

Prepared Comments by Curtis Sheets, Chief of Wintergreen Fire & Rescue

Good afternoon, Chairman Tiffany, and distinguished Federal Lands Subcommittee Members.

Thank you to Congressman McGuire and all who have helped advance this proposed legislation which I believe is essential to save lives.

First, a little about Wintergreen. Wintergreen is one of the largest planned communities in Virginia with over 3,000 properties situated on 11,000 acres. We are home for hundreds of Virginians and literally tens of thousands of their guests.

We're sitting here today because two mistakes were made in the mid 1970's. First, a large mountain-top community was designed with only one way in and out. Second, because the original developers believed so strongly in environmental conservation, they identified a few thousand acres of land which they would not need, and they conveyed this land to the Appalachian Trail Commission. The mistake they made was not reserving an emergency egress corridor across the very land they were conveying. Ironical.

It wouldn't be fair to beat the founding fathers of Wintergreen up too badly over this. Very little attention was paid to wildfire in Virginia in the 70s. Wildfires were a west coast phenomenon and perhaps a mid-west issue, but people really weren't talking about East Coast Wildfires.

Sometime around 2000 the Virginia Department of Forestry placed Wintergreen on their radar as a "Wildland Urban Interface" community with high risk of a devastating fire.

Ever since becoming aware of our risks, we have worked steadily to mitigate them. Wintergreen met the standards to become a "Firewise Community" as designated by the NFPA in 2008. We have continuously worked to reduce our

fire loads, and to change our community construction standards to prohibit things like cedar roofs and other highly flammable materials. The main thing we need, and what we have been relentlessly lobbying for is an emergency egress to the Blue Ridge Parkway.

We simply need a gravel road connecting our road network to the Parkway so that our residents and guests can run away from an approaching wildfire.

Let's take a second to put this into perspective since only Congressman McGuire has walked the proposed route with me. Many of you are likely pretty dialed into college football this time of year. Even if you're not, you can certainly visualize a football field. Now think about the end zone. That's roughly the same amount of square footage we need for our gravel path to safety.

We practice fire drills as little kids and as adults, we're still told where the fire exits are located on every airplane. The importance of an escape route is known and understood by all, and it's not disputed. And yet, the Department of Interior has been absolutely steadfast in their resolve to keep this emergency egress from being created. Why? It's simple. They're doing their jobs. They are charged with protecting the Park. It's literally in their job description. A job description, which you can amend.

So would this exit impact the Park environment? Of course no road can be built with zero impact, however we believe the impact is so close to zero that statistically speaking, it's zero. We have studied bats, bugs, artifacts, wetlands, trees, plants, sounds, lights, and then bats again. We have spent hundreds of thousands of dollars to be certain our project won't negatively impact the environment.

Let's say this bill doesn't get approved and that instead we kick this can down the road because "there's nothing we can do". What's the worst thing that could happen? If you asked the people in Gatlinburg, they would tell you about 14 lost lives in 2016. If you ask the people in Paradise California, they will tell you about 85 lost lives, many trapped in their cars trying to escape in 2018. If you talk to people in Maui, they will tell you about people abandoning their vehicles to jump into the ocean because the traffic wasn't moving and the fire was coming too fast. They lost 102 souls in 2023.

2016, 2018, 2023...this threat of wildfire isn't coming, it's here. The question is, what are you going to do about it? Are you going to add your name to the long list of people who haven't worked to improve safety? Or will you will agree with me that a patch of gravel smaller than an end zone is a very small price to pay if it could avoid another deadly wildfire scenario.

Please don't allow some fire chief in the future from some other community to rattle off a list of deadly wildfires which includes Wintergreen. In the words of Smokey The Bear himself, "Only you can prevent this".

Thank you for your time.