

**Testimony of Larissa Yocom
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**Before the House Subcommittee on Federal Lands, Committee on Natural Resources
Hearing on H.R. 1045 (Rep. Kennedy), “Utah Wildfire Research Institute Act of 2025”**

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Chairman Tiffany, Ranking Member Neguse, and all members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to speak today. I am Larissa Yocom, the Director of the Utah Forest Restoration Institute and an Associate Professor of Forest Fire Ecology & Management at Utah State University. I am excited about the opportunity to discuss the “Utah Wildfire Research Institute Act of 2025” bill, introduced by Representative Kennedy with a companion bill S.457 introduced by Senator Lee. This bill would amend the Southwest Forest Health and Wildfire Prevention Act of 2004 to require the establishment of an additional Southwest Ecological Restoration Institute under the Act in the state of Utah. Currently three institutes exist in Arizona, New Mexico, and Colorado. Passing this bill into law is an important initial step to benefit the people of Utah, as well as our neighboring states, by adding to an existing program with proven results accelerating science-based forest management and reducing wildfire risk.

Fire plays an essential ecological role in keeping diverse Western forests healthy and has wide-ranging benefits. For example, aspen trees thrive after fire, and wildlife often seek out recently burned areas. However, early settlers viewed fire as a destructive force that resulted in the waste of valuable timber. For decades, forest managers were remarkably successful in preventing and suppressing fire, while communities expanded into fire-prone areas. Then, about twenty-five years ago, large and destructive megafires suddenly started to become a regular occurrence. At present, we are experiencing more destructive fire, spending more resources on fighting fire, and dealing with other cascading effects such as fire-induced damage to water supplies and rising homeowner insurance costs. Everyone is looking for answers. How can we better manage our forests, keep communities safe, and reduce the risks for millions of Americans who depend on forests for services such as timber, clean air, recreation, hunting, grazing, and water supply?

In 2004 Congress created the Southwest Ecological Restoration Institutes, or SWERI, to serve as the critical connector of science and practice to restore forest health and reduce the risk of catastrophic wildfire. Hosted at universities to stay on the cutting edge of research, the SWERI work side by side with managers, policymakers, and communities to ensure that locally relevant science and technology reaches the people who need it most. The SWERI have worked for 20 years to demonstrate that adaptive and active management is an effective tool for improving outcomes. Although there is still plenty of work to do, we have learned a great deal in the last two decades about how to reduce fuels through mechanical thinning of trees and prescribed fire, as well as developed science-based fire response strategies that are safer and more effective. We have learned more about how to engage residents to garner support for active forest

management. We have learned about how to support collaboration across boundaries, so that important fire prevention work does not get hung up in the courts. We have learned about how to manage areas that have recently burned, to restore vegetation and prevent erosion into waterways. Much of this learning has been developed and applied on the ground under the leadership of the SWERI, through their place-based monitoring and timely and nimble production of actionable ecological and social science.

The work of the SWERI is so distinct and impactful that Utah wants a SWERI of their own. In 2024, the Utah state legislature authorized the formation of an institute housed at Utah State University, provided start-up funding, and named it the Utah Forest Restoration Institute. I was named the Director in January of this year. Initial responses in Utah to the formation of the institute have been universally positive, from partners including the state of Utah, the U.S. Department of Agriculture Forest Service, the Department of Interior Bureau of Land Management, tribal representatives, non-profits, and policymakers. Everyone acknowledges that we have a fire and forest resilience problem, and we need focused attention on solutions. Utah's mix of forest and woodlands are unique. We have different fire patterns from our neighboring states and our solutions will need to be unique too. Frankly, we are behind many of our neighbors in determining which management tools work best for Utah's forests and woodlands, and how to engage residents and decision makers. Establishing a SWERI in Utah is critical to help us get ahead of the curve before it is too late.

The benefits of establishing a SWERI in Utah include healthier forests, safer communities, a stronger workforce, and a more informed public. We have been collaborating closely with the other SWERI to ensure that we are additive and complementary to the SWERI program and will enhance their work across the Intermountain West. Federal designation of a SWERI in Utah will need to be followed by sufficient appropriations for the new Utah institute and sustained appropriations for the existing SWERI. Sustained federal funding allows the SWERI to reliably and swiftly respond to the substantial and increasing need for science-based solutions for reducing the risk of catastrophic wildfire and sustaining the health and vitality of our forests in the Intermountain West, in alignment with the broader intent of the Southwest Forest Health and Wildfire Prevention Act of 2004.

Thank you for the opportunity to address this Subcommittee. I would be happy to answer any questions you may have.