

Testimony before the House Natural Resources Committee Subcommittee on
Federal Lands

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Forest Management Impacts on Counties and Locally Managed Community
Forests as a Means of Improving Forest Health

Chairman McClintock, Ranking Member Tsongas and members of the Federal Lands Subcommittee, good afternoon and thank you for the invitation to testify here today.

My name is Gordon Cruickshank and I am a lifelong resident and county commissioner in Valley County, Idaho. Prior to becoming a commissioner, I worked for the Valley County Road Department for sixteen years with the last ten of those years as the Road Superintendent. Valley County is located in central Idaho. The county seat is Cascade, which is located approximately 80 miles north of our state capital, Boise. Valley County maintains over 750 miles of roadways including access routes into the National Forest. Our county has a population of 9,862 full time residents. Valley County is 2,354,048 total acres and only 221,151 acres, less than 10 percent, is privately owned.

When the National Forests were created over 100 years ago, the Federal Government sold the idea of public ownership of forest lands by promising a steady supply of natural resources produced from the forests, especially timber. Today, I am here to say that the current federal forest management practices are not fulfilling that promise.

I applaud the House Natural Resources Committee for its leadership in addressing the critical issue of federal forest management and appreciate the opportunity to appear here today in support of improving the management of our nation's

forests and the Self-Sufficient Community Lands Act (H.R. 2316). As the Committee continues its work to improve the health of our nation's forests, I want to leave you with two points:

1. Current land management practices fail to meet the ecological and economic needs of our public lands and communities.
2. Community Forest Trusts, as proposed in the Self-Sufficient Community Lands Act (H.R. 2316), can serve as a model to promote more active and sustainable management of all federal lands.

Current land management practices fail to meet the needs of our public lands and communities.

The first way that current land management practices fail to meet our needs is through drastic reductions in economic activity. Historically, federal timber receipts generated from the National Forests provided critical funding necessary to maintain our county roadways and to support our local education systems. In years past, the West Central region of Idaho had four major sawmills and one small sawmill. As timber harvests declined in the 1990's and into the 2000's, many mills closed their doors, taking with them many local jobs and leaving Idaho's West Central region economically imperiled. Today, only one sawmill remains and at times it has been questioned whether the mill would remain open. More generally, since 1990, there has been an 80 percent reduction in timber harvesting across all federal lands in the United States.¹ On the ground, this has translated into the closure of many sawmills and other related businesses and the elimination of many local jobs in Idaho and across the U.S economy.

For many years, communities, the timber industry and the federal government have worked together to maintain a sustainable and economically viable timber harvest. In Valley County and Adams County, Idaho, when concerns were raised

¹ U.S. Forest Service. (2013). Forest Management: Cut and Sold Reports. Retrieved from <http://www.fs.fed.us/forestmanagement/products/sold-harvest/cut-sold.shtml>.

regarding the compatibility of certain harvest techniques within the forest landscape, the community and industry came together and found a solution. The solution provided a 400,000 acre timber-producing area in the Payette National Forest in which sustainable timber harvests would continue while reducing or eliminating timber production on the remainder of the timber lands in the Payette National Forest.

When I attended a meeting to discuss timber harvest in this 400,000 acre area, the Forest Service personnel told us that the area grew approximately 80 million board feet of timber per year. In order to assure sustainable harvests far into the future, communities and the timber industry voluntarily limited timber harvest to 50 million board feet per year, enough to provide a steady supply of forest products to local mills that would be sustainable over the long term. In short, our communities understood the importance of responsible management of our natural resources and we were willing to make the tough decisions necessary to ensure their long-term viability and sustainability.

Unfortunately, due to litigation or threats of litigation by outside interests, timber production from the Payette National Forest that we worked so hard to make possible is in jeopardy. In recent years, the Forest Service has been unable to reach even a reduced 20 million board feet target. When I asked the Forest Service what would happen to the remaining 60 million board feet of timber that is not being harvested from our forest production area, to my dismay, the answer I received was, "It will burn." That is the unfortunate outcome of excess forest capacity not being actively managed and harvested.

That brings me to another way in which current land management practices fail to meet the needs of lands and communities – without active management of our forests, forest communities continue to be placed in harm's way through increased wildfire risk. This year, wildfires are on the minds of Americans more than ever. The current conditions of our public lands contribute to catastrophic wildfires and are a direct result of land mismanagement by the federal government. During 2015, counties in central Washington lost multiple homes

and businesses due to wildfire. In Idaho, multiple wildfires burned over 750,000 acres,² destroying critical Sage Grouse habitat, grazing acres for livestock, and over 80 homes.

This state of affairs is nothing new. The story is the same in many regions across the country. Until 1994, western states (Arizona, California, Colorado, Idaho, Montana, New Mexico, Nevada, Oregon, Utah, Washington, and Wyoming) experienced wildfires that burned 3 million acres or more only once in 1919, and then once again in the 1980s. Since then, these same western states have suffered over 5 million acres burned in 2000, over 4 million in 2002, over 6 million in both 2005 and 2006, over 4 million in 2011, and then over 7 million in 2012.³

Is “catastrophic” the new normal for wildfires? My constituents and I refuse to accept that multiple homes should be lost each year due to catastrophic wildfires caused by poor land management practices.

Catastrophic wildfire impacts all Americans by increasing insurance costs, impacting air quality and forever altering our landscapes. Most importantly, wildfires impact families’ livelihoods, destroying everything they have worked so hard to build and maintain.

The impacts of inactive land management decisions aren’t limited to fire season. Current land management practices end up reducing SRS payments as well. The Valley County Road Department is funded in part by the National Forest Timber Receipt Program, otherwise known as “25 percent payments.” Using the average actual timber harvest from prior years, approximately 56 percent of our annual roads budget was funded by revenues generated on public lands. Historically, forestry receipts and revenue from the state transportation dollars provided

² Incident Information System. (2015, October 14). Current Incidents. Retrieved from <http://inciweb.nwcg.gov/>

³ O’Laughlin, Jay. (2013, October 9). Wildland fire management: Are actively managed forests more resilient than passively managed forests? Issue Brief No. 15. Moscow, ID: University of Idaho. Retrieved from <http://www.uidaho.edu/cnr/pag/publications/pag-issue-briefs>.

sufficient revenue to my county to support maintaining and reconstructing our roadways, replacing bridges, and undertaking the general operations of the Road Department. As the Road Superintendent, I witnessed firsthand the decline in timber harvests and how those declines impacted my county's ability to provide critical services to residents. As timber production declined to record lows, the mills closed, local jobs were lost and our community's ability to maintain its transportation infrastructure diminished.

To assist forest communities suffering the economic losses of decreased forest production, Congress created the Secure Rural Schools (SRS) program. To me, the creation of the SRS program was a sign that Congress recognized the consequences local communities face due to the federal government's mismanagement of our federal forests. However, due to changes in the program's authorization over time and the impacts of sequestration, even this critical safety net program is drying up. Today, while working with a smaller budget for road maintenance, Valley County receives less funding from the SRS program. SRS payments now account for approximately 42 percent of our road budget.

As a Commissioner, I receive numerous calls from residents asking why their roadways are no longer maintained as they have been in the past. This decline in roadway maintenance can be tied directly to federal land management decisions and litigation which have reduced timber harvest and forest revenues. As a result of the reduction in revenue, very little can be done to increase maintenance and improve the roadways. Today, the Road Department has not filled vacant positions and has reduced its workforce by 30 percent. While there have been opportunities for my county to compete for infrastructure grants, many grants have matching fund requirements. Matching those funds up front takes away from the general operations fund and limits the delivery of other critical county services.

With the decline in timber harvest, reduction of the SRS payments and the ever growing threat of catastrophic wildfire looming over our communities, something must be done to protect counties.

Community Forest Trusts can serve as a model to promote more active and sustainable management of all federal lands

New and creative solutions to improve the health of our public lands and promote economic prosperity in public land communities must be implemented. For too long, forest counties have watched as forest management activities, and wildfire protection, improved environmental conditions, jobs and economic activity that comes with them, have dried up. In 2011, because of growing frustration over land management by the Forest Service, I and four other commissioners from Boundary, Clearwater, Idaho and Shoshone counties met with our state and federal representatives and discussed a new approach to improving the health of our forests. I applaud Congressman Labrador for embracing our approach, which he has introduced as H.R. 2316, the Self-Sufficient Community Lands Act, and commend this Subcommittee for holding today's hearing.

The Self-Sufficient Community Lands Act would create Community Forest Demonstration Areas to be managed locally for the benefit of forest health and local economies. Community Forest Demonstration Areas would identify areas of at least 200,000 acres to be managed by an Advisory Committee that must include diverse stakeholders. Although when the Community Forest model was initially proposed our group was focused on improving forest management in Idaho, I believe this model can be applied to many different landscapes across the United States.

H.R. 2316 aims to identify blocks of productive timber lands to be managed by local land managers and overseen by a Community Forest Advisory Board consisting of local government officials, recreational users, the forest products industry and grazing or other local stakeholders appointed by the governor of the state. This ensures that the health of our lands will be in the hands of those who are closest to it.

The Advisory Board would provide oversight of the management operations and work to insure that the lands are being managed for the long term health of the forests and the benefit of local communities.

The bill also includes important guidelines to ensure that our most sensitive forest lands remain undisturbed. Federally designated wilderness areas, including Wild and Scenic River corridors, would be exempt from designation under a Community Forest Demonstration Area. Additionally, hunting and fishing rights, as well as other recreational uses and tribal rights, will be protected under the law.

Those areas designated as Community Forests would remain the property of the United States government and the federal government would retain responsibility for firefighting on those lands. The extreme fire risk present in our forests today exists as a result of current federal management practices and the federal government should maintain responsibility for their actions. However, over time, firefighting expenses will decline as the health of community forest lands improve with local management.

Community forest lands would be managed under the environmental laws of the state and would also have to be managed in compliance with a resource sustainability plan aimed at ensuring long term productivity and viability of the area. Public access would be authorized in a manner that balances access and use with long term environmental management goals.

In order to fund this proposal, Community Forest land management costs would be deducted from the revenue earned from land management activities. Proceeds would be used to fund the management, administration, restoration, operation and maintenance, improvement, repair, and related expenses. Revenues generated from management of the Community Forests would also be pooled and distributed to county governments, reducing reliance on the Secure Rural Schools program proportionally.

Although a little over \$23 million in revenue would be necessary to fully offset Idaho's Secure Rural Schools payments, responsibly managing less than one percent of the timber lands in Idaho has the potential to generate enough revenue to offset over ten percent of our current SRS payments. Increasing the acreage of responsibly managed land would further decrease county dependence on the Secure Rural Schools program.

When our group of county commissioners developed our Community Forest proposal, it was important to ensure that whatever we proposed be economically viable as well as environmentally sustainable. We determined that forest lands operated by the Idaho Department of Lands Forestry Division under their regular management practices consistently returned positive revenues to the State of Idaho. Additionally, our group examined a 194,000 acre forest plot in Idaho that is managed under similar conditions to those we were proposing. The area had an average historic growth rate of 50 million board feet per year. Based on its sustained 30 million board feet per year harvest, we calculated that, after expenses, these 194,000 acres in healthy condition would provide \$3.7 to \$4.5 million annually in revenue.

Since our group of Idaho commissioners developed our Community Forest proposal, we have spent considerable time educating stakeholders and developing community support. We have presented to the Montana Forested Counties Committee, the Washington Forest Counties Committee, the Idaho Association of Counties, the Western Interstate Region Board of Directors, the Public Lands Committee of the National Association of Counties, and numerous local Chambers of Commerce in my local area, all of which positively responded to the concept. When an Interim Committee of the Idaho Legislature was studying Federal Land Transfers, I presented the Community Forest model to the Committee as a potential alternative to wholesale transfer of federal land ownership.

Our group worked closely with Congressman Labrador as he developed his legislation, the Self-Sufficient Community Lands Act. I am proud to be here today

in support of his bill and I would once again like to thank Congressman Labrador for his leadership on this important issue.

The current regime of inaction in federal land management is not working. It is endangering the ecological health of our treasured landscapes and the economic health of our communities. Counties in my state have come together to develop a better way forward to meet the needs of our lands and our communities. The Community Forest model and the Self-Sufficient Community Lands Act provide a solution that places management decisions back in the hands of local decision makers for the benefit of our lands and our communities.

Thank you for the opportunity to come here today to share my perspective on a positive solution for management of our federal lands. I look forward to taking questions from the Subcommittee.