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**To:** Representative Paul Gosar, Chair, House Natural Resources Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations and Representative Maxine Dexter, Ranking

**From:** Neil Chapman, Wildland Fire Captain, City of Flagstaff Fire Department

**Legislative Hearing:** *"Fix Our Forests: How Improved Land Management Can Protect Communities in the Wildland-Urban Interface."*

**Date:** 5/15/2025

Chair Gosar, Ranking Member Dexter, and distinguished members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify. My name is Neil Chapman, and I'm a Wildland Fire Captain with the City of Flagstaff Fire Department in Northern Arizona. I worked on my first fire 20 years ago. I am a qualified Engine Boss and have worked on fire assignments across many western states from Texas to Montana. I am also a former member of the congressionally chartered Wildland Fire Mitigation and Management Commission which provided one of the most comprehensive roadmaps of policy solutions to date for the wildfire crisis. Indeed, the Fix Our Forests Act takes up many of the recommendations of the Commission, with the Senate version touching on a third of the recommendations of the final report. I would like to thank the Committee for the opportunity to share my expertise as a municipal wildland firefighter, a participant in the Four Forest Restoration Initiative, and as a former member of the Commission.

I want to highlight that all three experiences offer important lessons in how to manage wildfire risk to communities. Reducing the risk of wildfires to our cities and towns requires a holistic approach that addresses risk in both the lands surrounding our homes and the material of the homes themselves.



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The City of Flagstaff Fire Department has been a national leader in wildfire risk reduction for 30 years and illustrates the important role that local fire departments play in reducing wildfire risk to our communities. We do this through collaborative thinning and prescribed burning projects across multiple jurisdictions, on the land surrounding the city, and through our outreach to community members to help them better prepare their homes and neighborhood to be resistant to wildfire.

Our first Fire Management officer was hired in 1997 and in 2008 we adopted the International Wildland Urban Interface Code. In 2012, Flagstaff voters approved a \$10M bond to support the Flagstaff Watershed Protection Project – a partnership effort between the city, the State of Arizona, and the Coconino National Forest to help reduce the risk of undesirable wildfire. This initial investment from the City of Flagstaff has supported over 18,000 acres of thinning, leveraged over \$40M in partner contributions, and allowed the city to significantly reduce its risk and determine its own relationship with wildland fire. Further, the City of Flagstaff has worked to reduce risks in the built environment and safeguard its residents while doing so.

One of our most impactful built environment initiatives is our Clean Air Program. We have distributed over 450 High-Efficiency Particulate Air (HEPA) rated air purifiers to the community and are developing plans to transform community buildings into clean air hubs. We have also established a network of indoor and outdoor air quality monitoring stations across the city. We keep an emergency supply of HEPA filters at stations across town and hand deliver them to community members in need. Our message is simple – no one should be subjected to low quality indoor air due to fire management practices.

This effort mirrors conversations within the Commission process. Working with the EPA, we recognized the connection between public health and beneficial fire was inseparable. An entire chapter of the Commission's final report was dedicated to the subject of public health. I believe



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the following quote from the Commission report summarizes this effort well: “The Commission acknowledges there are real and perceived tensions between the mutually important objectives of protecting public health from the impacts of smoke and enabling and supporting land management practices that reduce the future risk of large, high-severity fire events. While balancing these needs is challenging, the Commission believes that with sustained investment and increased cooperation, federal agencies, Tribes, and state and local agencies can work together under existing laws to clarify and align regulations, policy, and practice to promote these mutual objectives.”

The Commission recommended that Congress provide resources to state, local, and Tribal public health authorities to work with wildland fire agencies, the public, and healthcare providers to promote wildland fire and smoke readiness, mitigate risks, and reduce level of potential impact per event. While FOFA does not authorize additional funding, it does empower the proposed Fire Intelligence Center to support air quality monitoring to help protect the public from the impacts of smoke from wildfires and prescribed fires. Additionally, the Senate version includes direction for public health agencies and federal land managers to enable the “exceptional events” pathway of the Clean Air Act to create procedural ease for conducting prescribed burns – a necessary step in reducing fire risk.

Actions in the built environment, like clean air initiatives, defensible space, and home hardening, must complement actions in the natural environment. Investments in beneficial fuels management and built environment modifications are equally as important to the long-term safety of our communities, and firefighters, as investments in our response infrastructure.

While the Flagstaff Watershed Protection Project was being implemented in 2012, the Four Forest Restoration Initiative was deep in the NEPA process thanks to the Collaborative Forest Landscape Restoration Program. The Four Forest Restoration Initiative, known as “4FRI”, is a



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landscape effort to reduce wildfire risk across northern Arizona, covering the Kaibab, Coconino, Apache-Sitgreaves, and Tonto National Forests.

The 4FRI is an excellent example of the planning process done right. The entire problem – a 2.4 million-acre forest at risk of undesirable fire – was analyzed and completed without litigation. By 2022, the majority of the 4FRI footprint was cleared for thinning and burning under two separate NEPA efforts. This NEPA now allows for collective action with thinning and burning projects at a meaningful scale and with strong local participation in the planning process.

I am a past Chair of the 4FRI Stakeholder Group and have had my assumptions challenged more times than I care to admit. I continue to be impressed by this community of partners and value opportunities like this to share our lessons learned.

The 4FRI forests are now producing the most prescribed fire acres of any National Forest in the west annually, and the Coconino National Forest has been in the top five of timber producing forests in the last two years. With proper investments, this success will be sustained for years to come.

None of this would be possible without the collaborative agreements that were developed through the 4FRI NEPA process. This robust planning process provides positive signals to the timber industry that acres will be made available with strong local support. 4FRI leadership, including both USFS and Stakeholders, are committed to ensuring a vital timber industry thrives in northern Arizona.

The continuation of federal funding is crucial to 4FRI's successful active forest management model – a model that is based on leveraging partner and industry investment. Over the last five years, 4FRI enabled over \$188M in timber industry investments and \$54M in partner



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contributions. For every dollar the USFS has invested in 4FRI since 2022, the timber industry and partner organizations have contributed \$1.42. Research shows that in high-risk areas like northern Arizona, wildfire risk reduction funding sees an estimated \$7 return for every \$1 invested, saving billions of dollars in undesirable wildfire recovery costs (Hjerpe, 2024). The takeaway here is that USFS dollars invested in 4FRI is money well spent; these funds leverage additional contributions from non-federal partners and meaningfully reduce wildfire risk across northern Arizona.

Again, these efforts in Flagstaff provide local level examples of discussions and recommendations of the Commission. The Commission found that federal land management planning efforts and requisite environmental analyses are often not completed at a pace aligned with the increasing impacts of wildfire. Improving planning and analysis are challenges we need to meet to achieve consistent, flexible integration of evolving wildfire science. The two related recommendations I would like to mention that are well supported by the lessons learned from 4FRI are to:

- Expand funding and staffing for planning and Interdisciplinary Teams of federal land management agencies([R23](#));
- And, explore mechanisms to make planning more effective and efficient, such as improved information gathering, training, staffing, collaboration, and programmatic analyses for restoration and hazardous fuels reduction activities. ([R24](#)).

Reducing wildfire risk to communities in the Wildland Urban Interface requires a multifaceted approach in both the natural and built environments, which we see within the Senate version of FOFA. The Senate FOFA builds on the House version to expand shared stewardship agreements with local governments, special districts, water end-users, and other entities while including a more robust Community Wildfire Risk Reduction Program, as called for by the Commission. The Senate version would also allow for Community Wildfire Defense Grants to be used for home



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hardening while providing a pathway for input from non-federal experts like myself to inform and improve the program.

The expanded Senate FOFA also supports the use of prescribed fire to reduce risk on the landscape. The emphasis on more efficient planning, risk reduction in the built environment, and support for the use of prescribed fire, are very important federal efforts for the City of Flagstaff.

I began my testimony today by sharing with you all that I am a wildland firefighter and an Engine Boss. I am a member of the wildfire workforce though I am clearly not a federal employee. It is critical that we recognize that our wildfire workforce is drawn from local, state, Tribal and federal entities. The National Association of State Foresters recently shared that non-federal wildland fire staff are first responders on about 80% of wildfires, regardless of the jurisdiction (National Association of State Foresters, n.d.). Additionally, there are 27,060 fire departments across the US that are registered with the US Fire Administration (USFA). 64% of them provide wildfire response to their community (National Fire Department Registry Quick Facts, n.d.).

Wildfire response across this country will not be improved without significant commitment to and support from the non-federal fire service. The Commission recommended enabling the USFA to increase its ability to support, train, and equip the existing structural fire protection workforce for wildfire response to improve the level of service provided by local fire and emergency medical services organizations. Support for our workforce—our entire workforce—is critical to providing effective risk reduction to our communities. Whether we are working to create cleaner air spaces or extending the reach of federal forest management dollars through active partnership, local fire departments and fire districts are an essential part of the solution.



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The Flagstaff Fire Department stands ready to help support the implementation of wildfire risk reduction at scale, but we cannot do this without the support of strong and committed federal partners.