

**Opening Statement of Chairman Greg Walden  
Subcommittee on Environment Hearing on  
“Air Quality Impacts of Wildfires: Perspectives of Key Stakeholders  
October 3, 2017**

*(As prepared for delivery)*

Today, we’re taking a long overdue look at an air quality issue that has affected Oregonians and those living across the rural West for years – smoked clogged skies from catastrophic wildfires. Just this summer in my home state of Oregon, we watched as fires burned more than 678,000 acres – equivalent to two-thirds the size of Rhode Island – and over \$340 million has been spent – so far – to fight them.

And you can see the impacts. Sue, from Rogue River, sent me this pictures of what looks like fog on her pasture. In reality it’s dense smoke from a fire that burned over 190,000 acres.

Across Oregon schools were forced to close because of smoke and poor air quality. Some high schools traveled hours away for football games, and my Oregon Ducks had to practice on the Oregon coast to get away from the smoke.

Annual community events, from the Sister’s folk festival, to performances of the Britt Festival in Jacksonville and the famous Oregon Shakespeare Festival in Ashland were canceled. Communities have watched timber jobs disappear as more and more of our federal land has become locked up. Those same communities are now watching tourism dollars slip away as visitors stay away from the smoke.

In meetings across my district earlier this month, I heard similar stories in different communities of people that were finding themselves visiting a doctor, only to learn their respiratory challenges were a result of the smoke.

We know that wildfires pour significant amounts of pollution into our air. According to EPA, forest wildfires emitted an annual average of 105.5 million tons of carbon dioxide in the United States between 2000 and 2005. In 2005 alone, wildfires resulted in more than 126 million tons of carbon dioxide in the United States. And in a fire that I remember – the 2002 Biscuit Fire in southwest Oregon – the carbon dioxide emitted during that fire amounted to almost one-quarter of the total carbon dioxide emitted in Oregon that year.

It doesn’t have to be this way. Fuel loads continue to build up in our forests because of broken federal forest policies that have led to a lack of management. As you can see in this chart, between 2011 and 2015 federal forests in Oregon grew by 1.3 billion cubic feet. Of that, only 9% was harvested, 29% dies, and the remaining 62% - or 822 million cubic feet remains as fuel for fires.

Reducing that fuel load reduces the severity of a fire and the emissions. A 2014 study by the Sierra Nevada Conservancy, The Nature Conservancy and the Forest Service, showed 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.

Now, we're always going to have fires but we can reduce the risk and intensity through proper management. And when we do get fire, we must get in and clean up and replant. Just like private forest managers do. These forests are our lungs after all, and we should restore forests that are destroyed by fire. In fact, a study by the Forest Service's Pacific Northwest Research Station found that younger, growing stands of trees absorb more carbon than far older stands.

We also need to consider how we choose to fight fire, and the impacts of letting fires burn within wilderness – simply because of its management designation – on air quality.

For communities in my district like Grants Pass and Medford that saw days on end of “Very Unhealthy” or worse air quality during the Chetco Bar fire, which was spotted at ¼ of an acre on July 12<sup>th</sup> in wilderness, and has now burned over 191,000 acres, these decisions matter greatly.

There are plenty of questions to explore today and I look forward to exploring them a bit more depth over the course of this hearing.