

Written Testimony of Rep. Brittany Pettersen (CO-07)
House Committee on Natural Resources, Subcommittee on Federal Lands
“Legislative Hearing on H.R. 528, H.R. 655, H.R. 1276 & H.R. 2876”
April 29, 2025

Chairman Tiffany, Ranking Member Neguse, and members of the subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to offer testimony regarding H.R. 528, the *Post Disaster Restoration and Reforestation Act*.

More than 3 million people in Colorado—over half the state’s population— live in areas where there is a moderate to high risk of wildfires.¹ Since 2001, 20 of the largest wildfires in America have occurred in Colorado and more than 2,500 Colorado families have lost their homes.² Wildfires have not only threatened the safety and well-being of our families, they have also damaged ecosystems, and disrupted our communities. From 2013 to 2023, there were an average of 61,407 wildfires annually and an average of 7.2 million acres impacted annually.³ This is our new normal: fires are burning more frequently and more fiercely than ever before.

As climate change worsens, we must take a whole-of-government approach to respond to these crises and protect our communities from the destruction. This includes investing in pre-disaster mitigation measures such as strengthening infrastructure and housing in the wildland-urban interface, enhancing early detection capabilities, supporting our country’s wildland firefighting workforce, and focusing on post-disaster resilience.

Unfortunately, as climate change accelerates, these devastating events happen more frequently, compounding their effects and challenging our country’s natural disaster response as landscapes and communities attempt to recover. For example, in states like Colorado where we combat wildfires, we also contend with the compounding effect of post-fire flooding. Wildfires leave lasting scars on our landscapes and can permanently alter our environment. This heightens the risk of deadly flash flooding and mudflows. When a fire kills and burns trees, understory, and other organic matter within a forest, the high temperatures convert these materials into a compound that repels water.⁴ The next time it rains, these burned areas can’t absorb the precipitation; the water runs off the landscape rapidly, and the risk of damaging flash floods grows. Even long after a fire has reached 100% containment, communities downstream and downhill from burned areas are in danger of potentially deadly flash floods and debris flows.

Because of increasingly frequent, repetitive, and damaging natural disasters in our forested areas, our federal government, in conjunction with state, local, and Tribal stakeholders, must prioritize identifying and investing in comprehensive recovery efforts.

¹ https://www.fs.usda.gov/rm/pubs_series/rmrs/qtr/rmrs_qtr438/rmrs_qtr438_chap09.pdf

² <https://dfpc.colorado.gov/sections/wildfire-information-center/historical-wildfire-information>

³ <https://sgp.fas.org/crs/homesec/IF10732.pdf>

⁴ <https://www.weather.gov/sew/burnscar>

H.R. 528, the *Post Disaster Restoration and Reforestation Act*, will require the Department of Interior, in coordination with states, local governments, Tribes, and colleges, to identify lands in need of reforestation and restoration due to natural disasters and it will help support projects in those areas. These kinds of crucial investments will help ensure communities impacted by wildfire can rebuild and recover in a way that improves their resilience against future natural disasters.

Recovery after a wildfire is a lengthy and challenging process. However, H.R. 528 will help build stronger, more resilient communities that can stand up against the threat of wildfires for generations to come. I appreciate the Committee's consideration of this urgent legislation and look forward to their efforts to address this critical issue.

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