

Opening Statement of Ranking Member Russ Fulcher
Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests, and Public Lands
Legislative Hearing on H.R. 6142, H.R. 6199, H.R. 6201,
H.R. 6337, H.R. 6434, H.R. 6435, and H.R. 6451

February 3, 2022

Thank you, Chairman Neguse. Before I begin my opening statement, please accept my sincerest condolences to your constituents impacted over the holiday break by the Marshall Fire. This fire, which was the most destructive in Colorado history and destroyed 1,084 homes, will affect these families and the community for years to come, and we are holding them tightly in our prayers.

It's times like these that we must ask ourselves: what could have been done to prevent this tragedy, and what

can we do to prevent similar tragedies moving forward?

Last month, we asked the Forest Service those exact questions and the answers were startling and sobering.

They prepared a report for us that shows that the fire shed around the Marshall Fire was ranked as a top 10 priority fire shed in the State of Colorado and the 41st priority fire shed out of a total 7,688 across the country.

And while it's devastating that over 1,000 homes were lost, Forest Service statistical modeling has identified "plausible future fire events in the area with 3-4 times the building exposure and probable loss in the Boulder area. The most extreme simulated fire could potentially expose 39,418 buildings, versus 7,700 in the Marshall fire." Mr. Chairman, I'd like to ask for

unanimous consent to insert the Forest Service's report on the Marshall Fire and surrounding fires into the hearing record.

Fortunately, there are solutions. Republicans have asked for months to hold a hearing on H.R. 4664, the bipartisan FIRESHEDS Act that is being led by Representatives Blake Moore and Henry Cuellar, that is based on this exact science and would target the top 10 percent of highest risk fire areas across the country. I am a proud cosponsor of this legislation, which would also bolster the Forest Service's recently announced 10-year strategy to confront the wildfire crisis, which is based on similar fire science.

Chairman Neguse, you have my pledge to work with you on this issue so that we can make sure what happened in your district never happens anywhere else again.

Moving to the bills on today's hearing, I am pleased that today's hearing includes a bill that I am cosponsoring to make an important technical correction for fiscal year 2021 Secure Rural Schools payments.

It is often said that poor process results in poor policy. The recently passed Infrastructure and Jobs Act, which is colloquially known as the BIF, is a prime example of poor process and poorer policy. The bill, which was jammed through on the House floor with no real vetting, is riddled with errors and implementation challenges that we are just beginning to learn about.

One of these implementation challenges relates to the re-authorization of the Secure Rural Schools program. Unfortunately, due to statutory deadlines and technical drafting errors, the U.S. Forest Service is not able to open the elections process for payments or allocations for fiscal year 2021, as the deadlines had already passed by the time the BIF was signed into law in November 2020. As a result, all counties will be forced onto SRS formula payments with the default allocation, resulting in lower payments for all counties across the board. Counties will also have no flexibility in how these funds are allocated between the different SRS titles.

H.R. 6435, a bipartisan bill sponsored by Congresswoman Cathy McMorris Rodgers, will correct

these drafting errors and ensure counties aren't literally the ones paying for this careless mistake. This bill requires swift consideration and passage by Congress to ensure counties receive their SRS payments in a timely manner and I urge the committee to move this bill as soon as possible.

I'm also thankful that Idaho County's Commissioner, Skip Brandt, is joining us today to talk about the importance of these payments and why Congress needs to quickly pass this legislation.

Before I yield back, I will simply state that with the litany of issues facing our constituents – from skyrocketing inflation, to the unending supply chain crisis, to wildfires that are claiming lives and property –

we need to make sure we set the right priorities for this subcommittee this year. Not to diminish the importance of the bills before us, but I fear this tranche of largely innocuous bills reflects a lack of urgency and concern by some of my friends on the other side of the aisle to provide real solutions to these crises afflicting our nation and our public lands. With that, thank you to the witnesses for appearing here today. I look forward to your testimony, and I yield back the balance of my time.