

**TESTIMONY OF TIM VREDENBURG,
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COW CREEK BAND OF UMPQUA TRIBE OF INDIANS
PRESENTED TO THE
HOUSE COMMITTEE ON NATURAL RESOURCES
SUBCOMMITTEE ON FEDERAL LANDS
LEGISLATIVE HEARING ON H.R. ____ “FOSTERING OPPORTUNITIES TO
RESTORE ECOSYSTEMS THROUGH SOUND TRIBAL STEWARDSHIP ACT”
MAY 20, 2025**

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

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today on behalf of the Cow Creek Band of Umpqua Tribe of Indians. I serve as the Tribe’s Director of Forest Management. I appreciate the Committee’s leadership in advancing Tribal priorities in forest restoration, wildfire resilience, and the exercise of true self-determination. We have had the honor to support the important work of Chairman Hurd, Ranking Member Huffman and our very own Congresswoman Hoyle and Congressman Bentz.

About the Tribe

The Cow Creek Band of Umpqua Tribe of Indians is a sovereign, federally recognized Indian Tribe located in southwestern Oregon. The Tribe has deep ancestral ties to the Umpqua and Rogue River watersheds. Today, Cow Creek actively manages approximately 49,000 acres of forestland.

These forests are essential—not only to the Tribe’s cultural wellbeing, to the Tribe’s economy, but also ecological resilience, and community welfare. As the Director of Forest Management, I’ve had the privilege to work alongside leading forest scientists, Tribal leaders, tribal elders, and dedicated natural resource staff in carrying out that responsibility.

The Cow Creek Umpqua has built a reputation as a collaborative partner—working across ownership boundaries and jurisdictions to implement landscape-scale restoration that benefits not just Tribal lands, but entire watersheds and rural communities.

Tribal Forest Management: A Distinct Approach

Across the country, Tribal Nations manage over 19 million acres of forest lands held in trust by the federal government. These lands:

- Support over 500 Tribal communities across 36 states;
- Contain some of the highest-value forests and richest biodiversity in North America;
- Are consistently managed at a higher standard of long-term sustainability than many state, private, or even federal forests;
- And remain chronically underfunded—receiving just 30 cents on the dollar compared to other federal land management agencies.

In my work with the Indian Forest Management Assessment Team (IFMAT), I visited tribal forests across the nation. One thing became abundantly clear: Tribal management is different—not only in philosophy and practice but in meaningful results and accountability.

As IFMAT Co-Chair John Gordon put it: “Tribes have to live with the consequences of their actions. If they make smoke, they breathe the smoke. If they muck up the water, they drink that mucked up water.” That kind of direct connection—where decisions are felt immediately and locally by the community—produces a very different kind of stewardship. The result is clean cold water leaving reservation lands and healthy beautiful forests.

Indigenous Stewardship Is Active, Not Passive

Too often, Western conservation models treat sensitive areas as “no-touch zones”—closing them off from any human attendance or management. But indigenous knowledge teaches the opposite: when something is important, special, or sensitive, that is when it must be actively cared for.

Indigenous forest management is based on reciprocity. It’s not just about what can be taken from the land—it’s about what must be given back. Management and Restoration is a responsibility. Timber Harvest and Fire, when used with purpose and intention aren’t scary words, they are tools for health and balance.

Our society is grappling with the consequences of exclusion-based forestry policies. A philosophy that says if something is important or sensitive we draw a line around it and exclude management. The result: catastrophic wildfires, degraded watersheds, loss of wildlife habitat, and declining biodiversity. Indigenous knowledge offers a better path, one grounded in presence, relationship, and attachment to place.

Forests as Economic Infrastructure

Forest management is also essential to Tribal governance. Because Tribes cannot levy taxes, revenues from forestry operations often support critical services like education, elder care, and healthcare. Forestry is a necessary engine of economic self-sufficiency and self-determination.

At Cow Creek, we’ve seen how investing in biomass and sawmill infrastructure—especially after Catastrophic Fire—can reduce hazardous fuels while creating jobs and economic opportunity in rural Oregon. Many parts of the country have lost their milling infrastructure and have no place to take their forest residuals.

This legislation empowers Tribes to enter into revenue sharing agreements that can help support our local county governments. At Cow Creek Umpqua our leadership embraces the philosophy that “High Tides Float All Boats.” Forest health and economic health are inseparable.

The Need for Modernization

Despite the importance of Tribal forestry, the federal tools available to Tribes are becoming outdated.

The Indian Trust Asset Reform Act (ITARA) has shown what’s possible when Tribes lead. While continuing to satisfy all environmental review regulations, including endangered species act compliance, we are restoring forests, wildlife habitat and improving fish populations. How do we know this? We monitor, learn, and adapt our strategies to always improve. At Cow Creek, we’ve

used ITARA to improve efficiency, increase accountability, and manage tribal forests more effectively. This approach should be scaled and replicated across federal agencies.

The FORESTS Act: Progress and Potential

The bill we are here to discuss today, The Fostering Opportunities to Restore Ecosystems through Sound Tribal Stewardship Act (FORESTS Act) includes many important provisions that we strongly support:

- Expanded Tribal co-management authority over adjacent federal lands where cultural ties exist.
- Support for Tribal demonstration projects that include thinning, cultural burning, timber harvest, and native species restoration.
- Reforms to TFPA to include response timelines and approval standards—making the policy actionable and reliable.
- Revenue authority for forest restoration byproducts. Allowing Tribes to manage and sell forest products enables reinvestment into future stewardship and workforce development.
- Investments in restoration-linked infrastructure, including biochar and sawmills.
- Access to long-overdue programs, including the Reforestation Trust Fund, workforce development grants, and the Wood for Life program.

Key Recommendations

1. Authorize expanded self-governance for co-management of culturally connected federal lands.
2. Fund Tribal forestry at parity with other federal land management programs. It's the best investment in forest health you can make right now.
3. Scale Tribal demonstration projects meaningfully and design them with flexibility.
4. Reform TFPA with enforceable timelines and clear review processes.
5. Support Tribal forest infrastructure and economic tools that enable long-term stewardship.
6. Expand access to post-fire reforestation, training, and community resilience programs.
7. Direct agencies to use existing tools like emergency/alternate procedures.
8. Develop new contract mechanisms that allow efficient transfer of funding between federal agencies and Tribes.

Bipartisan Opportunity

This is not a partisan issue. The Bipartisan Wildfire Commission Report made the recommendation saying that if we want to meaningfully address Catastrophic wildfire, “Congress should provide the U.S. Department of Agriculture stand-alone authorities to enter into co-management agreements

with Tribes that would allow the Forest Service to share, defer or transfer decision-making authority with or to a Tribe for management of Forest Service programs or activities.” That’s what this legislation does. Wildfires do not check voter registration. Wildfires in Red and Blue state are resulting in the same color of charred burn scars. Rural economies and forest ecosystems are suffering across the political spectrum. The FORESTS Act is a chance to come together around shared values: of reciprocity, sovereignty, responsibility and durable cost-effective solutions.

Conclusion

We are in the midst of a national forest health and wildfire crisis. Every fire season we are in a waking nightmare. Our children and families are literally choking on this crisis. Tribal Nations are ready and capable of implementing these solutions—but they need the authority, funding, and trust.

Indigenous knowledge offers a framework for living with fire, restoring ecosystems, and managing land in a way that supports both people and place. The FORESTS Act moves us toward that future as it puts real tools in the hands of tribal nations.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify. I would welcome your questions.