

## **Oral Testimony for Craig Foss, Idaho State Forester**

### **Submitted to the House Subcommittee on Water, Oceans, and Wildlife Hearing on “The Status of Drought Conditions Throughout the Western United States” May 25, 2021**

#### **Introduction**

Thank you, Chairman Huffman, Ranking Member Bentz, and Members of the subcommittee for holding this hearing today and for the opportunity to testify on behalf of the State of Idaho – Department of Lands. I am Craig Foss, Idaho State Forester, and I appreciate the opportunity to speak with you today regarding the relationship of drought, wildfire and our federal, state and private forests.

As State Forester for the Idaho Department of Lands, I oversee the forestry and fire programs for the state of Idaho. IDL staff provide professional assistance to the citizens of Idaho enabling them to use, protect and sustain their natural resources, while protecting soil and water quality, reducing the risks of catastrophic wildfire, and providing access to necessary use of fire for forest restoration and community protection. The IDL protects 6.3 million acres of federal, state and private lands from wildfire.

#### **Forests, Drought and Wildfire:**

Idaho’s forestlands are essential to providing drinking water for urban and rural populations. Healthy forests bring increased water supplies through snow retention in mountain headwaters and increased stream shading. Unhealthy and fire damaged forests bring water quality and quantity issues. Healthy “resilient” forests can withstand naturally occurring disturbances such as insect and disease outbreaks, wildfire, and drought. Idaho’s national forests comprise 80% of the state’s total forestland. Of these more than 20 million acres of federal forests, 12.8 million are designated suitable for management. Of these 12.8 million acres, seventy five percent, more than 8 million acres, are in declining condition, leaving them at high risk of insect and disease and wildfire mortality. Idaho, like much of the West, is experiencing wildfire seasons that are 30-60 days longer due to the changing climate.

***We can’t change the weather, but we can change the condition of our forests.***

In Idaho, we’ve entered into Shared Stewardship and Good Neighbor Authority agreements with a goal of doubling the number of acres treated and restored on our most at risk federal forestlands. Adjacent state, industrial and family forestland will also be treated, assuring landscape scale forest health improvements. These Agreements involve a wide array of federal, state, county, NGO and private interests. Treatments will include harvest of commercially viable forests, prescribed fire on landscapes not suitable for mechanical treatments, and reforestation with suitable forest species. Federal and state nurseries have capacity, but lack funding, to significantly increase seedling production to meet the increased reforestation needs across the west.

***The goal of forest restoration is removal of dead and dying trees, and thinning of overcrowded forests and ladder fuels contributing to wildfire spread, assuring the remaining healthy trees have access to increasingly limited water supplies, and more water available for aquifer recharge.*** Idaho is fortunate to have strong forest industry, with forestry consultants, logging contractors, and lumber mills and seedling nurseries serving an integral role in this restoration effort.

It will take many years to address the extensive restoration work needed to restore and protect our forested watersheds -- in Idaho and throughout the western United States. This cannot be accomplished without consistent national policy support. It will require increased funding for climate change research, active forest management, wildfire mitigation, increased use of prescribed fire and reforestation. Much of the funding used by state forestry agencies for these efforts comes through the USFS State & Private Forestry Programs.

Additionally, the Trillion Trees Act, Resilient Federal Forests Act, Treating Tribes and Counties as Good Neighbors Act, Rural Forest Markets Act, and National Prescribed Fire Act contain important policy and funding tools needed by federal and state forestry agencies engaged in these essential forest restoration efforts. These are all important policy initiatives, and the more they can be streamlined, the more efficiently the directives can be implemented on the ground.

***The critical point I want to stress to this committee: Managed forests are healthy forests, better able to withstand wildfire, pests, and drought, and more capable of storing carbon, providing clean air, water, wildlife habitat, economic and recreational opportunities, and countless other benefits. Forests, water and people are dependent on one another.***

I look forward to answering your questions today, and thank you again for the opportunity to testify.