

**Opening Statement of Republican Leader Greg Walden**  
**Joint Subcommittee Hearing**  
**“Out of Control: The Impact of Wildfires on Our Power Sector and Environment”**  
**January 28, 2020**

*As Prepared for Delivery*

Today’s joint subcommittee hearing on wildfire impacts returns to an important topic for the Committee—and vitally important for tens of millions of people, especially Oregonians, Californians, and those across the West who have been experiencing massive devastation from these catastrophic fires.

When we last held a hearing on this topic in September 2018, my home state of Oregon for the second year in a row was battling near record wildfires. Communities in my district experienced some of the worst air quality in the world, while also suffering significant economic impact as tourists went elsewhere.

Just two months after the hearing, California suffered the tragically fatal Camp Fire, devastating the town of Paradise.

In the wake of that and other harmful events, California and Oregon have moved toward requiring utilities to strengthen emergency plans, including de-energizing lines in areas of high risk.

This past year we witnessed how this risk reduction practice put two million people in the dark just as windstorms were threatening new wildfires. And news reports suggest [this may become the norm](#) in coming years. But we also know this strategy is not without negative consequences for people who have special medical needs that require electricity without interruption.

Meanwhile, government red tape continues to stand in the way of common-sense hazard tree removal or grid safety improvements in utility right of ways.

We're joined today by Dave Markham of Central Electric Cooperative in Redmond Oregon. Central Electric's service territory is 56 percent on federal land. I know he'll speak to the challenges that presents later, but I want to share this photo he showed me earlier.

Last year Central Electric applied to move the power pole in this photo 20 feet to mitigate against wildfire. The new location would be safer and more accessible. The Forest Service didn't get to their application until October, and then Central Electric missed the short window to move the pole.

Delays in these sorts of maintenance efforts can have deadly consequences, especially when combined with our poorly managed federal forests waiting to burn. Something has to change.

While climate plays a role, I think the evidence remains overwhelming that increasingly intense fires seasons are driven by the decades of poor management that has left our federal forests overstocked with trees.

For example, OSU forestry professor [John Bailey testified](#) before us two years ago that tree stand densities in the driest areas of eastern Oregon would naturally be as low as 20 trees per acre, but those forests today could have upwards of a thousand trees per acre. Think about that for a minute – 20 trees versus 1,000 trees.

When fire strikes, that excess ends up as smoke and carbon in our atmosphere. We know from Forest Service and EPA data that in 2015 in Oregon we burned 685,000 acres, which emitted the equivalent of 3 million cars, or 3.5 coal fired plants.

Nationwide since 2015, we've burned 39 million acres. Following the same pattern that would be emissions roughly equal to 170 million cars or 199 coal fired plants.

Taking sensible steps to improve NEPA and increase the pace and scale of forest management activities that thin out our forests is a win for our forests, the climate, and the health of our communities and citizens.

A [2014 study](#) by the U.S. Forest Service, the Sierra Nevada Conservancy, and The Nature Conservancy found that fuel treatment projects can reduce the size and intensity of fire between 30 and 76 percent.

Treatment also helps reduce carbon emissions from these fires by up to 85 percent. This is among the reasons why the UN's climate panel recommends forest management as a key tool for addressing climate risks.

The good news is, we have measures like the Resilient Federal Forests Act that we can enact right now, this year to help propel smarter forest management practices, reduce the risk of wildfire and ensure that we clean up after fires and replant our forests for future generations.

Rather than pursue grand climate schemes that cannot become law, we should focus this Congress on practical measures, like forest

management where we have made some bipartisan progress in recent years, but plenty of meaningful work remains.

Turning back to energy infrastructure, we should also look today at technology and practices that can reduce inherent risks in the power sector and increase reliability and resilience during fire emergencies.

Our panel offers an array of experience that can help work through core issues like fire management, resilience, the intersection of our electric infrastructure with fire risks and public safety, the prospects of advancing technology to minimize risks, and to more rapidly respond and recover from wildfires.

I look forward to your insights.