



Written statement of

The Honorable Dwayne McFall  
Commissioner  
Fremont County, Colorado

On behalf of the National Association of Counties

U.S. House Committee on Natural Resources  
Subcommittee on Federal Lands  
Legislative Hearing on H.R. 4717, *the Locally Led Restoration Act*

November 14, 2023

**Testimony of the Honorable Dwayne McFall, Commissioner, Fremont County, Colorado**  
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Chairman Tiffany, Ranking Member Neguse and members of the Subcommittee on Federal Lands, thank you for the invitation to testify at today's hearing in support of H.R. 4717, *the Locally Led Restoration Act*.

My name is Dwayne McFall, and I am in my second term as a Fremont County, Colorado Commissioner. I was born and raised across the state line in New Mexico, but I have been a resident of Fremont County for over thirty years, where I raised my family. I am an avid outdoorsman and sportsman with a passion for wildlife and livestock conservation. I offer my testimony today on behalf of the National Association of Counties (NACo).

Fremont County has a population of approximately 48,000 people and serves as a gateway to the San Isabel and Pike National Forests, along with the Sangre de Cristo Wilderness Area. With more than 46 percent of our landscape owned by the federal government, the decisions made by Congress and federal lands agencies directly impact the well-being of residents and visitors, landscape resiliency and our county's economic prospects. We need a strong, cooperative intergovernmental relationship with our federal partners to thrive.

Like many parts of the West, Fremont County has seen an increase in wildfire over the past few decades because of reduced management activities in our national forests. The recent additional spike in recreational visitors to our federal lands by recreators, while generally good for the local economy, leads to heightened wildfire risks from both legal and illegal campfires. Proactively reducing and managing the vegetation and hazardous fuels in the forests is critical for lowering this risk to our communities and environment.

Lack of Timber Harvests and the Increased Threat of Wildfire

Catastrophic wildfires disproportionately threaten western communities and pollute our environment. In 2023, we have been fortunate to see only 2.5 million acres have burned nationwide, compared to the 7 million acres burned on average annually over the past two decades. The forest health and wildfire crisis will only be solved if federal agencies forge strong partnerships with state, local and Tribal governments, as well as private industry.

Unfortunately, agencies and Congress took a passive approach to managing our national forests over the past three decades. This left our forests overcrowded and unhealthy, while restraining our ability to grow our local forest products economies. Healthy forests generally contain 50-80 trees per acre, depending on the type of forest and surrounding environment. Colorado's national forests have between 250-300 trees per acre. Some national forests in other parts of the country contain 600-800 per acre, serving as kindling for the next devastating blaze.

In spite of this obvious, looming threat, agencies and Congress still have not taken all the necessary steps to reduce it. In the 1980s, the United States produced around 20-times the board foot of timber we produce today. As we reduced the amount of timber harvested, the number of wildfires and acres burned increased exponentially, resulting in the calamity the West faces today. We must do better for our environment and communities.

In 2016, the Hayden Creek wildfire in western Fremont County burned over 16,000 acres, mostly on US Forest Service land. Like in many parts of the west, the large amount of beetle kill served as ready fuel for a wildfire caused by lightning. Today the landscape is littered with fallen, no value trees, which pollute the watershed and threaten livelihoods.

More recently, in 2020, Colorado experienced two of the worst fires in our state's history. The Cameron Peak fire burned 208,663 acres, and the East Troublesome fire burned 130,000 acres. These fires damaged or destroyed over 800 homes. Like the Hayden Creek fire, these two were also fueled by beetle kill trees. Proactive removal of these fuel sources is no longer an option—it's an absolute necessity to protect people and the environment.

#### *H.R. 4717, Locally Led Restoration Act*

By improving relationships with intergovernmental partners and outside organizations, especially the private sector, we can reestablish healthy and resilient federal forests. In recent years, stewardship contracts have been one of the most effective tools used by federal agencies to improve forest health and local economic prospects. A stewardship contract is one in which the contractor is mandated to complete another task, such as repairing infrastructure on federal lands, that is secondary to timber harvesting.

However, federal lands agencies and private sector partners do not have the needed flexibility under current law to utilize stewardship contracts in a way that will truly impact overall federal forest health. H.R. 4717, *the Locally Led Restoration Act*, would improve the implementation of stewardship contracts to better support landscape restoration projects and create good paying jobs within our communities. We appreciate Congressman Doug Lamborn for sponsoring this legislation. H.R. 4717 improves the stewardship contract system in several important ways.

First, it allows third party contractors such as an intergovernmental partner, private industry or even a conservation group to propose their own stewardship contract to the U.S. Forest Service or Bureau of Land Management if **at least 10%** of the vegetation to be removed is salvage. The bill defines salvage as beetle kill, dead or dying trees or wildfire kill. Allowing a third party to propose a stewardship contract will better inform the agencies of what specific timber is most valuable to mills.

This provision would not impose new responsibilities or authorities on federal lands agencies. Under the Tribal Forest Protection Act, tribes are allowed to propose their own stewardship contracts to the federal government. The bill ensures agencies have the authority to reject or amend any proposed stewardship contracts from third parties and will not force them into accepting an insufficient proposal. To be clear, this legislation does not change the established process for timber harvests on federal lands—it only makes necessary improvements to stewardship contracting.

Additionally, the bill raises the \$10,000 cap where agencies are not required to advertise timber sales to \$55,000. This cap was established in 1976 but has never been adjusted for inflation. Raising it to \$55,000 reflects the change in currency value over the past five decades. This will give agencies the ability to approve smaller timber sales expeditiously.

For Colorado counties and others in the West, new stewardship contracting authorities can help kickstart new forest products industries in our communities. Unlike in the Pacific Northwest, for example, our forests predominantly consist of small diameter pine trees that are typically not suitable for major lumber mills. By improving the stewardship contract program, federal agencies can facilitate the removal of small diameter trees in a cost-effective manner, which will improve the landscape and provide the needed fiber for emerging forest products industries, such as the manufacture of wood pellets for energy generation.

#### Conclusion

Chairman Tiffany and members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the invitation to testify. Counties urge Congress to enact forest health legislation that facilitates economic growth in the rural west. The Locally Led Restoration Act will create a better, more sustainable mechanism to implement stewardship contracts on federal lands to benefit the environment and create jobs in our communities. We urge Congress to adopt H.R. 4717 promptly.

I look forward to your questions.