

April 23, 2015

Testimony of Mitch Friedman

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For the House Committee on Natural Resources, Subcommittee on Federal Lands' oversight hearing titled, "*The Devastating Impacts of Wildland Fires and the Need to Better Manage our Overgrown, Fire-prone National Forests.*"

Mr. Chairman, members of the subcommittee, thanks for this opportunity. I'm Mitch Friedman, a biologist and executive director of Conservation Northwest, which I founded in 1989. Conservation NW works across the State of Washington and the broader Northwest region to protect and connect wildlands and older forests to sustain healthy wildlife populations.

I have long been passionate about the management of our federal forests. In the mid 1980's I was one of the first people to sit high in a tree in protest logging of ancient forest, and I organized the first protest against logging spotted owl habitat. Through the 1990's, my scientific staff engaged in technical review of Forest Service timber sales across Washington State, and we appealed and litigated many. In 2003 Conservation NW helped pioneer community-based, multi-interest collaboration to improve national forest management. Over the past 13 years we have collaborated on timber and other projects across five national forests, working directly with forestry, ranching and other stakeholders. As a core member of the Northeast Washington Forestry Coalition, we've been part of a record of helping produce more than two dozen successful projects on the Colville National Forest, converting it from gridlock to a national model for collaboration.

I certainly agree that substantial national forest acreage warrants active management, though I don't see that through quite the same frame as the title for this hearing. The relationship between wildfire and forest management is complex, varying in need and cost-effectiveness by forest type and other considerations, and with somewhat unpredictable levels of benefit for taxpayers. A better frame and justification for the restoration and management of our forests is to improve their ecological health and ability to adapt to withstand the impacts of climate change. The need for such widespread and extensive work led me in 2008 to call for a restoration Marshall Plan.

An example of the counter-intuitive nature of wildfire and management is last summer's Carlton Complex Fire. It was the largest in my state's history, but three quarters of the burned area was grass and shrub land. Of the quarter that burned in forest, there were acres recently thinned for fire risk reduction and acres not, and fire behavior wasn't always what one might have guessed. It also burned in acres of forest types for which we have no known approach for reducing wildfire risk, especially not without excessive public cost and environmental damage. That's

why we think it's best to focus on restoration for ecological resilience, with reduced risk of uncharacteristic and harmful fires being a benefit but not the primary driver.

On these matters I've found substantial common ground between conservation and timber interests. Just last week, I met in Spokane, with a number of regional timber industry leaders and conservationists from various national and local organizations. We all agree to the following general points with respect to national forests of the West:

- There are substantial acreages that warrant active management for ecological objectives, often involving commercial timber production as an additional benefit;
- There are substantial areas that should be permanently protected as wilderness;
- There are substantial acreages on which active management can occur for objectives apart from ecological restoration;
- Such management should maintain environmental quality, including clean water, habitat for endangered species and other wildlife, etc.; and
- All of this should occur with due efficiency as a matter of good governance.

A product of our discussions will be suggested legislative language to incentivize collaboration. For instance, we agreed to propose bold new ideas with respect to environmental review of collaborative products at landscape and project scales. I look forward to being involved in discussions on such potential legislation in the near future.

I'm one of many conservation leaders who believe that environmental review is a means to the essential ends of public engagement, quality decision-making, and protection of the environment on our public lands, rather than an end itself. The more efficient and cost-effective environmental review can be in achieving these objectives, the better.

It's important to note that many matters of Forest Service efficiency are not constrained by legislation. Programmatic environmental review of very large national forest landscape projects has always been consistent with NEPA, and is being attempted in places. Third party environmental review is also legal, allowing us to support experimental outsourcing of review to both a local conservation district – which didn't go so well - and, currently, a so-called A to Z purchase by a timber interest. Along with others, I have called for a range of other already-authorized reforms and actions, including:

- Reducing the disruptive transfers of Forest Service leaders;
- Modifying employee performance reviews;
- Modernizing training;
- Encouraging risk-taking among contract officers; and
- Larger appropriations.

What I believe can work best is bona fide, quality collaboration among private, public, national and local interests. In the Northeast Washington Forestry Coalition, we not only built trust and a culture of problem-solving and production among former adversaries, for over a decade we've made quality projects rain on the national forest. We agreed upfront to firm sideboards on such things as roadless areas, big trees, and roadbuilding, so that we wouldn't have to waste valuable time. We collaboratively developed a highly informed land management plan for the entire Colville National Forest, including mapping the landscape into three general zones: proposed wilderness, restoration area, and active management areas. We've agreed to, and in many cases led or helped design, over two dozen stewardship projects that have been impressively implemented. We've focused effort first in areas of general agreement, such as thinning of dry forest types, and then incrementally took on design of prescriptions in more challenging forest types by bringing in outside scientific guidance and memorializing our agreements so that forward progress continues. We have a memorandum of agreement signed by all core parties that guides our efforts, and guidelines that inform what nature of Forest Service management proposals warrant our focus or not. We've won substantial grants from the Collaborative Forest Restoration Program and won recognition from the Secretary Vilsack and others. We have grown and learned a lot together, much of which is embedded in these remarks.

It's this sort of collaborative framework that I believe can lead to more efficient and broadly beneficial and sustainable management of our public lands. I appreciate you inviting my thoughts, and hope we can work together to improve and protect the rich national heritage that our public forests comprise while fostering sustainable and prosperous local communities.