



H.R. 528: (Rep. Pettersen), “Post-Disaster Reforestation and Restoration Act of 2025”

Congressional Testimony, Colorado State Forester Matt McCombs, April 29, 2025

Chairman Tiffany, Ranking Member Neguse, and Members of the Subcommittee:

Good morning, and thank you for the opportunity to speak today. My name is Matthew McCombs, and I serve as the State Forester of Colorado. I’m here to express strong support for H.R. 528, the Post-Disaster Reforestation and Restoration Act, which creates new direction for Interior Bureaus to track reforestation needs, expand partnerships through existing funding, contract and cooperative agreement instruments, consult with states, tribes, and other partners on priority projects and identify outstanding funding needs. It offers an important initial step to understand the Department's reforestation backlog and galvanize partnerships to respond.

Colorado is no stranger to natural disasters including frequent, severe wildfires and flash floods. In recent years, our state has seen large and destructive wildfires that consume vast areas of forestland—many of those fires occur on federal lands that border our communities, contain our critical watersheds, and provide our economic lifelines through Colorado’s world-famous outdoor recreation opportunities.

Take the 2020 fire season, when Colorado experienced its three largest wildfires in history. Those megafires scorched over a half-million acres and Colorado experienced significant post-fire flooding issues. Five years later, we’re still working to restore those landscapes. But limited federal capacity, gaps in funding and knowledge, and fragmented coordination have slowed recovery. This bill directly addresses those challenges.

We also know one negative outcome of severe wildfires is that the seed source needed to naturally regenerate the forest can be consumed by the fire. This can reduce or eliminate the opportunity for the areas to recover without human intervention. There is a critical need to reforest impacted lands after natural disasters to re-establish forest cover and stabilize watersheds and riparian areas.

Prior to the 2020 fire season, the Hayman Fire was our largest wildfire in Colorado. More than 20 years after that fire, many areas within its burn scar remain without trees—but targeted reforestation in strategic areas has been successful in bringing forests back to some burned lands. This bill supports those efforts.



H.R. 528 recognizes that reforestation is not just a conservation issue—it's a community resilience issue. Our forests provide clean water and air, offer abundant opportunities for recreation, house our wild neighbors, and support jobs and rural economies.

In Colorado alone, over 80% of our municipal water supplies originate in forested watersheds—many of them on federal lands. Colorado's forested watersheds provide a vital water supply for millions of Americans downstream on both sides of the Continental Divide. Wildfires can have a catastrophic effect on drinking water as debris flows and degraded water quality damage infrastructure and disrupt treatment processes for years after the fire. The more quickly that burned watersheds are reforested, the better protected drinking water supplies will be.

This legislation would allow the Department of the Interior to work in lockstep with states, Tribes, local governments, and NGOs to prioritize reforestation and recovery efforts after disasters. It reflects the type of federal-state collaboration we need—flexible, proactive, and locally informed.

Importantly, the bill also supports workforce development. In Colorado, we're building a workforce pipeline through a revitalization of our state nursery and forest restoration projects. With the right investments, post-fire restoration can fuel rural economies—from seed collection to nursery production to planting trees—while preparing our landscapes for a warmer, dryer climate.

I urge the Committee to advance H.R. 528. It's a smart, timely bill that helps us move from reactive recovery to strategic restoration—ensuring our forests can remain as forests and our communities and watersheds not only heal but come back stronger.

Thank you, and I look forward to your questions.