Statement of
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Concerning
Issues Affecting Forest Health and Management in Eastern Washington—National Forests, Tribal lands, and Local Communities

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Mr. Chairman, thank you for the opportunity to testify today on forest health and management in eastern Washington. The Forest Service is concerned about the health and long term sustainability of these forests, and we are taking action to improve conditions on the ground. The new tools that Congress and the Administration have provided over the last several years have increased our ability to address forest health issues across the nation. I am pleased to share with you the actions we are taking, along with our neighbors, to use these tools here in eastern Washington.

Background

Although forests are dynamic and undergo change through natural processes, there is no question that humans have had a profound effect on the condition of forests in Washington State and across the nation. Naturally, fire played a role in maintaining complex forest ecosystems. American Indians had used fire historically to modify vegetation, but increased settlement of the area in the nineteenth century brought unprecedented change to this ecosystem through fire suppression, grazing, timber harvest, and other activities.

These changes resulted in modification of forested ecosystems. For example, timber harvesting practices included the removal of high value species, such as ponderosa pine. Once the canopy was removed, understory species of Douglas-fir and other true firs benefited greatly by the additional light and water availability. These trees, which were typically of poor form and vigor, crowded into the forest openings and became the dominant species in the stands.

By the early 20th century, grazing levels far greater than found today included large herds of sheep and cattle. These herds heavily impacted watersheds by removal of understory

vegetation. Introduction of non-native desirable species to improve rangelands, as well as the spread of introduced weeds by livestock cattle, also changed western rangelands.

Although a natural part of any forested ecosystem, uncharacteristic insect and disease populations can erupt when a combination of factors, such as stand composition, species number and vigor, and drought or other natural stress factors, come together. Some of these environmental changes also favored invasive plant species, which compete with desirable vegetation and can alter disturbance processes. A good example of this is cheatgrass, which has led to more frequent fires in some of our rangeland ecosystems.

The weakening effects of drought combined with unnaturally dense forest stands, often further compromised by insect infestations and disease, and continued fire suppression for many decades, has led to a dramatic increase in high fuel loadings and subsequent catastrophic large fires. In areas where communities are situated at the edge of the forests--the wildland-urban interface, or WUI--fires pose the greatest threat.

Improving Forest Health—New Authorities

A number of new tools have been made available to the Forest Service over the last several years to help us deal with forest health issues across the landscape. The Healthy Forests Initiative and Healthy Forest Restoration Act of 2003 (HFRA) were developed to expedite fuels treatments in and around communities, among other things.

These new tools and authorities have re-shaped the Forest Service's program of reducing fuels and restoring healthy forests. The Pacific Northwest Region is working diligently to address the fuels work that needs to be accomplished on the ground. For example, in fiscal year 2002, this Region accomplished fuels reduction work on more than 52,000 acres. In the current fiscal year, as of August of 2005, we've already completed work on more than twice that number, over 114,000 acres.

A great example of a successful fuel reduction project exists on the Colville National Forest. The Burnt Valley Fuels Reduction Project was a collaborative effort between the Forest Service and the Northeast Washington Community Forestry Coalition, a diverse group of individuals representing industry, environmentalists, Washington State Department of Natural Resources (DNR) and others. Typical of "first time" collaborative efforts, this project took longer to plan and implement than group members initially anticipated, but the outcome was a 2,000-acre fuels reduction project that was awarded to Vaagen Bros. Lumber, Inc., a local mill. Riding on this success, this same group is completing another collaborative project, and realizing much shorter timeframes.

Community Wildfire Protection Plans

In every corner of the Region, stakeholders are rolling up their shirt sleeves and sitting down to the task of developing Community Wildfire Protection Plans. These community-led plans allow stakeholders to clarify and refine their local priorities for protection of life, property, and infrastructure. Community members create maps that

identify WUI areas and assess the risk of wildfire and structural ignitability. This leads to the development of priorities and an action plan to reduce the risk of wildfire in their community, develops and solidifies relationships among stakeholders, and improves the lives of those living in the communities.

The Chewelah Community Wildfire Protection Plan process began in the fall of 2002 when the Northeast Washington Community Forestry Coalition, Washington DNR, the Lands Council and community fire districts and members worked together with the goal of eliminating fire hazards located near the town of Chewelah, WA. The Forest Service's role was as a technical expert; the plan was written by local organizations. The plan area encompassed over 15,000 acres and includes 12 strategic planning areas with individual descriptions and recommendations. The group held several informational meetings for the public. Stevens County Commissioners approved the plan in May, 2005.

Stewardship Contracting

After three years of pilot authority for stewardship contracting, Congress approved expanded authority in 2003. Stewardship contracting, which allows the Forest Service to offset the value of goods received for services, helps us shift the focus of federal forest and rangeland management towards a desired outcome. Stewardship contracts are also a means for federal agencies to work with rural communities to restore and maintain healthy forest ecosystems, and provide a continuing source of local income and employment.

The Pacific Northwest Region has actively engaged in the use of stewardship contracting. The Region contracted with Sustainable Northwest to put on six training sessions in 2004, attended by both Agency personnel and contractors, to provide an overview on stewardship contracting. After initiating 12 pilot projects, the Region has approved an additional 33 stewardship projects. The primary project objectives have been fuels reduction, closing unneeded roads, improving water quality, and improvement of fish and wildlife habitat. With some of the 12 initial projects well underway, we have initiated a "lessons learned" process that includes experienced contractors, collaborators, and Agency personnel to integrate what we have learned so far. One of the most important lessons we have learned is that collaboration takes a tremendous amount of work. Each representative on collaboration teams brings a different skill--and trust--level to the process. We have found that after teams work through their initial collaborative projects, succeeding work is expedited, often improving efficiency by reducing project planning time upwards of several months in comparison to the first project. The Forest Service will work to quantify the levels of efficiency associated with stewardship contracting to help improve the use of this authority. These and other lessons will be shared among forests to improve future project implementation.

One of the stewardship projects on the Colville National Forest is the Little Horn Wild Sheep Habitat Restoration. The 358-acre project's objectives were to promote viability of the Vulcan Mountain California bighorn sheep herd, protect habitat for blue grouse and mule deer, and reduce fuels through the harvest of 414 thousand board feet of timber.

Partners included the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) and Washington State Department of Fish and Wildlife; other cooperators important to the success of the project included the Foundation for North American Wild Sheep, Safari Club International, Inland Northwest Wildlife Council and Curlew Job Corps. The project cost approximately $261,000, a combination of product value ($184,000) and appropriated funds ($77,000).

Tribal Forest Protection Act of 2004

The Tribal Forest Protection Act of 2004 (TFPA) was passed by Congress in response to devastating wildfires that crossed from Federal onto Tribal lands in the summer of 2003. It authorizes the Secretary of Agriculture and the Secretary of the Interior to enter into an agreement or contract with Indian Tribes to reduce threats such as fires, insect infestations and disease from Forest Service or the BLM lands that border on or are adjacent to Indian forest land or rangeland, including Indian communities.

The Forest Service has developed draft guidance to implement the TFPA, and these guidelines were the subject of formal consultation between line officers and Tribes between April 25 and June 25 of this year. A review team is analyzing comments received during this consultation period, and it is expected that an interim directive will be published soon.

While we have not initiated any TFPA projects here in Washington, we have had preliminary discussions with the Confederated Tribes of the Colville Reservation regarding the authority. In Oregon, local line officers and Regional program managers from both the Forest Service and the BLM are now working with the Confederated Tribes of the Warm Springs Reservation of Oregon to develop a Tribal Forest Protection Act proposal which will not only address forest health issues in central Oregon, but also contribute biomass for energy generation. The target date for presentation of this proposal to the Pacific Northwest Regional Forester and the BLM State Director is late fall of this year.

Summary

Mr. Chairman, our current forest health situation did not develop overnight, nor will improvements be quickly visible on a large scale. However, with our clearly defined priorities and the variety of new tools available to the Forest Service, I am confident we, along with other federal, state, tribal and local partners, can make significant progress towards healthy forest restoration. We appreciate your steadfast support and guidance. I would be happy to answer any questions the committee may have. Thank you.