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House of Representatives

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Opening Statement of Chairman Ro Khanna

Hearing on “Fighting Fire with Fire: Evaluating the Role of Forest Management in Reducing Catastrophic Wildfires”

March 16, 2022

I welcome everyone to this hearing. I’m grateful to our esteemed panelists for joining us today.

The climate crisis and misguided forestry policies of the past have given rise to catastrophic burning across our Western forests.

For decades, the Forest Service’s strategy for managing fires has been to suppress all fires.

In 1935, the Forest Service established the so-called 10 a.m. policy, meaning they would put out every new fire by 10 a.m. the next day.

However, fire is a natural part of the landscape in Western forests. Some trees in these forests even need to be exposed to fire to grow and reproduce. Only in recent decades has the Forest Service policy changed.

Because we’ve had decades of stopping all fires from burning in the forests, dense vegetation has accumulated. That means that when there are wildfires, they burn hotter and create more damage, feeding off the dry brush.

Climate change is also worsening wildfires. Last month, the United Nations called for urgent action in a new report, warning if we continue with business-as-usual climate emissions, we will have 57% more wildfires by the end of the century.

Without objection, I submit the United National Environment Program report titled, “Spreading like Wildfire: The Rising Threat of Extraordinary Landscape Fires” into the record.

Drier conditions make it easier for wildfires to spread and increase their intensity.

Droughts leave trees with less water to fight off disease and pests.

Dead and dying trees are less fire resistant.

Climate change, combined with the fuel build up, cause extreme wildfire disasters that can be deadly.

The top five years with largest amount of wildfire acreage burned since 1960 were 2006, 2007, 2015, 2017, and 2020.

From 2000 to 2018, wildfires burned more than twice as much land area per year than those from 1985 to 1999.

We’re not immune to this problem in my district in Silicon Valley.

In 2020, the SCU and CZU complex fires blanketed my district with unhealthy levels of smoke for weeks.

Land managers like the Forest Service have a hard job in addressing this crisis. They have to balance first and foremost human safety from wildfires, but also the economy, healthy ecosystems, and meeting climate goals.

Unfortunately, special interests seek to present industrial management of forests as the solution to out-of-control wildfires.

According to public lobbying disclosure filings, industry spends over \$12 million dollars a year to influence Congress.

Not only do they spend to influence politicians; they work hard to influence the public too.

For example, according to an investigation by ProPublica and Oregon Public Broadcasting, the taxpayer-funded Oregon Forest Resources Institute, spends \$1 million dollars annually on advertising defending the state's weak forestry laws.

Similarly, in 2018, the Oregon Forest & Industries Council, a trade association which represents corporate interests, launched an advertising campaign stating, "Managed Forests Do Good Things. Catastrophic Wildfires Do Bad Things."

Special interests are influencing the policy process to acquire more access and contracts, saying we can thin and log our way to fires that will be easier to suppress and control, but nothing could be farther from the truth.

While some management, including removing brush and small trees, is crucial to returning forests to a healthy state, industry is incentivized to remove the largest trees to sell for furniture and other forestry products. Clearcutting or removing large trees puts communities at greater risk from wildfires.

Our forests evolved alongside fire, and older, larger trees are the most fire-resistant.

Depending on the local circumstances, thinning forests can also increase fire risks if not done cautiously and in a science-based manner.

Too much thinning, and forests can dry out from exposure to wind and sun and create conditions for high winds during fire events.

In fact, ProPublica found that private lands that were clear cut in the last five years burn hotter than federal lands that cut fewer trees.

This industry wants us to believe they share our desire for safe communities and healthy forests.

But we cannot allow their short-term financial gains to substitute for careful, collaborative forest management.

Another reason it's important to prioritize fire prevention is to help our wildland firefighters, who risk their lives and health each year to protect communities.

Wildland firefighters are grappling with longer fire seasons and longer-burning fires, which means more overtime and exposure to deadly smoke.

Congress must conduct careful oversight to make sure that the U.S. Forest Service has the tools they need to reduce large fires. We don't want to make the situation worse by removing the big trees that store the most carbon and slow wildfires down.

We need to listen to the science, and pursue a community-driven process that incorporates all perspectives

to forge the best way forward for our forests.

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