

Questions for the Record by Democratic Members

Questions from Representative DeGette

1. Colorado has served as a model for other states with the creation of our Colorado Resiliency Office, which works to support local communities with hazard identification, risk mitigation, and recovery planning – all with the goal of helping communities become more resilient to various risks. Some communities with less capacity may rely on this support to a greater extent, while communities farther along in their resilience planning may work with the State of Colorado to provide examples of best practices that can be extended across Colorado.

a. Is there a role that the federal government can play to support states in a similar way to incentivize state and community-level actions that reduce wildfire risk rather than being entirely disaster response and recovery focused?

Response: We face tremendous and growing challenges in land management across the United States, whether as federal, state, tribal, county, or municipal land managers or as private landowners. None of us can solve these problems alone. They are too vast, on a scale that crosses borders and boundaries. But the Forest Service can help be part of the solution. In the past, our projects were scattered and disconnected because we had no good way of assessing risk and placing our treatments accordingly. We have a new scenario investment planning tool to help us understand landscape-scale conditions and focus treatments where they can do the most good across jurisdictional boundaries. We have acquired more technical capabilities, including advances in remote sensing, information science, fire simulation tools, and mapping technologies. We can also map contributions to fire risk from each parcel of land and use that information to forecast what might happen here or there in response to various kinds of treatments.

b. In other words, what is the best role for the federal government to help states and communities break the cycle of disaster-rebuild-disaster?

Response: Every state has a Forest Action Plan which can provide guidelines for coordinating fuels and forest health treatments across broad planning areas that span jurisdictional boundaries. States are also uniquely positioned to convene stakeholders to evaluate the wildland fire environment, agree on cross-jurisdictional planning areas, use scenario planning tools to assess fire risks and alternatives for managing the risk, and set priorities for investments that will bring the most bang for the buck. We propose sharing decision space with governors' offices and state agencies and other stakeholders to set broad priorities together based on state forest action plans and other tools. We will work with tribes and other partners, including local communities, to choose the most appropriate tools tailored to local conditions. In addition, the Forest Service is working with FEMA, Department of Interior and other partners to develop a more cohesive mitigation framework to address pre-event mitigation.

c. How can the federal government increase capacity for wildfire risk mitigation on USFS lands? How can tools, such as prescribed fire, be better utilized to reduce risk to public lands as well as neighboring communities?

Response: On March 28th, the Departments of Agriculture and the Interior jointly transmitted the Administration's Forest Management legislative reforms package, which includes various categorical exclusions from the National Environmental Policy Act for forest and rangeland management activities to help mitigate the risk of catastrophic wildfire. These legislative proposals would create a suite of landscape-based categorical exclusions designed to expedite forest and vegetation management projects that will support healthy forests and rangelands and aid in efforts to protect homes and infrastructure from catastrophic wildfires. They include a Categorical Exclusion under NEPA that would allow for managing wildland fuels using prescribed fire. We appreciate the authorities Congress have given us but want to keep working with you to enact additional reforms that maximize our ability to improve the health of America's forests.

2. In Colorado, the US Forest Service personnel who work in the State and Private Lands program have developed extensive partnerships with the private sector – such as with Molson-Coors, PepsiCo, and Xcel Energy – to help pay for wildfire mitigation on forested lands that span ownership and jurisdictions. These partnerships are obviously important to help pay for these activities but can also benefit the private sector by protecting the watersheds, infrastructure, and natural resources that they rely on.

a. Are these partnerships sustainable? And do they provide enough resources to adequately mitigation wildfire risk on these vast expanses of forested land?

Response: The Rocky Mountain Region works with a wide variety of partners to mitigate wildfire risk across jurisdictions, including state agencies, municipal water providers, energy utilities, corporate partners, environmental organizations, fire departments, and many others. Since 2009, these state, local, and private partners have contributed \$39 million to support priority treatment projects across Colorado on approximately 100,000 acres. These projects include hazardous fuel removal, prescribed burns, wetland and riparian restoration, and invasive species treatments. Many of these partnerships have proven to be sustainable. The Region recently entered into another 5-year agreement with Denver Water, at similar funding levels, adding two new major partners in Colorado State Forest Service and USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service. We are also pursuing new long-term agreements with Colorado Springs Utilities and Xcel Energy and have numerous other important partnerships working at local and regional levels. Despite the significant contributions of this collaborative work, we need to grow existing partnerships, and find new partners, to work toward solutions for our shared stewardship challenges. It will take an increased investment of time, resources, expertise, and funding across all sectors, public and private, to reach the scale necessary to be resilient to wildfires. Under Secretary Perdue's initiative for shared stewardship, the Region is working closely with the state of Colorado to finalize a shared stewardship agreement that will increase capacity to address shared priorities across a broader landscape.

b. How far behind are we on wildfire mitigation on federal, state, and private lands? And what is the relative impact that these partnerships play in performing the backlog of mitigation?

Response: In 2018, we treated approximately 40,000 acres on National Forest System lands in Colorado through mechanical thinning, prescribed fire, and managed wildfires. Two of our largest funding partners at the regional level, Denver Water and Colorado Springs Utilities, provided resources to assist with 5,450 of these acres in 2018. To stay at pace ahead of the current wildfire threats, we estimate the need to increase the pace and scale of treatments on NFS lands on the Colorado Front Range alone to be about 83,000 acres/year. This is only a fraction of the total forests in unhealthy conditions across the state. Our partners can continue to play an important role in helping us achieve this goal, but this scale of effort will continue to require a combination of federal, state, and local resources to achieve success.

c. Are there opportunities to create new markets, such as in biomass production, which can help to incentivize wildfire risk reduction projects conducted by private companies?

Response: There is a need and opportunity to create new biomass markets. Most of the trees that need to be removed in high-priority areas have little to no market value. Creating markets for these low-value timber products could be a key factor to increase the pace and scale of forest restoration. The Forest Service is working with partners, and the timber industry, to explore the feasibility of new markets. This includes funding support through the Forest Service's Wood Innovations Grant Program for projects and initiatives that could lead to scalable solutions in wood products utilization. We are currently supporting multiple projects with local cooperators exploring cross-laminated timber, bioenergy, biochar, and other emerging market opportunities for small-diameter biomass utilization. It will likely take a combination of investment in market development, and supporting policy, to have a significant impact on forest restoration at scale.