations of that land base, you cannot go in there and remove those dead and dying trees even off the roadsides, bring them to a mill and reinvest the revenue back into the land. That's not allowed.

Mr. MOORE. So, how long do you think that timberland is out of production? Is it forever or for generations?

Mr. JOSEPH. That land base likely will be if it ever comes back as a forest.

Mr. MOORE. So, the second photo, I saw, like, green trees growing. How long ago has that been—that fire occurred?

Mr. JOSEPH. That fuel break on the second picture is an ongoing project. So, that's anticipation of and a proactive strategy to try to address fire if and when it comes through that area. So, that project is happening right now and ongoing as they work to complete hundreds of miles of fuel breaks across multiple jurisdictions, and that's exactly what we need to be thinking about doing. It's not just about Forest Service land, although that's the focus. But in the West when you have multiple ownerships, you've got to work with all of the managers to create a more holistic approach to forest management.

Mr. JOSEPH. Gotcha, and with that, Mr. Chairman, I'll yield back.

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you, Mr. Moore. The gentleman from California, Mr. Costa, is recognized.

Mr. COSTA. Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman, and the Ranking Member. An important effort that many of us who come from western states especially share the challenges of trying to maintain our forests. I represent the San Joaquin Valley, along with my colleague, Congressman Valadao, but our beautiful Sierra Nevadas are in our backyard. And included in those are the giant Sequoia Groves, trees that are increasingly threatened by more extreme droughts and hotter and more intense wildfires, and I think we all share the notion that we no longer have a fire season, but a fire year. I think out in the West, certainly that's become, sadly, the rule. I cosponsored the Fix Our Forests Act (H.R. 471) and the Headwaters Protection Act of 2025 (H.R. 605), spent years working on these partnerships between the Federal and state efforts and local.

Supervisor Coe, it's good to have a fellow Californian testify and a farmer/rancher come and share a lot of these issues, and of course, both of us mourn the loss of our friend, Representative

LaMalfa. But I would like to ask you about your—the impact you see—I’ve seen in the Central Sierra and the closing of regional and station offices, including the capacity for research, and the permitting, and the other kinds of things that the Forest Service does as a partner locally. As a supervisor and a person who’s involved in many areas, what does that mean to you in Modoc County for wild-fire and mitigation work on the ground in rural California?

Mr. COE. Thank you, Congressman Costa, and good to see you again. So, I will go back to the approach of—we have in Modoc County where the county works proactively with the Modoc National Forest. Through our coordination, we are able to, on a monthly basis, go over issues similar to what you just discussed and find solutions to those problems.

Mr. COSTA. Yes, but have you found the reduction of staff, and has that impacted your ability to do the necessary work in that partnership?

Mr. COE. The reduction of staff definitely has impacted the forest, even on the Modoc Forest, and that is where our Shared Stewardship Retired Worker Program first got started. The forest didn’t have an engineer, and they had a timber sale that was sold and ready to be harvested, but they needed an engineer to certify the road.

Mr. COSTA. Yes.

Mr. COE. We hired an engineer through the Farm Bureau that was a retired forest engineer, and we were able to complete that project.

Mr. COSTA. Yes.

Mr. COE. That’s just one example of that program.

Mr. COSTA. Okay. I need to move on. My time’s limited. Ms. Whitney, your work on the ground, as you stated in your testimony, makes a strong case for public engagement and collaboration that make projects more durable and less likely to end up in court. As the agency loses staff, leans on faster, more streamlined reviews, what does that mean for public trust for getting forest health and fuel projects done right the first time?

Ms. WHITNEY. I think the question is about eroding public trust?

Mr. COSTA. Yes.

Ms. WHITNEY. Yes, and we’re definitely seeing that on the land. When you move into projects that don’t have avenues for public input and bypass processes that allow for public to have scoping periods, commenting periods, and objection periods, the only avenue to hold people accountable—the agency accountable is litigation. And if you are litigating smaller projects that didn’t have public input that are CEs, that are moved along quickly on a smaller scale, that isn’t nearly as time consuming and productive as it is to work on larger-scale projects that have buy-in through collaboratives that are going to have larger impacts on the land and less conflict at the end.

Mr. COSTA. Yes, my time’s almost expired, but I’m very concerned about this whole reorganizational plan and the cuts that have been made within the Forest Service. Mr. Joseph, in your testimony, you highlighted the need to get back to active management and for Congress to evaluate the roadblocks that are getting in the way. I think we always find ourselves in this bind between forest

management and the funding for that and the funding we put for fire suppression, and we borrow from Peter to pay Paul. We don't do a good job on the forest management areas because we're trying to triage putting out the fires, and in the meantime, we get further behind. That's my assessment of this over the years that we've worked on that. Do you concur?

Mr. JOSEPH. Congressman, you're right, and every dollar that Congress invests in proactive management saves the taxpayer \$4 in wildfire damage.

Mr. COSTA. Well, my time's expired, but not only that, but what we have found, Mr. Chairman and the Ranking Member, in conjunction with our universities, that when we are better able to manage our forests, we retain more of the moisture, and the snow pack, and the water that otherwise gets soaked up, literally and figuratively, by the vegetation that's growing, which creates more fuel for fire. And so, it becomes a very difficult, vicious cycle. I think we need to reexamine the efforts between monies for fire suppression and forest management to try to figure out how we can better complement the two efforts.

The CHAIRMAN. Yes. I appreciate it very much, Mr. Costa. Thank you. The gentleman from Indiana, Mr. Baird, is recognized.

Mr. BAIRD. Thank you, Mr. Chairman and Ranking Member, and I appreciate the interest in the forest products. I've always been interested in agriculture. I got a brother that that owns a mill on the home farm, so forestry is an important part of agriculture, in my opinion.

So, Mr. Joseph, I would like to back up a moment. I thought I heard you say that in—you cannot go in and harvest or remove trees after a fire or those downed trees. And the reason I want to do that, my question focuses on those hazardous fuels, and I'm interested in biochar. I am interested in biomass utilization and other value-added products, so, but go back and repeat, if you will, unless I misunderstood that, what you said about—

Mr. JOSEPH. Some places you can. Some places you can't, for example, wilderness areas. You can't go into a wilderness area after the fact and use mechanical treatments and replant that forest in a wilderness area. That's restricted under the 1964 Wilderness Act (Pub. L. 88-577). The Roadless Rule has restrictions about what you can and can't do on the land base. The Northwest Forest Plan in the Pacific Northwest that governs 24 million acres tells you where and what you can't do on National Forests. So, yes, a vast majority of the landscape, including after a fire, are unavailable for management. Even if they do, you have to go through a process that I would love to talk to you about that needs to be changed if we do want to do active management and replant our forests.

Mr. BAIRD. Well, in that regard, I agree with my colleague from California. That makes no sense to me in agriculture. And in Indiana, I know through forest management, we've been able—the net gain in productivity of board feed has increased over the use of forest management. And so, being an agriculturalist, I don't understand why we can't harvest that. But aside from that, I'm really interested in the—in the biochar idea that—and I realize there's some concerns about that, but then other biomass utilization where we can make energy out of or fuel out of those byproducts if we

harvested them. So, I'd just be interested in your thoughts in that regard.

Mr. JOSEPH. There's extraordinary opportunity there, and currently, the Renewable Fuel Standard and how we treat biomass and woody biomass is really important and critical. My understanding, that there are ongoing conversations to try to come up with a bipartisan solution to make sure that we treat wood equitably in terms of policy and the law and the Renewable Fuel Standard. So, there's an extraordinary opportunity for all these other uses of wood and biomass that support society, including, as you said, energy and fuel. Right now, by the way, woody biomass from Federal lands does not qualify for the Renewable Fuel Standard. So, we're leaving—193 million acres and all of the outputs from those lands don't qualify for the RFS. That needs to change.

Mr. BAIRD. Well, thank you, and then I'm going to preface my next question, which will be to Mr. Coe, but, Mr. Glover, you're the sheriff, and I read something or saw something interesting. Back in 1948, they moved in through low-flying planes because it was too difficult a terrain to get them any other way. They brought beavers into a valley there in Utah. They call it flying beavers, and they ended—and then the video of all that got misfiled for 60+ years. So, those beavers worked in that valley all that time, and when you had a—and when you had a giant fire, that area was not involved because they built so many dams and worked so effectively. I just bring that up because we're talking about nature and National Forests, and sometimes if you let nature alone, it'll take care of itself.

But I don't ask you to comment on that because—anyway my question, Mr. Coe, goes to the role of the universities, and you've worked with the University of California Extension Service. You've also worked with the California Farm Bureau as well as NACo. So, I just would appreciate your thoughts, and we got about 40+ seconds. Appreciate your thoughts on the importance of these—Extension Service and some of these other—the cooperation with the counties and so on in that regard to fire prevention, forest management.

Mr. COE. The knowledge that the Extension Service can put on the ground at the local level is amazing. We have the opportunity in Modoc County to work with a range specialist, natural resources, and the work that she does to assist in fuels management, range management working with ranchers is incredible.

Mr. BAIRD. Thank you very much, and my time's up. I yield back, Mr. Chairman.

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you, Mr. Baird. Mr. Vasquez, you are recognized.

Mr. VASQUEZ. Thank you so much, Chairman Newhouse. Thank you to our panel of experts today.

I represent New Mexico's 2nd District, home to four National Forests. I hunt Coues deer and Mearns' quail in the Coronado. I fish for Gila trout and backpack in the Gila, hunt turkey in the Lincoln, and I hike and camp in the Cibola. I know these areas very well. It's where I prefer to spend my time when I'm back home. What I can tell you is that every forest is different, should be managed different, and should operate with a modernized man-

agement plan and adequate and stable staffing. Partnerships are necessary and should be expanded, but it also can't replace adequate Forest Service staffing as well as new management plans.

But today, I want to focus on an issue that's very important to my district, and that is the Secure Rural Schools Program. For decades, SRS has helped counties provide the basic services that people count on every day, such as schools and roads, and when that funding is delayed or uncertain, local leaders are forced to make impossible decisions about budgets, staffing, and public safety. That's why last August I convened a meeting in Catron County, a bedroom community to the Gila National Forest in a very rural part of my district, and spoke with stakeholders, including Republican State Representatives, local elected officials, teachers, and others, about the importance of reauthorizing SRS. That's why I also introduced the bipartisan Secure Rural Schools Reauthorization Act of 2025 (H.R. 1383) with the late Congressman LaMalfa just last year, which ultimately passed with bipartisan support, which is a win that was applauded by state lawmakers from both sides of the aisle back home in New Mexico. But that funding is set to lapse again in 2027. I believe our communities deserve certainty, not year-to-year uncertainty over whether they're going to have the resources that they need.

So, my first question is for Supervisor Coe. Could you tell me as a supervisor what happens when SRS funding isn't reliable, when it's delayed, and Congress waits until the last minute to act? How does that impact your budget and your operations?

Mr. COE. It creates massive budget uncertainty. Unlike some other entities, a county has to budget with the revenue that they have available. And when that did not come through the past several years with the expiring of SRS, it required us to make hard decisions, as I indicated previously, delayed road work, but it goes way beyond just roads and schools in the impact to our budget.

Mr. VASQUEZ. Thank you, Supervisor Coe, and I can tell you, in one of the most rural schools in Quemado, New Mexico, if we didn't get that done in time, they were going to let go about a dozen teachers from the local elementary school. That's the impact in that community, so thank you.

Mr. COE. Yes.

Mr. VASQUEZ. I appreciate you sharing that insight. Sheriff Glover, I'd like to ask you the same question from a public safety perspective. What does stable SRS funding mean for law enforcement and emergency response, in particular, in counties with large amounts of Federal land where tax revenue is limited, and how does that lapse or delay in SRS funding negatively impact public safety?

Mr. GLOVER. Yes. Many law enforcement agencies and sheriff's offices across the West are dependent on SRS funding in the Pacific Northwest. I have with me Hood River County Sheriff Matt English, a large forest in his county, lots of visitors, four million visitors in his county. I've got a similar—less forests in my county, but I get between five and six million visitors that come through our county. We're small counties of 10,000, 20,000 population, so that SRS funding for search and rescue services is critical. It has to be on time. Again, I echo Supervisor Coe. When it's unknown

whether these programs, like PILT or SRS, are going to move forward, it creates real budget uncertainty and difficulty during our budget seasons on how are we going to pay for these services that truly do save lives every day.

Mr. VASQUEZ. Thank you so much, Sheriff. And that's why these bedrock programs, like PILT and SRS, are so important to the rural West, and I think in this Committee and in Congress as a whole, we have to look at solutions for permanent reauthorization and appropriations so that your counties don't have to go through this every year, and that's the same message that I've been hearing from my county commissioners back home. They still have to pass budgets, they still have to hire deputies, keep roads maintained, support their schools, and they can't put those responsibilities on hold while they wait for Washington to get its act together.

So, SRS funding truly is about supporting and keeping rural communities safe. This program is set to lapse again next spring, and this Committee has to continue to work together in a bipartisan fashion to prevent any more delays or lapses in funding. The health of both our forests and our rural communities and their economies depend on it. Thank you all. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and I yield back.

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you, Mr. Vasquez, and I recognize the gentleman from California, Mr. Valadao.

Mr. VALADAO. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Thank you to all of our witnesses for your time today.

While many of my constituents don't live in or near National Forests, they still experience the consequences when catastrophic wildfires occur. Mr. Coe, numerous studies have found that active forest management practices, such as the prescribed burns and fuel reduction projects, can reduce wildfire severity and improve forest health. Are there any barriers to allowing those practices from being implemented?

Mr. COE. Yes. As other members of the panel have already indicated, there are barriers every day to active forest management, and I'll refer back to an example that occurred several decades ago. It was part of the Quincy Library Group where they did a shaded fuel break, similar that was shown in the photograph today, and the Moon Fire, which was raging out of control, got to that and dropped down, and actually went out on its own because of active fuel management.

Mr. VALADAO. All right. Ms. Whitney, farmers in my district depend on water that originates in forested watersheds. Are there current Federal policies, permitting requirements, or funding limitations delaying watershed-focused forest management projects from being carried out at a scale needed?

Ms. WHITNEY. I think funding delays in staffing across the National Forests is delaying all proposed actions, regardless of water or what have you, and so I would say that, yes, undoubtedly that is happening. I don't have particular instances on the Gifford Pinchot National Forest that I can call out to say that that's actually happening, but I'm sure that it is.

Mr. VALADAO. All right. Thank you. Mr. Coe, as Congress appropriates money and reauthorizes forest management programs each year, what metrics should we use to determine whether these in-

vestments are making forests and communities safer? Do you believe we are measuring the right outcomes today?

Mr. COE. Looking at the results, I would say the measurements of the outcomes are not being looked at correctly. Our forests are in much poorer condition. As your previous question about water off of the forest, when I left Monday, I watched the last of my irrigation water for this summer coming down the ditch. When I get home tomorrow, it's going to be dry, and that's because all my water comes off of National Forest land that has anywhere from magnitudes of more trees per acre than it can support. That water's being consumed up there with small, stunted trees.

Mr. VALADAO. I guess I should have asked you the same question that I asked Ms. Whitney. Are there any current Federal policies, permitting requirements, or funding limitations delaying watershed-focused forest management projects from being carried out to the scale needed?

Mr. COE. Absolutely.

Mr. VALADAO. Any one specific you want to highlight?

Mr. COE. One that Congressman LaMalfa worked on for years, the Sites Reservoir Project. This is an off-stream reservoir project that would supply water, even to your district, that has been—entire lifetimes have spent working on the engineering and the study of it, but yet we don't have a drop of water saved from it.

Mr. VALADAO. Yes. From my understanding, Sites has been in the planning stages for 60 years now?

Mr. COE. Yes, that was the number I was going to use.

Mr. VALADAO. That's a little longer than my life, but I'm not sure if it's longer than the Chairman's life.

[Laughter.]

Mr. VALADAO. Sheriff Glover, in your testimony, you mentioned difficulties in working with U.S. Forest Service law enforcement, especially after the national memorandum of agreement was modified in 2023. How can Congress strengthen the partnership between law enforcement, division and county sheriff officers across the country as they work towards their shared goal?

Mr. GLOVER. Yes, thank you for your question. We need to get the Criminal Prohibitions Rule off the table, repealed, whether that's through this legislation, H.R. 6802, or another means, and just get back to the table. I think we can solve this problem in short order, actually. We love these guys, we like working together with them, we work very well together, but we can't sustain them usurping our authority and jurisdiction on a state and county level at, like they did with this rulemaking. So, if we can get that rule off the table and get back to the table, I have great confidence that we'll resolve this issue and move forward.

Mr. VALADAO. All right. My time is up. I yield back to the Chairman. Thank you.

The CHAIRMAN. I thank the gentleman, who should understand that the next hearing, he'll only get 2½ minutes to ask questions.

[Laughter.]

The CHAIRMAN. So, I think that completes the round of questioning from our Members on the Committee. Before we adjourn, what I'd like to do is give the acting Ranking Member, Mr.

Vasquez, an opportunity for a closing comment, and then I may have some comments at the end as well.

Mr. VASQUEZ. Thank you so much, Mr. Chairman. Thank you as well again to our guests for being here in Washington for this important Subcommittee hearing. I'm glad we had the opportunity to discuss the importance of durable and lasting partnerships in forest and rural communities and discuss a regulatory environment that is conducive to improving forest health and conditions, especially during times when we need it most in this heightened wildfire risk season that we face today. And it's also important for us to remember that our forests are the land of many uses, and stakeholders do deserve a voice. However, that shouldn't come at the expense of getting projects on the ground when we need them the most.

I do just want to briefly address wildfire risk because New Mexico faced two of our largest wildfires in our state's history in just the last 3 years, including right in my district, the Black Fire and the Gila National Forest. And there are many solutions, some of them which have been discussed here today, but I want to just continue to throw some of these out there as we continue this conversation. That includes protecting the integrity of our watersheds. That includes maintaining trails to cut fire lines, which requires volunteer and staff, and Conservation Corps, and other folks to do that work. It requires funding and support for volunteer fire departments. That's one of the biggest issues that we face in my district oftentimes as the first responders. Improving the communication infrastructure for the network of first responders in rural communities is also incredibly important. When that fire lookout first spots the fire, we've got to take action, and those lines of communication are often broken in rural counties like those in my district.

I mentioned the full funding and reauthorization of SRS, properly staffed regions and individual units, adequate staffing for the development and implementation of new forest plans under the 2012 rule, modernized prescriptive burn practices. I can't emphasize that enough. That was the cause of the Hermit's Peak/Calf Canyon Fire in Northern New Mexico, which was completely preventable and has devastated that community. Easing regulations on fuel thinning and timber harvesting where it's appropriate in different forest units, and, of course, the Fix Our Forests Act, which I also supported, that provides some of those commonsense solutions. We've got to tackle these issues sooner than later, and certainly those partnerships that we build with local governments, Tribes, and stakeholders have to be there, have to be solid, and we've got to have adequate staffing to ensure that we can execute on those partnerships. Thank you, Chairman.

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you, Mr. Vasquez. First of all, I'd just like to thank everyone for joining us today to take part in this important discussion on a very important topic, and particularly, I want to thank the witnesses. I believe I can speak on behalf of the entire Subcommittee when I say that we do deeply appreciate you traveling across the entire country to share your wisdom with us here in Congress. Just as the Forest Service depends on their partners to steward our public lands, we in Congress greatly benefit from people like you coming all the way to Washington, D.C., to provide

us with such thoughtful and answers to our maybe not so thoughtful questions. So, thank you very much for that. Your experiences shape the policies that we champion, and 193 million acres of cherished public land are better off because the four of you are here today, so thank you. Thank you very much for that.

Under the Rules of the Committee, the record of today's hearing will remain open for 10 calendar days to receive additional materials and supplementary written responses from the witnesses to any question posed by a Member, so take note of that.

And with that, this hearing of the Subcommittee on Forestry and Horticulture is adjourned. Thank you very much.

[Whereupon at 11:22 a.m. the Subcommittee was adjourned.]

[Material submitted for inclusion in the record follows:]

SUBMITTED QUESTIONS

Questions Submitted by Hon. Angie Craig, a Representative in Congress from Minnesota

Response from Hon. Ned Coe, Supervisor, District 1, Modoc County Board of Supervisors; Second Vice President, Western Interstate Region, National Association of Counties

Question. Are there changes to the Community Wildfire Defense Grant program, operated by the Forest Service, that would make it easier for small and less populated counties to access?

Answer. Yes. The National Association of Counties believes targeted changes to the Community Wildfire Defense Grant program would substantially improve access for small, rural and less populated counties. These counties often face severe wildfire exposure but lack dedicated grant staff, flexible revenue and the capacity to compete in a highly oversubscribed national program. In the third funding round, the Forest Service received 573 applications requesting more than \$1.6 billion but selected 58 proposals totaling \$200 million. Every selected proposal met all three statutory priority factors, demonstrating the difficulty communities may face if they do not qualify under every priority category.

NACo recommends establishing a small or rural county application track or funding set-aside; expanding cost-share waivers to consider population, fiscal capacity and wildfire exposure rather than low-income status alone; and allowing a Federal Emergency Management Agency-approved hazard mitigation plan with a substantive wildfire component to satisfy, or be converted through a streamlined crosswalk to, the Community Wildfire Protection Plan prerequisite. The Forest Service should also consider phased awards that allow a county to complete its plan and begin priority implementation activities under one award.

The Forest Service should preserve a lengthy application window, expand hands-on technical assistance, use plain-language application materials and provide multi-year awards where appropriate. These steps would help address long-standing barriers faced by counties with limited grant-writing and administrative capacity.

These program improvements are even more important in light of the Office of Management and Budget's proposed rewrite of 2 CFR Part 200. Although NACo supports specific provisions intended to simplify funding notices and reduce duplicative requirements, NACo is deeply concerned that the proposal as a whole could make Federal grants more costly, uncertain and difficult to administer. The proposed rule would impose new application reviews, contractor and sub-recipient monitoring requirements, SAM.gov reporting obligations, E-Verify requirements and payment-verification responsibilities, while eliminating lower-burden fixed-amount awards and providing no corresponding mechanism for counties to recover the additional administrative costs.

NACo is also seriously concerned about the proposal's expanded authority to terminate or suspend competitive grants based on broad and undefined standards, including whether an award remains in the "national interest." These provisions could expose multiyear wildfire mitigation projects to delays, stop-work orders or termination after counties have committed staff, contractors and local matching funds.

NACo has urged OMB to extend the comment period, conduct a formal federalism consultation, scale new requirements to award size and risk, improve SAM.gov reliability and delay implementation until no earlier than Jan. 1, 2027. The Forest Service and OMB should ensure that government-wide regulatory changes do not create new barriers that further disadvantage the small and rural counties the Community Wildfire Defense Grant program is intended to serve.

Responses from Travis Joseph, President and Chief Executive Officer, American Forest Resource Council

Question 1. The reconciliation bill from last year, H.R. 1, required the Forest Service to offer a certain number of 20 year timber sales.

Have long-term timber sales (10 or more years in length) been litigated in the past due to anti-trust concerns?

Answer. We are aware of at least one 2022 lawsuit filed in the District of Oregon by a plaintiff coalition, led by the Malheur Forest Fairness Coalition, against Iron Triangle and Malheur Lumber which is the only sawmill located in John Day, Oregon. See *Malheur Forest Fairness Coalition et al. v. Iron Triangle, LLC et al.*, Case No. 2:22-cv-01396-HZ (D. Or.) (Compl. filed Sept. 15, 2022). The lawsuit alleged that Iron Triangle used its 10 year *stewardship* contract (*not* a traditional FS-2400 timber contract) with the Malheur National Forest to create a monopoly that suppressed regional competition.

A Federal judge in Portland dismissed the antitrust lawsuit without prejudice in October 2023. Malheur Forest Fairness Coalition filed an amended complaint, and Iron Triangle moved to dismiss a second time, but requested that the dismissal be with prejudice. The district court granted the second motion to dismiss with prejudice in September 2024. Malheur Forest Fairness Coalition appealed the decision to the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals, and the Court affirmed the district court's dismissal in January 2026. *Malheur Forest Fairness Coal. v. Iron Triangle, LLC*, 164 F.4th 710, 723 (9th Cir. 2026).

Question 1a. Do your members have concerns about the concept or current implementation of the 20 year timber sale requirements from H.R. 1?

Answer. The concept of using long-term timber contracts to attract private capital and investment to build or sustain forest sector infrastructure where it is at risk or does not exist is sound policy. The private-sector—purchasers of Federal timber, mills, loggers, contracts, and connected supply chains—need predictability and certainty to make major, long-term investments.

We support the strategic and thoughtful use of long-term timber contracts to recruit and maintain forest sector infrastructure needed to actively manage Federal forests, help reduce the risk of catastrophic wildfire, protect communities, and create jobs and economic opportunities in rural communities.

It is our understanding that the first 20 year timber contract required by H.R. 1 was awarded to the Idaho Department of Transportation to remove hazard trees, which will improve public safety and access, while also delivering logs to local mills.

AFRC has identified two important considerations regarding the long-term contract requirements in H.R. 1. First, directing timber sale revenues to the U.S. Treasury rather than to county governments and agency trust funds will reduce resources that currently support essential local services and active forest management. As a result, Congress may ultimately need to appropriate additional funding to Federal land management agencies to carry out mission-critical work.

Second, the Forest Service and BLM should avoid awarding 20 year timber contracts in areas with established and competitive timber markets. In wood baskets where multiple purchasers, contractors, and bidders already operate, long-term contracts could distort markets, reduce competition, and create unintended economic consequences. Such contracts are best reserved for areas where infrastructure is absent, underutilized, or at risk of being lost.

Responses from Molly Whitney, Executive Director, Cascade Forest Conservancy

Question 1. Ms. Whitney, we here on the Agriculture Committee have heard a lot about closed field offices because of reduced staff. Can you share your experience and what you're hearing from others in the conservation community about response times from the Forest Service?

Answer. Yes, delays are happening even with the increased use of emergency authorities.

For example, our team has been moving forward with an aquatic habitat restoration project on National Forest lands, using funds we secured through non-agency channels. Due to severe and unexpected staffing shortages and a lack of clarity on current internal processes within the FS, this work and the employment in the local community it brings have been continually stalled.

Additionally, staffing cuts and frequent policy changes have forced timber-harvest and wildfire-preparation projects to adapt during development, resulting in delays. A recent example, the North Packwood project, shows how shifting direction from the USDA and the current Administration complicates and delays forest management efforts on the ground. There were repeated changes in policy guidance, such as environmental review requirements and legal interpretations of CEs, that led the Forest Service to redesign the project multiple times. This reduced its scale, delayed implementation, and caused redundant planning efforts, ultimately resulting in a much smaller treatment area than initially planned. This uncertainty hampers the Forest Service's ability to efficiently carry out landscape-scale restoration and wildfire resilience projects.

One of the most impactful changes stems from the broad staffing cuts; the GPNF now has only one interdisciplinary team, down from three. These teams consist of specialists in project planning, so having only one team has decreased the Forest's capacity to develop new projects. The Ranger Districts are having to share personnel rather than a full team of specialists dedicated to a project. Whole projects have been delayed due to this capacity shortage.

Question 2. Ms. Whitney, in your opinion, are there policy changes we can make that would help make large-scale projects (>25,000 acres) that have robust environmental analysis more attractive for the Forest Service to pursue and for partners to support?

Answer. Recent policy changes have weakened the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), reducing opportunities for public input and collaboration, and weakening the strength of environmental analyses. Congress could support the Forest Service in developing larger, scientifically sound, and community-supported projects by (1) mandating public input and collaboration, (2) requiring reversing arbitrary time limits on Environmental Assessments (EA) and Environmental Impact Statements (EIS). Strict time limits on EAs and EISs hinder the agency's ability to plan effective, community-backed landscape-scale projects. Planning and collaboration for these projects take time, and arbitrary time limits end up incentivizing the agency to pursue smaller projects or design projects with weaker analysis and less community backing and involvement.

Supporting NEPA is a strong policy move that can facilitate large-scale projects by ensuring comprehensive environmental reviews, public input, and often, public support—thereby reducing litigation. NEPA plays a crucial role in creating responsible, balanced, and community-backed projects. For example, a 2019 rule-making effort under the Trump Administration showed that delays in project implementation were due to inadequate agency funding and staffing, not NEPA itself. Multiple case studies also demonstrate that public engagement through NEPA reduces litigation and improves project quality. While litigation is essential for safeguarding species, habitats, and public resources, a thorough NEPA process, combined with collaboration, can effectively reduce the need for litigation. Public input allows the Forest Service to refine plans, resolve conflicts early, and prevent unintended consequences and controversies. For instance, the GPNF removed areas of special habitat identified by the public during the NEPA process for the Yellowjacket and Silver Creek Projects, which the Forest Service had initially overlooked—leaving these stands in the project would likely have led to further opposition, possibly resulting in litigation.

Public comment not only refines projects but also helps improve them and reduces litigation, as does formal collaboration. Our organization typically emphasizes collaboration, public comment, and the administrative objection process to address concerns early and often, avoiding the need for litigation. For instance, we administratively objected to the Yellowjacket Sale in 2024 and the Little White Sale in 2025, but did not pursue litigation after resolving the conflicts through the conflict resolution process. Specifically, during the Yellowjacket project, the agency withdrew plans to reconstruct a decommissioned road following public comments and objections to the EA, which likely prevented increased sedimentation and temperature issues. Without this objection process, these modifications to protect water quality might have required litigation. Since adopting formal collaboration as an additional step to participating in the public comment and administrative review processes in the early 2000s, CFC has significantly reduced the number of times it has had to resort to litigation over vegetation management projects.

Finally, for the Forest Service to successfully implement large-scale projects, Congress also needs to provide the agency with robust funding and staffing.

