

The United States House of Representatives
Committee on Natural Resources
Subcommittee on Water, Wildlife, and Fisheries

Oversight Hearing Entitled “*Fix Our Forests for Affordable and Reliable Water and Power Supplies*”

Testimony of
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January 8, 2026

Thank you, Chairwoman Hageman, Ranking Member Hoyle, and Members of the Subcommittee for the opportunity to testify at this hearing on Fixing Our Forests for Affordable and Reliable Water and Power Supplies.

My name is Travas Deal, and I serve as the Chief Executive Officer of Colorado Springs Utilities, a four-service, municipally owned utility in Colorado Springs, Colorado. For more than a century, Colorado Springs Utilities has reliably provided water, wastewater, natural gas, and electric services to the people of Colorado Springs. Today, we serve nearly half a million people, including residential, commercial, and industrial customers across a 200-square-mile service territory. Our ratepayers - working families, small and large businesses, and military installations - depend on us to deliver the vital water and power services that make life in the Rocky Mountain West possible. Unhealthy forests create a direct threat to our water and power infrastructure and thus our ability to provide these services safely, reliably, and affordably.

Within our community and nationally, water and electric affordability and reliability are of paramount concern, and both are increasingly threatened by natural disasters and extreme weather events. Wildfires have posed escalating risks to our electric transmission and distribution networks, water collection infrastructure, terminal water storage reservoirs, and the forested watershed lands from which our water supplies originate. When wildfire burns through our watersheds, not only does it damage infrastructure, but ash, sediment, and debris can contaminate our reservoirs, creating significant increases in water treatment costs. When fires damage power lines and hydroelectric facilities, we face expensive repairs and replacement power costs which ultimately impact our ratepayers through higher utility bills.

For nearly 120 years, Colorado Springs has relied on water supplies from remote high-elevation watersheds to deliver clean, sustainable water to our community’s residents and businesses. Our water system transports raw water via pipelines and tunnels from watersheds more than 100 miles away from our city to be stored in terminal reservoirs located in the forested mountains just outside Colorado Springs. Because our city is not located on a major river and has no natural lakes to meet our water supply needs, we depend on both first use and reuse of this imported water. Much of the water that enters our system is collected from upper elevation watersheds, providing 60 to 70 percent (depending on annual precipitation) of our community’s total water supply. Most of these high-elevation watersheds that supply our sources of water are lands that

are part of the National Forest System. This requires Colorado Springs Utilities to work closely with the U.S. Forest Service to protect our water supply from risks like catastrophic wildfire and post-fire conditions.

Colorado Springs Utilities is not unique in its reliance on water from federal lands. Many western communities depend on clean, sustainable water supplies and raw water conveyance infrastructure located within federally managed forested landscapes. But Colorado Springs Utilities is exceptional in that we also own and operate hydroelectric generating units and electric transmission and distribution lines on and adjacent to forested lands managed by the federal government, creating a distinct interdependence between water security and electric reliability for our community. This means that a single catastrophic wildfire can simultaneously threaten both our water supply and our power generation. As such, Colorado Springs Utilities' infrastructure encompasses far more than just pipelines and power lines; it includes these forested landscapes themselves and we rely heavily on federal agency partnerships to manage the critical forested landscapes which our community relies upon.

Although I am here representing Colorado Springs Utilities, my testimony reflects the shared experience of many electric utilities and water providers across the western United States. We collectively depend on the health and sustainability of our federal forested watersheds and on the various land managers who help protect these landscapes before, during, and after extreme weather events and from disease and insect infestations. These forested landscapes form the backbone of the natural resources that support western communities—providing critical drinking water supplies, power generation, agricultural water supply, manufacturing resources, and environmental and recreational benefits.

The Fix Our Forests Act that passed the House early last year, is an important first step in addressing the challenges facing our federal landscapes by providing much needed support for federal land managers, enabling forest health projects, and contributing to broader forest restoration efforts. Though we do not think either the House or Senate versions of this bill are perfect, the consequences of continued inaction in this space are far too high and we respectfully urge its quick passage.

Landscape-Scale Restoration

One of the most significant strengths of the Fix Our Forests Act is its support for landscape-scale restoration in high-priority watersheds and fireheds, including the establishment of Wildfire Crisis Strategy areas. Historically, priority landscapes were identified primarily for ecological reasons, without fully considering community assets, Community Wildfire Protection Plans, utility infrastructure, or the potential for tribal, state, and local collaboration. The Fix Our Forest Act would enable a more holistic consideration and approach and help solidify the cross-boundary partnerships necessary to support the ecological needs of forested environments as well as the needs of the communities that are dependent on them.

One area where Fix Our Forest Act works to improve these overlapping ecological and community needs is the designation and enhanced management of High Priority Fireheds. This

designation allows for improved pace and scale of forest treatments in priority high risk watersheds using the best available science and collaborative partnerships that would benefit the forested environment and promote community resiliency against wildfire in designated high-risk areas. The Fix Our Forest Act would also promote the use of shared stewardship agreements to better designate and treat areas at high risk of wildfire. Through shared stewardship, our federal partners have accelerated the pace and scale of forest restoration across jurisdictional boundaries by providing previously allocated funding to the Colorado State Forest Service in support of watershed protection projects near our terminal reservoirs and electric infrastructure located on Pikes Peak. While this funding greatly supported some of our collective priority project areas, additional funding and support is needed to continue this effort of protection in high priority forested landscapes. While one of the foundational purposes of the National Forest System is to protect water supplies and critical public infrastructure, continued collaboration with local electric utilities and water providers is essential to maximize the value of federal funding for high priority forested environments.

Proactive Treatment and Partnerships

Proactive forest treatments—such as mechanical thinning and prescribed fire—help reduce the risk of catastrophic wildfires and the post-fire damage that can harm water collection systems and contaminate terminal storage reservoirs. Many of Colorado Springs Utilities’ terminal reservoirs sit on federally managed lands under long-term special use permits, which makes federally coordinated post-fire response, suppression efforts, and ongoing forest management essential to protecting our community’s water supply. Achieving meaningful risk reduction will require ongoing federal support, federal funding, and continued shared stewardship.

Our local partnerships have already shown what shared stewardship can accomplish, shifting this work from a solely federal responsibility to a collaborative effort among utilities, state agencies, nonprofits, academic institutions, and other partners. But continued progress depends on reliable federal investment. Funding for priority landscapes has declined, limiting our ability to reduce risk in the areas that need it most. We have successfully utilized tools such as the Good Neighbor Authority, Categorical Exclusions, and the Wyden Act to accelerate restoration work through the treatment of 1,800 acres of high-priority watershed lands each year. This has been possible in part through the financial contributions of Colorado Springs Utilities and previous federal funding received as a designated priority landscape. Without the funding appropriated by our federal partners, the ability to treat priority watersheds will diminish, placing our community assets and forested environment at greater risk.

Transparency, Technology, and Partnership

We are exceedingly proud of the strong and enduring partnership with federal agencies that we have established in Colorado Springs. For more than 140 years, we have collaborated to protect and manage the forested watersheds that sustain critical water resources for our community and our region. Despite this long-standing commitment, our forest management efforts face a

significant challenge common across the West: what to do with the removed low value wood and hazardous wood material that cannot be sold for profit.

Although biochar production, the process of converting wood waste into usable heating material, is expanding in Colorado, facilities remain geographically limited, and the cost to transport materials to these facilities exceeds economic practicality and is a cost that we cannot pass on to our ratepayers. Current biochar technologies lag behind what is required to support the pace and scale of treatments necessary for sustainable forest conditions. As a result, efforts to restore forest health are frequently constrained by the challenge of removing low-value material from the landscape. Unlike some states with more robust wood product markets, Colorado's Front Range and Priority Landscapes do not yield merchantable products capable of offsetting harvesting costs, and the region's economic framework differs markedly from states with profitable wood-product markets. This leaves water and power utilities, particularly those that are publicly owned like Colorado Springs Utilities, with few economically viable options. The provisions of the Fix Our Forest Act promoting biochar development could be helpful in regions like the Colorado Front Range, but substantial technical, logistical, and financial support will be needed.

Compounding these challenges, Colorado is experiencing a rapidly expanding Mountain Pine Beetle infestation, which heightens wildfire risk, complicates management operations, and threatens essential water and electric infrastructure. When combined with increasingly extreme weather, these conditions create unprecedented risks across already vulnerable landscapes. The connection between forest health and water resource protection cannot be overstated. Catastrophic wildfires compromise water quality, damage reservoir infrastructure, and impose substantial treatment costs on water providers and their ratepayers. Healthy, actively managed forests are essential to maintaining the clean, reliable water supplies that communities and ecosystems depend upon. Continued federal and state support is essential to expand markets, integrate utilization strategies into up-to-date Forest Management Plans, and ensure adequate funding to address these evolving threats.

Through shared stewardship, we remain committed to science-based management and technological innovation and supporting the protection of critical watershed lands. However, it is equally important to pursue and consider alternatives to biochar, such as chip board or cross-laminated timber, and strengthen local milling capacity to make effective use of otherwise non-merchantable materials. Sustained federal and state investment will be critical to advancing the goals of supporting resilient forest management across Colorado and protecting critical water and electric infrastructure.

Room for Improvement in FOFA

While we are greatly supportive of the Fix Our Forest Act legislation and the potential improvement that it could bring for forest health across the country, I would like to take this opportunity to highlight one potential area that we believe should be improved. Both the House and Senate version of the bill would amend the Healthy Forest Restoration Act of 2003 to increase the pace and scale of active forest management projects of up to 10,000 acres, as

opposed to the current allowance for 3,000 acres. While this could be beneficial to Water providers in the West, the bill's reliance on existing statutory project location limitations prevents the expanded categorical exclusions from applying to Fire Regime V. Many parts of New Mexico, Colorado, and Wyoming's high alpine watersheds reside within Fire Regime V and as such, would not qualify for the categorical exclusions that the bill creates for projects in other Fire Regime areas. We appreciate the House's inclusion of Fire Regime V in Section 603 of the bill which would allow us to conduct important project work in areas that are in dire need, however, we encourage the Senate to review these limitations and consider adjustments in all of the other statutes that allow land managers to act swiftly in these areas that pose significant risks to high alpine communities. This will strengthen the ability of federal land managers and their state, tribal, and local partners to protect high-elevation forests and the communities that depend on them.

However, while we prefer the House version of the legislation that includes the expansion of Fire Regime V, we believe that either version of FOFA would create meaningful and timely opportunities to improve the overall health of our nation's watersheds to meet the moment, and would support passage of either bill.

Conclusion

Colorado Springs Utilities is proud of the strong federal partnerships we have built over the past 140 years and the progress we have made together in the spirit of shared stewardship. I respectfully urge this Subcommittee to carefully review the Fix Our Forests Act, restore federal funding for on-the-ground implementation, and support landscape-level innovation in wood-product utilization.

With your continued support, local utility providers like Colorado Springs Utilities can help safeguard the infrastructure, natural resources, and communities that depend on healthy, resilient forests and continue to provide affordable and reliable water and power.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify and I welcome your questions.