

Subcommittee Chair Debra Haaland
NPFPL Oversight Hearing
Opening Statement
May 9, 2019

Thank you all for being here today for the Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests, and Public Lands' hearing on the importance of wildfire resilient communities. I'd also like to welcome our panel ...

My hope today is that we can recognize the important steps Congress *has already taken* to fund fire suppression and forest management with the passage of the Fiscal Year 2018 Omnibus Appropriations bill and the recently enacted Farm Bill.

These recent Congressional actions on fire funding and forest management provide us with an opportunity to revisit the drivers behind recent devastating wildfires.

Our responsibility as Members of Congress is to ensure that limited federal resources are being spent wisely and that they are matched to the needs of the communities we are here to serve.

This is especially true with wildfire.

Wildfires have always burned across the American landscape – forests, grasslands, and chaparral alike – long before there were any federal, state or local governmental lines.

Many Native American tribes recognize that wildfire was *a natural and necessary process* to help shape healthy and diverse ecosystems.

Many Indigenous communities used wildfire as a tool – burning preemptively to help *protect* their communities and *maintain* the land for subsistence uses.

Today, land use changes and significantly more development in fire-prone areas have placed millions of Americans at risk.

Meanwhile, climate change is contributing to higher temperatures, drier conditions, insect and disease outbreaks, and longer fire seasons to the point that wildfire is now a year-round concern.

A century of unsustainable logging and fire suppression have proven that we *cannot* simply cut our way out of wildfire risk.

In extremely hot, dry, and windy conditions, a strongly blown ember can place entire communities in harm's way.

This is why community focused solutions will *always* be our best defense against devastating wildfire.

No one on this subcommittee opposes “active management,” but too often this term is co-opted to call for rolling back environmental protections, limiting public input, and restricting judicial review, without any meaningful benefits to community safety or forest health.

We are here today to talk about community-focused solutions – like better land use planning, fire resilient home construction, and ecological and science-based forest restoration and fuels management.

This approach allows us to retain the integrity of our public lands while supporting healthy forests, rural economies, well-paying jobs, firefighter safety, and community resiliency in the face of a changing climate.

Many wildfires can negatively impact public health, clean water, and recreational opportunities, but the most effective thing we can do to protect human lives and property is to work within our communities.

In the U.S. last year, there were over 58 thousand wildfires that burned 8.8 million acres.

We have a world-class interagency fire response and command system that is typically able to suppress or contain more than 95 percent of wildfires.

For the small percentage of wildfires that *do* get out of control, building more resilient communities is the only way we can prevent wildland fires from becoming an urban catastrophe.

If we can take a moment today to stop thinking from the FOREST IN and start thinking from the HOME OUT, I believe we will all find a lot of consensus in this room.

To my constituents in New Mexico, who have felt the impacts of wildfire as much as nearly anyone in the country, I want to say that I’m doing all I can to fight climate change, protect clean drinking water, and support the policies and resources *we need* to better prepare our communities for wildfire.

However, we must also take steps as individuals and as a community to ensure the resiliency of our homes and the safety of our families.

Our witnesses today will provide some of these valuable perspectives and I look forward to hearing their testimony.

Thank you again to the witnesses and to you all for being here today.

I would now like to recognize the Ranking Minority Member for 5 minutes.