

Opening Statement

The Honorable Peter DeFazio, Ranking Member

Full Committee Oversight Hearing: “Tribal Forest Management: A Model for Promoting Healthy Forests and Rural Jobs”

April 10, 2014

Mr. Chairman, thank you for holding this hearing today. I want to begin by welcoming a fellow Oregonian and one of my constituents, Chairwoman Brenda Meade of the Coquille Indian Tribe. Chairwoman Meade, very early in my congressional career I was proud to sponsor your tribe’s restoration act and I want to recognize that this year is the 25th anniversary of your restoration. In those 25 years, you have developed a sound economy and have been responsible stewards of your forest resources. I think our federal land managers can all learn a lot from the way your tribe manages its forest. Thank you for making the long trek out here.

Tribal forestlands constitute over 18 million acres on 334 Indian reservations in 36 states. These figures amount to over one third of all the lands held in trust by the United States for tribes. Tribal forestry is a major economic driver in rural communities. In 2011, tribal timber harvests generated almost twenty thousand jobs for Indians and non-Indians alike. While timber production is a very important aspect of tribal forestry, Indian forest lands are also important as sources of cultural and spiritual resources for Indian peoples.

The National Indian Forest Resource Management Act – a comprehensive 1990 law that sought to give tribes a more active role in managing their forests – calls for an independent team of experts to assess the condition of Indian forests, management infrastructure, and BIA administrative procedures every ten years. This group, known as the Indian Forest Management Assessment Team, published its first report in 1993 and has published subsequent reports in 2003 and again last summer.

IFMAT's most recent report, the 2013 report, included some notable findings. First, and perhaps most importantly, tribal forestry programs are woefully underfunded especially when compared to other federal forests. In fact, the report noted that funding levels for Indian forestry are lower now than they were in 1993. Congress must step up to the plate and make the investments needed to ensure the work proposed by Tribes is actually getting done. Without that investment, we will lose jobs; we will lose more milling infrastructure; and we will lose the ecological and cultural benefits that tribal forests provide.

Second, the report noted that climate change is a huge challenge to successful tribal forestry. The report notes that climate change imposes disproportionate social, economic, and cultural impacts on tribes and other populations with limited resources, mobility, and access to information. Moreover, forest management doesn't happen in a vacuum. The Coquille Forest, for example, neighbors Bureau of Land Management O&C Lands and multiple private land owners. What happens on those lands – in terms of fire prevention, wildlife management, and climate change adaptation – impacts tribal forests.

Third, despite inadequate funding, climate change, and other obstacles, the report confirms that tribes are effective, responsible managers of their forests. In fact, the IFMAT team – which includes some of the most knowledgeable foresters and scientists in the country, thinks the federal government could learn lessons from tribes to help it manage the federal forest estate.

That's not a surprise to me. In fact, the Coquille Tribe was a collaborator with Drs. Norm Johnson of Oregon State University and Jerry Franklin of the University of Washington in demonstrating cutting edge forestry, called "ecological forestry," in the Coquille Forest. Ecological forestry seeks to provide multiple management benefits – economic, ecological, social, and cultural – as an alternative to thinning or traditional regeneration harvests. Tribes, like the Coquille, are often ahead of the game in terms of their flexibility, creativity, and adaptability in forest management.

Again, Mr. Chairman, thanks for holding this important hearing. I am very interested in this topic and ready to learn from our panelists about what's working and what's not working on tribal forestlands.

I yield back.