TESTIMONY of
James Hubbard
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US Department of Agriculture
Natural Resources and Environment
Before The
United States House of Representatives
Committee on Oversight and Reform
Subcommittee on Environment
March 16, 2022
concerning
Wildfires and Forest Management

Thank you for inviting me to testify and share my experiences on this urgent issue. Much of my career has been devoted to addressing the growing problem of large wildfire and community protection. As Colorado State Forester I dealt with the Hayman Fire that burned to the edge of Denver. As Under Secretary I worked with all Governors to sign Shared Stewardship agreements that addressed wildfire threats.

FOREST CONDITION

A billion acres of forest and thousands of communities are at risk. Fuel density and continuity is at an unprecedented all-time high. These dense forests are prone to insect and disease, and much more susceptible to catastrophic wildfire. Areas of the West have forests created by natural disturbance and are now being recreated by unnatural large mega-fires. In the last 20 years every western state and many eastern states have experienced their largest fires in recorded history.

Less precipitation, higher temperatures, lower humidities and human development in and around forests all contribute to the complexity and increased danger to firefighters, residents, and infrastructure.

WHAT WE'VE LEARNED

Large wildfires involve multiple jurisdictions with states, counties, etc. A unified approach across boundaries is critical in fighting wildfire and preventing wildfire. Plans and decisions must be mutual.

The Forest Service prestigious research program has been studying wildfires for nearly a century, both on the landscape and in the laboratory. Using scientific data collected over long periods, the Agency has evaluated the impacts of fire-related activities. Their science has demonstrated that combinations of thinning and prescribed fire can influence fire behavior, protect communities, wildlife habitat, water and air quality. Through their research they have also provided analytics for all lands and forest types. Using interactive technology, they can show what forests are most at risk and what land management options are most appropriate and available. Many studies have shown that active forest management can stabilize carbon stocks and increase resilience of carbon storage by reducing wildfire size and severity.

WHAT CAN BE DONE

Congress has provided policy tools over the years that promote more forest management and a collaborative shared approach. Most recently, the Infrastructure Bill provided a significant increase in financial resources. A 10 Year Implementation Plan is in place. Full implementation will require up to $20 billion over 10 years for Federal lands and $30 billion for state, private, and Tribal lands.

Much more must happen to achieve success in reducing risk. We will have to dramatically increase the amount of forest treatment to overcome the continued destructive fire seasons. This will require increased capacity among all the participants with increased skill sets put in place to support a systematic approach. It starts with local leadership and a shared vision over time, involving all lands at risk, and will require all jurisdictions involved to agree on the actions.

CONCLUSION

Hundreds of communities are at similar or worse risk than the town of Paradise was in 2018 before the Camp Fire destroyed the community, killing 85 civilians. The problem isn't going away until we dramatically increase strategic fuel treatments.

This is an emergency and needs to be treated like one. We need to thin forests and return low intensity prescribed fire to western landscapes and ensure our forest lands and communities can be resilient to natural fire. This is about the land, the communities and the actions that can make a difference.

We now have the policies, money, science and tools to go to work. Shared decision making will be key, and where that occurs with the right capabilities, progress will result.

This concludes my statement.