

Chair Neguse Opening Statement
Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests, and Public Lands
Oversight Hearing on Wildfire in a Warming World: Opportunities to Improve
Community Collaboration, Climate Resilience, and Workforce Capacity.
April 29, 2021

Thank you all for being here today for the Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests, and Public Lands' hearing on Wildfire in a Warming World: Opportunities to Improve Community Collaboration, Climate Resilience, and Workforce Capacity.

For those of us that live in the West, wildfires are one of the most immediate and obvious impacts of climate change.

Wildfires today are nearly a year-round risk, burning larger areas at higher intensity, and this is only projected to increase as the climate continues to warm.

In fact, my Congressional District was impacted by record setting wildfires in 2020.

Not only were these fires some of the largest in Colorado history - they occurred later in the season and at higher elevations than typical.

There are probably two things most Coloradans would say they love about our State: our communities and our public lands, which is why it is imperative that we identify bipartisan opportunities that will facilitate community protection and ecosystem restoration throughout the West.

We know that climate change is the overarching factor driving wildfires. However, there are also other human drivers that contribute to the likelihood that wildfire will impact people and property.

Those factors include increased development in fire-prone areas and near wild lands, coupled with nearly a century of implementing forest policies that prioritized commercial activities, too often at the expense of other values, including clean water, wildlife habitat, and healthy, fire resilient ecosystems.

The challenges facing our forests did not emerge overnight, so as we consider opportunities to improve forest health and resilience, we must be conscious of past mistakes and ensure that our policy prescriptions don't simply deliver the same results by dressing up old approaches in new rhetoric.

To meet this objective, I have proposed robust investments in federal restoration efforts, including a new Civilian Climate Corps designed to address immediate restoration needs, and create rural jobs and a pipeline for careers in land management and conservation.

Even if Congress is able to deliver at the scale we know is necessary, there is still a need to better prioritize science to target investments for the greatest long-term benefit of climate, biodiversity, and community protection.

In addition to addressing immediate restoration needs, we need more well-paid, permanent opportunities to grow the federal land management workforce.

As the federal budget has shifted towards wildfire suppression, there has been a corresponding reduction in non-fire personnel, costing us the land managers, biologists, and other scientists with the expertise to plan for fire and improve the resiliency of the landscape in the first place.

Although Congress has acted in recent years to increase the budget for wildfire suppression, two things are clear.

One. Stopping the drain of resources away from the federal land management agencies has not had the desired effect of restoring core capacities.

Two. While the fire funding fix ended the practice of ‘fire borrowing’ it did virtually nothing to improve the health care, pay or general well-being of those on the front lines of these climate driven disasters – our federal wildland firefighters.

Our witnesses today will provide a range of perspectives at the nexus of climate and wildfire, including how we can promote collaboration and reduce conflict to support more community protection, conservation, and restoration work.

We’ll also hear about some of the challenges faced by the federal wildfire workforce, and the opportunities that exist to recognize these individuals as full-time federal firefighters and to utilize those skills year-round for improved mitigation and response, including their ability to support fire-adapted landscapes.

During an active wildfire, we will always prioritize the protection of people and property, but here in Congress we can do a better job of prioritizing our essential wildfire personnel, restoring core capacity to the land management agencies, encouraging more effective collaboration, and better incorporating carbon and biodiversity into land management planning.

Lastly, it bears repeating that, even with substantial investments in restoration, workforce, and community protection, it does not alleviate the need for more comprehensive action to reduce national and global climate emissions.

Conservation of our forests and public lands should certainly be part of any climate solution.

As the Biden administration continues to pursue the goal of protecting 30% of U.S. lands and waters by 2030, it may consider how existing collaborative structures and programs can be expanded in order to prioritize restoration work near vulnerable communities, while also identifying high-value conservation areas that are best managed for their natural resiliency and undeveloped characteristics.

Again, I'd like to thank the witnesses for being here today. I look forward to your testimony, but first I'll yield back my time and recognize the Ranking Minority Member, Mr. Fulcher, for 5 minutes.