



FOREST GUILD NEWS RELEASE

For Immediate Release
June 19, 2007

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Congress Holds Oversight Hearing on Wildfire Preparedness *Forest Guild's Testimony Calls for* *Federal Wildfire Programs to Better Serve Rural Poor*

Washington, D.C. – In 2006, over 96,000 wildland fires in the U.S. burned approximately 10 million acres. Many rural communities at risk to wildfire are also areas with significant poverty; these communities risk losing more when their homes or their assets burn.

To draw attention to this situation, Forest Guild Southwest Region Director Michael DeBonis testified before Congress today that federal wildfire preparedness programs must provide greater focus and assistance to ensure that low-income communities at risk from wildfire have the resources to take action to reduce that risk. Mr. DeBonis's testimony was part of the oversight hearing held this morning by the House Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests and Public Lands entitled "*Wildfire Preparedness: An Ounce of Prevention is Worth a Pound of Cure.*"

The Forest Guild is a national organization of more than 500 foresters and allied professionals who manage our country's forestlands and advocate for ecologically sound forest practices. The Forest Guild's mission is to practice and promote ecologically, economically, and socially responsible forestry—"excellent forestry"—as a means of sustaining the integrity of forest ecosystems and the human communities dependent upon them.

"The Forest Guild supports Congress's work to improve wildfire preparedness on our nation's public and private lands," said Mr. DeBonis. "We hope our comments before the Subcommittee will help ensure that all communities, regardless of financial resources and social capital, have access to Federal wildfire preparedness assistance programs."

Mr. DeBonis's testimony presented critical information about the relationship between wildfire and poverty and made several recommendations for the Subcommittee to consider as it explores responses to these issues:

1. Recognize that some communities have lower capacity to cope with fire-related disruptions of economic activity and social services, and risk losing more of their assets when their homes or their communities burn.
2. Establish a designation for low capacity communities that fire agencies can use to identify and direct appropriate wildfire preparedness resources.

3. Design measurement criteria and performance measures to ensure that assistance is applied in an equitable and appropriate way.

Mr. DeBonis's recommendations were based on his professional experience as well as discussions with community-based forestry partners and the Rural Voices for Conservation Coalition (RVCC), which the Forest Guild is a member of. RVCC is a coalition of western rural and local, regional, and national organizations that have joined together to promote balanced conservation-based approaches to the ecological and economic problems facing the West.

Kathy Lynn, Associate Director for Resource Innovations at the University of Oregon Institute for a Sustainable Environment and a member of RVCC, agreed with and supports the recommendations made by Mr. DeBonis. "Our research shows that there are a significant number of low-income households and communities in areas prone to wildfire. Many of these are rural communities that lack the capacity and experience to reduce their risk to wildfire and need greater levels of assistance from federal land management agencies."

Mr. DeBonis's full submitted testimony as well as his comments to the Subcommittee may be found at <http://www.forestguild.org/firepreparedness.html>.

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