

Oral Statement of
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Before the
Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests, and Public Lands
Committee on Natural Resources
United States House of Representatives
Concerning
Oversight Hearing on
“Wildfire Preparedness: An Ounce of Prevention is Worth a Pound of Cure”
June 19, 2007

Good morning Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee. Thank you for the opportunity to testify on the subject of wildfire preparedness and specifically the relationship between wildfire and poverty.

My name is Michael DeBonis and I am the Southwest Region Director of the Forest Guild, an organization of more than 500 foresters and allied professionals who manage our country’s forestlands and advocate for ecologically sound forest practices.

This testimony focuses on three key points for Congress to consider when evaluating federal levels of assistance necessary to ensure that low-capacity communities at risk to wildfire have the resources to reduce their risk.

First, many rural communities at risk to wildfire are also areas with significant poverty. Many of these 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.

Second, federal agencies need better monitoring systems and performance measures for fuel reduction and forest restoration treatments to direct resources and track impacts in rural, low-capacity communities.

Third, a designation for low-capacity communities will increase the ability of federal agencies and congress to identify, assist, and monitor impacts in communities that need the most help.

Each year, the increasing risk of wildfire is illustrated by the catastrophic fires affecting communities all across the United States. While the impacts to the general public are most often illustrated by images of large homes destroyed by wildfire, the significant and long-term affects on low-income communities often go unnoticed.

A 2005 study by Resource Innovations and the National Network for Forest Practitioners investigated whether communities most at risk from wildfire are able to access and benefit from federal programs established to serve these communities. In other words, are the dollars,

assistance, and fuels-reduction projects hitting the ground in the areas that are most at risk? Not necessarily.

The report showed a higher percentage of poor households are located in inhabited wildland areas, which are not considered part of the federally defined WUI – the areas that federal agencies and Congress have prioritized to receive the majority of wildfire preparedness funds.

Excluding inhabited wildlands from the federally defined WUI is one example of how well meaning policies and programs can exclude low income communities. The federal government needs to ensure that rural low-income communities are not overlooked in hazardous fuels reduction programs.

Mr. Chairman, Federal agencies need better monitoring systems and performance measures for fuel reduction and forest restoration treatments to direct resources and track impacts in rural, low-income communities.

Current performance measures use a traditional input-output approach, such as “acres treated” and “cost per acre.” These measures encourage short-term actions that rely on the quickest and cheapest way to treat the “easiest” acres, an approach that does not prioritize community watershed or socio-economic health.

Yet, there are opportunities for the federal agencies to work collaboratively with non-governmental, community partners to develop performance measures that address capacity and poverty in the context of wildfire preparedness.

Finally, Mr. Chairman, I recommend establishing a designation for low capacity communities so federal agencies can identify and direct appropriate resources to those communities that need the most help.

Such a designation should be used in:

- assessing communities to target financial and technical assistance;
- wildfire risk assessments at a state and local level;
- and monitoring outcomes and performance measures for a range of federal land management agency programs.

The agencies should engage in a collaborative process with community-based forestry organizations to develop the designation and a strategy for its use.

In closing, I offer the following recommendations for the Subcommittee as they explore responses to these issues:

- Recognize that some communities have lower capacity to cope with fire-related disruptions and risk losing more when their homes or assets burn.
- Establish a designation for low capacity communities that fire agencies can use to identify and direct appropriate wildfire preparedness resources.
- Design performance measures to ensure that assistance is applied in an equitable and appropriate way.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on wildfire preparedness and the relationship between wildfires and poverty. The Forest Guild supports your work to increase wildfire preparedness on our nation's public and private lands and your efforts to ensure that all communities, regardless of financial resources and social capital, have access to federal wildfire preparedness assistance.

I welcome any questions that you may have.