

Opening Statement of the Honorable John Shimkus
Subcommittee on Environment
Hearing on “Air Quality Impacts of Wildfires: Perspectives of Key
Stakeholders”
October 4, 2017

(As prepared for delivery)

This subcommittee has jurisdiction over the Clean Air Act, and for that reason we frequently hold hearings about EPA regulations and policies designed to address air pollution. Today, we will discuss a source of air pollution so bad that it accounts for some of the nation’s worst air quality episodes, and that is the wildfires occurring across the U.S. and especially out west. And while most of the focus during and after these fires is on the ecological and economic harm and the loss of life, the public health impacts from these wildfire air emissions also deserve Congressional attention.

The statistics are staggering. So far this year there have been almost 49,000 wildfires in the United States destroying nearly 8.5 million acres. And the emissions from these fires can have serious impacts on air quality over a range that can stretch for many miles. As a result, millions of Americans can be exposed to the pollutants found in wildfire smoke, sometimes for extended periods of time.

Nearly every other significant source of combustion - from vehicles to power plants to factories – are subject to very stringent controls. But the emissions from wildfires are completely uncontrolled. Worst of all are the sharp increases in particulate matter emissions from wildfire smoke, which can contribute to eye and respiratory irritation, impaired lung function, bronchitis, and exacerbation of asthma, especially in vulnerable populations.

In looking for solutions to these wildfires and the resulting air quality impacts, it is important to note how much greater wildfire risks are on federal lands as compared to state and private lands. Often, the largest and most polluting fires originate on or involve federal lands. Many point to active management of state and private forests as a big reason behind their relatively lower risk of catastrophic wildfires. There are a number of preventive measures that have a proven track record for reducing both the extent and severity of wildfires, and where these measures are used, we see a much lower risk. I look forward to learning more about active management from our distinguished panel of forestry experts.

One successful forest management strategy is prescribed burns, in which small deliberate fires are set that significantly reduce the risk of far more damaging wildfires later on. Unfortunately, at least in some places, government restrictions impeded the use of prescribed burns, due in part to concerns about the air emissions from them. But these restrictions may be counterproductive if prescribed burns help avoid much greater air emissions from wildfires. These are the kinds of policies we need to review.

Congress should be looking at any and all ways to address wildfires and their air emissions, and most important of all, the policy measures that can help prevent or minimize wildfires in the first place. Thank you.