

Statement of Mesa County Commissioner Bobbie Daniel
Before the U.S. House Committee on Natural Resources
Subcommittee on Federal Lands
Hearing on H.R. 8688
May 21, 2026

Chairman Tiffany, Ranking Member Neguse, Congressman Hurd, and Members of the Subcommittee,

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today in favor of H.R. 8688, the Forest Health and Wildfire Risk Reduction Act, introduced by Congressman Jeff Hurd. Mesa County strongly supports this legislation, which seeks to codify the Bureau of Land Management’s proposed categorical exclusion for thinning to improve forest health and reduce wildfire risk.

I’m Bobbie Daniel, and I serve as a Mesa County Commissioner in western Colorado. Mesa County is one of the largest natural-resource-producing regions on the West Slope, and I also serve as Vice Chair of the National Association of Counties Public Lands Steering Committee.

The wildfire crisis facing Colorado and the American West continues to worsen every year. Our communities are facing longer fire seasons, worsening drought, declining forest health, and dangerous fuel buildup across public lands.

Nearly three-quarters of Mesa County, approximately 1.6 million acres, is federally owned. Federal forests are directly connected to our public safety, water quality, outdoor recreation economy, wildlife habitat, and overall quality of life.

Communities throughout western Colorado understand firsthand what is at stake. Wildfires threaten lives, watersheds, infrastructure, and rural economies while worsening air quality and causing serious respiratory and public health problems. We need every available tool to reduce wildfire risk and improve forest health. As the saying goes, an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure when protecting our communities from devastating wildfires.

I serve on both the Colorado River Basin Roundtable and the Gunnison Basin Roundtable, and I want this Committee to understand that forest health and water security are directly connected. Across the Colorado River Basin, more than 40 million Americans depend on mountain snowpack for drinking water, agriculture, and local economies. Healthy forests protect watersheds, improve snowpack retention, and support water supplies across the West.

In Colorado, nearly 80% of our residents get their municipal water supplies from watersheds associated with our forests. Catastrophic wildfire can damage watersheds, increase erosion and sediment runoff, contaminate drinking water supplies, and create long-term water quality challenges. The forest health crisis and the Western water crisis are deeply interconnected.

H.R. 8688 adds another tool to the toolbox by allowing the BLM to move more efficiently on routine thinning projects. BLM's decades-long review found these treatments reduce hazardous fuels and lower wildfire severity by more than 70 percent.

Importantly, H.R. 8688 is carefully tailored. The bill applies to thinning activities under 5,000 acres and expressly excludes clearcutting, even-aged regeneration harvests, and activities intended to convert forests into non-forest uses. The bill also includes protections related to erosion control, invasive species, riparian areas, and temporary road reclamation.

Between 2000 and 2024, the United States averaged more than 7 million acres burned annually by wildfire, and communities across Colorado and the West are increasingly facing larger and more destructive fires. Mesa County experienced this firsthand during the Pine Gulch Fire, which burned more than 140,000 acres and caused \$26 million in damage.

At the same time, federal agencies continue to face challenges managing our forests at the pace and scale necessary to protect our children, families, and businesses. Projects that should take months can take years to complete, even when there is broad agreement. Delays often mean conditions continue to deteriorate while communities remain exposed to increasing wildfire risk.

Mesa County believes we need to significantly increase the pace and scale of active forest management across our federal lands, and this bill from Congressman Hurd is an important step in that direction.

H.R. 8688 will help BLM respond more quickly to hazardous and overgrown conditions while supporting healthier forests, firefighter safety, and rural jobs.

Most importantly, this bill recognizes that proactive forest management is far preferable to reacting after major wildfires have already devastated communities, watersheds, infrastructure, and landscapes. The longer we delay active management projects, the more expensive and destructive future wildfires become.

As both a county commissioner and a mother raising four children on Colorado's Western Slope, I believe we have a responsibility to leave behind healthier, safer, and more resilient forests for the next generation.

We appreciate Congressman Hurd, Subcommittee Chairman Tiffany, and Chairman Westerman's leadership and their recognition of the unique forest management challenges facing communities like Mesa County. Mesa County also supports the bipartisan Fix Our Forests Act, and we believe both that legislation and H.R. 8688 need to become law immediately.

Thank you again for the opportunity to testify. I look forward to answering your questions.

Sincerely,



Bobbie Daniel
Commissioner, Mesa County, Colorado