

The Case For ***THE HEALTHY FORESTS RESTORATION ACT***

THE PROBLEM.

America's forest ecosystems are being decimated at an alarming rate by large scale catastrophic wildfire and massive outbreaks of disease, insect infestation and invasive species. Federal foresters estimate that an astounding 190 million acres of land managed by the Secretary of Agriculture and the Secretary of Interior are at unnatural risk to catastrophic wildfire. Of that, over 70 million acres are at extreme risk to catastrophic wildfire in the immediate future. *The summers of 2000 and 2002 were the two largest and most-destructive fire seasons in the last 50 years.*



THE CAUSE. For 100 years land managers have aggressively moved to suppress wildland fire in all forms, including nature's periodic small scale burnings that restore and rejuvenate forest ecosystems. *The unintended result of this policy is a decades-long build up forest fuel, woody biomass and dense underbrush that's as close as the next lightning strike or escaped camp fire from exploding into a massive conflagration.* In some areas, tree density has increased from 50 trees per acre to as many as 500 trees per acre, according to the Forest Service and fire ecologists. These unnaturally dense forests are a small-scale ignition away from a large-scale wildfire.

THE ENVIRONMENTAL EFFECTS.

Forest ecologists, professional land managers and many environmental groups agree – *the exploding incidence of catastrophic wildfire and disease and insect infestation pose a massive threat to the*



health, diversity and sustainability of America's forests. The Nature Conservancy – one of the world's largest and most acclaimed environmental groups – has been a leader in the environmental community in building public awareness about the environmental calamities that catastrophic wildfires cause.



Colorado's Hayman Fire provides a startling example of the kind of enduring environmental degradation that unnatural wildfire cause.

The fire dumped colossal loads of mud and soot into Denver's largest supply of drinking water, annihilated several thousand acres of cathedral-like Ponderosa Pine old growth, pushed one globally-rare species to the brink of extinction, and created the worst air pollution conditions in Denver's recorded history.



One study found that the Hayman fire and another of Colorado's fires in 2002 combined to pump more CO2 into the atmosphere than did all of the cars, trucks and SUV's in the State of Colorado during the same year combined.

Other massive fires claimed a similar environmental toll. Oregon's record setting Biscuit fire turned 80,000 acres of prime old growth habitat for the endangered northern spotted owl into a sterile blackened wasteland. Arizona's record setting Rodeo-Chedeski fire ravaged over 100,000 acres of habitat, including 20 sensitive nesting sights, for the endangered Mexican Spotted Owl.



THE HUMAN CONSEQUENCES.

In 2002, hundreds of homes and other structures were destroyed, and thousands more were evacuated. 23 firefighters lost their lives. The American taxpayer spent in excess of \$1.5 billion containing 2002's record setting blazes. Rural economies that rely on tourism suffered significant financial losses.

A SCIENCE-BASED SOLUTION. Using 21st century techniques, technology and know-how, professional land managers can restore America's cherished landscapes back to a healthy, natural condition. *Through the use of environmentally-smart thinning, prescribed burns, and other scientifically validated management practices,*



overstocked forests can be returned to a natural balance, and the risks of catastrophic wildfire and insect and disease infestations reduced. One scientific assessment found that the only available means of protecting the nation's forest ecosystems from the ravages of wildfire is the prompt implementation of these management techniques on a large, landscape scale.

THE BUREAUCRATIC IMPEDIMENT. 190 million acres of federal forest and rangeland are at unnaturally high risk to catastrophic wildfire, 72 million acres of which are extremely perilous risk. *And yet, federal land managers will treat only about 2.5 million acres each year because of the extraordinarily lengthy procedural and documentation requirements that federal land managers face.* As proof, the Forest Service testified that one important project near a major metropolitan city and its primary source of municipal water had to endure an 800-step decision making process and 3 years before implementation. *Unfortunately, before this drawn-out process was complete, a record-setting wildfire eviscerated large swaths of the landscape, causing enormous damage to the natural environment and a number of communities.*

THE LEGISLATIVE SOLUTION. The Healthy Forests Restoration Act's premise is simple and clear: Given the massive scale of the threat that catastrophic wildfire and disease and insect infestation pose to the health of pristine forest ecosystems, threatened and endangered species, air quality, water quality and the safety of thousands of communities, it is unacceptable that it takes federal land managers upwards of several years to maneuver forest health projects through a maze of procedural and analytical requirements that do little to inform constructive decision-making. *The*



measure is guided by the belief that excessive bureaucratic procedures can be streamlined without unduly infringing on the imperatives of public participation. Forest management projects would still be subject to rigorous environmental analysis as well as administrative challenges and

lawsuits under the Healthy Forests Restoration Act, but these multiple processes would be completed in a matter of months, rather than years as is currently the case.

Tough environmental safeguards in the bill would provide heightened restrictions on management activities, and old growth trees would receive additional management consideration and protection.



The bill would codify the public participation processes set out in the bipartisan Western Governors Association 10-Year Strategy for Reducing the Threat of Catastrophic Wildfire to Communities and the Environment. Similarly, the Healthy Forests Restoration Act gives priority to management projects near communities and watersheds as provided in the Governor's 10 year plan.

Finally, the bill would (1) facilitate the utilization of the otherwise valueless wood, brush, and slash removed in conjunction with forest health project in the production of biomass energy, (2) authorize federal programs to support community-based watershed forestry partnerships that address critical forest stewardship, watershed protection, and restoration needs at the state and local level, (3) direct additional research focused on the early detection and containment of insect and disease infestations, and (4) establish a private forestland easement program, supported by groups like Environmental Defense, focused on recovering forest ecosystem types in decline.

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