

Statement by

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**Before the
United States House of Representatives
Committee on Natural Resources
Subcommittee on Federal Lands
Legislative Hearing on H.R. 1045, H.R. 1655, H.R. 3187, and H.R. 3444**

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INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Chairman Tiffany, Ranking Member Neguse, Vice Chairman Kennedy, and members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to testify at this legislative hearing. My testimony today will focus on H.R. 1655, the “*Wildfire Communication Resiliency Act.*”

I am Greg Andreas, General Manager at Ponderosa Telephone. I have over 30 years of executive leadership and operational expertise across large multinational corporations and rural telecommunications providers. My background has provided me with the opportunity to lead several small rural operators and understand firsthand the unique challenges rural communities and providers face in getting and staying connected.

Ponderosa Telephone covers 1,650 square miles from the foothills to the spine of the Sierra Nevada mountains covering Madera and Fresno Counties. Ponderosa is in its sixth generation of family management, starting in 1908. We have over 7,200 customers and serve 10 tribal communities. This good work has not been easy, however. Ninety-five percent of our Big Creek exchange is situated on federal land and several of our other exchanges also traverse federally managed areas. We average four homes per mile of network build, navigating through rough terrain that is difficult and costly to serve. It has taken extraordinary efforts to serve our neighbors, friends and families— and this work rests atop a unique mix of commitment to our community, an entrepreneurial spirit, and effective governmental policies and programs that help make and sustain the business case for investing and continuing to operate in rural America.

Of course, there are a number of community-based and community-focused local providers like Ponderosa across the country. We are proud members of NTCA- The Rural Broadband Association, which represents about 850 rural, community-based broadband providers that are deploying cutting edge networks and offering advanced communications services in deeply rural communities. These operators collectively serve less than five percent of the population of the United States but nearly thirty percent of its landmass. Much like Ponderosa, these rural providers operate in rural areas left behind decades ago when earlier efforts to build out our nation’s communications networks ignored them because they were too sparsely populated.

Even before taking my current role at Ponderosa, I have unfortunately had significant experience in managing responses to and recovery from natural disasters. In 2017, while working for VIYA in the United States Virgin Islands, two Category 5 hurricanes (Irma and Maria) went overhead two weeks apart on September 6th and 20th respectively. With seventy-eight percent of utility poles down, the disaster recovery effort was extensive. It took a year to restore internet and phone services to over ninety-five percent of customers that were down.

Experiences like these have given me substantial insights into critical disaster recovery efforts to restore telecommunications infrastructure in remote and underserved areas, including the need to work closely with local and federal stakeholders to ensure rapid response, community safety and resilient rebuilding – which brings us to this important hearing. I look forward to sharing “lessons learned” in managing recovery and restoration of communications networks following natural disasters not only on federal lands that are under the purview of this Subcommittee but

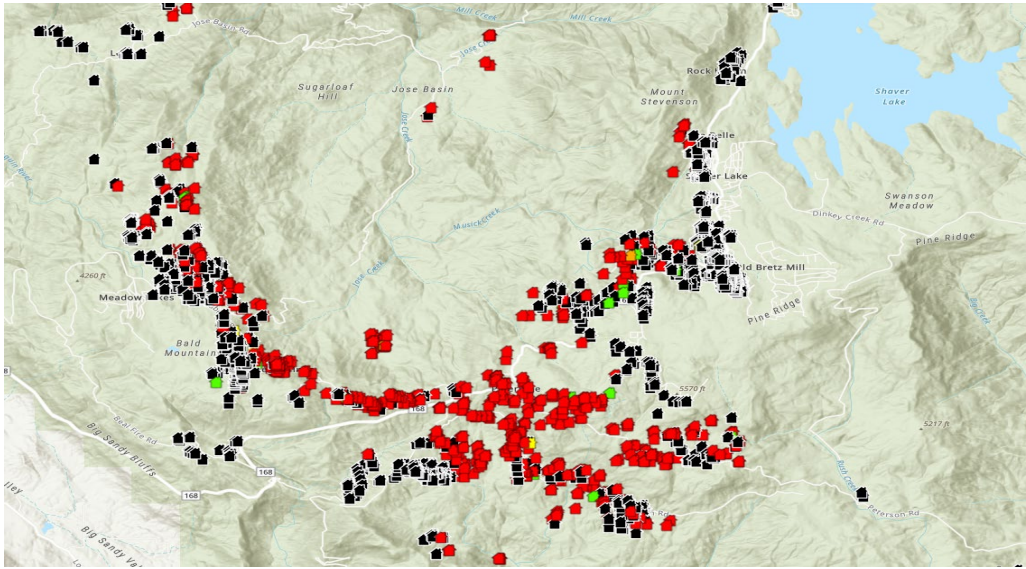
also along interstate, state, and local roadways, under railroad crossings, on poles, and/or in private rights of way. These lessons have come from both my time in the Virgin Islands dealing with the impacts of hurricanes on networks and more recently navigating inefficient, outdated, and/or understaffed permitting processes in the wake of Ponderosa's efforts to help our community recover from catastrophic wildfires.

Wildfires pose a serious threat not only to lives and property but also to critical communication infrastructure. As fires spread, they can damage cell towers, fiber optic cables (that provide service directly to residents and businesses as well as serving as backhaul for wireless towers), and power lines – leading to widespread communication outages. These disruptions can hinder emergency response efforts, delay evacuation alerts, and isolate communities, especially the elderly, from vital information. In rural and wildfire-prone areas especially, the loss of connectivity can exacerbate already dangerous situations. I am grateful for the opportunity to highlight how H.R. 1655 will expedite the environmental and historical review processes to ensure that swift and reliable networks are back up and running after a catastrophic wildfire through restoration of critical communications infrastructure.

2020 CREEK FIRE

On September 4, 2020, the sixth largest wildfire recorded in California history ravaged our community. The Creek fire burned nearly 400,000 acres, destroyed over 850 buildings, and took well over four months to contain. Firefighting costs exceeded \$500 million dollars, making it one of the costliest fires in California history.

Ponderosa experienced the loss of several cell towers due to the fire, along with significant damage to our North Fork, Auberry, Shaver Lake, Big Creek, and Wishon service areas. Portions of our buried fiber were damaged, particularly at access points such as hand-holes and pedestals where the fiber transitions above ground. In several instances, damage occurred weeks after the initial fire, as residual heat from smoldering tree stumps traveled through underground root systems and ultimately comprised the network. Preliminary assessments put total damages and restoration costs at approximately \$4,137,000.



Homes damaged or lost in Ponderosa's Auberry, North Fork, and Shaver Lake Exchanges

In the aftermath of the Creek Fire, several challenges emerged. Restoration crews faced restricted access to impacted areas due to a breakdown in interagency coordination among law enforcement, agency officials, emergency management and utility stakeholders, delaying restoration efforts. We installed temporary networks to continue delivering critical communication services to first responders to support emergency operations. Although it is not the topic of today's hearing specifically, legislation to address interagency coordination to combat these breakdowns may be useful in ensuring expedited restoration. Restoration delays were further compounded by utility companies conducting repairs without submitting 811 locate requests. As a result, underground fiber cables were cut and conduits damaged, exacerbating the scope of the restoration effort and causing unnecessary disruptions to emergency communications for first responders.

Once the immediate emergency concluded, we were required to comply with all applicable federal, state, and tribal permitting regulations. It has now been five years since the wildfire, and we are still navigating the permitting process to rebuild completely in the affected areas.

GENERAL BROADBAND PERMITTING ISSUES

Stepping back, obtaining access to federal lands for broadband facilities installation (including restoration) – or otherwise obtaining a permit when a project is considered a “major federal action” under the National Environmental Policy Act (“NEPA”) and/or a “federal undertaking” pursuant to the National Historic Preservation Act (“NHPA”) – can be a time-consuming, expensive and cumbersome process. Due to the nature of the areas served by many rural providers like Ponderosa, we often have no alternative but to install fiber under roads that cross land owned or managed by federal agencies such as the Bureau of Land Management or the Forest Service. Rerouting even a small segment of a project is frequently infeasible because of long distances, difficult terrain, or the lack of obtainable easements on nearby private land – if any exists at all. Moreover, many smaller rural providers have no choice but to comply with the

NEPA and NHPA processes even if they are not installing facilities on federal lands; for example, a project undertaken pursuant to a federal broadband grant will also face the need to adhere to NEPA and NHPA. I am aware that some NTCA members recount delays of up to two years in some cases to apply for and obtain permissions to build. Indeed, even if a project crosses federal land for only a short distance as part of a broader deployment, the entire initiative can be delayed due to the need for federal agencies approvals for that portion. Additional delays may occur when states, even if they exempt providers from certain environmental and historical regulations, use NEPA or NHPA requirements to pause or impede restoration efforts.

While these processes are cumbersome under normal circumstances, in the wake of a wildfire, they can lead to significant delays as companies like Ponderosa work to reconnect their communities to the outside world. In the aftermath of a wildfire, quickly restoring and rebuilding communication infrastructure is essential to reconnect communities, support emergency services, and enable recovery efforts. Thus, any effort to streamline these processes as communities recover from wildfires is essential.

H.R. 1655

I am pleased to support Representative Bentz's *Wildfire Communication Resiliency Act*, under consideration today – and I thank him for his leadership. This legislation aims to tackle the significant delays surrounding the restoration of a communication facility after a wildfire. Communities across the nation will benefit from this legislation being signed into law. I would also encourage this Subcommittee to consider similar legislation to address other natural disasters such as hurricanes or tornadoes. Expediting NEPA and NHPA procedures in the wake of natural disasters such as wildfires would allow providers to swiftly replace damaged infrastructure, deploy permanent communications solutions, and ensure that affected areas regain access to essential services. As I previously stated, it has been five years since the Creek fire, and we are still navigating the permitting process to restore our networks. These reviews, while important for environmental and cultural projections, are often lengthy and complex – even for restoration projects of facilities that had previously been in the very same area. Streamlined approvals are not just a matter of regulatory efficiency – they are a lifeline for communities trying to rebuild and stay connected.

Closing

By streamlining NEPA and NHPA review processes for communications facilities on federal lands post-wildfire, providers like Ponderosa will be better positioned to engage in the rapid restoration of networks. In an era of increasingly frequent and severe wildfires, ensuring fast, reliable deployment and restoration of communication infrastructure is critical now more than ever. These networks are the backbone of emergency response, public safety, and community resilience.

Thank you again for providing me with the opportunity to share these thoughts with the Committee. I look forward to working with this Subcommittee, other members of Congress, the federal agencies of jurisdiction, and other stakeholders.