

**Testimony of Phil Rigdon**  
**Superintendent, Department of Natural Resources, Yakama Nation**  
**&**  
**Vice-President, Inter-Tribal Timber Council**  
**Before the House Committee on Natural Resources**  
**Federal Land Subcommittee**  
**Hearing on “Conservation with a Purpose on America's Federal Lands and Forests”**  
**March 8, 2023**

I am Phil Rigdon, Vice-President of the Intertribal Timber Council (ITC) and Natural Resource Superintendent for the Yakama Nation in south-central Washington State. On behalf of the ITC and its more than 60 member Tribes, I appreciate this opportunity to share some of the lessons of forest conservation from a tribal perspective.

All of America’s forests were once inhabited, managed and used by Indian people. Today, only a small portion of those lands remain under direct Indian management. On a total of 334 reservations in 36 states, 18.6 million acres of forests and woodlands are held in trust by the United States and managed for the benefit of Indians.

I believe that the Indian notion of “conservation” is different from that seen on other lands in the federal estate. Pursuant to both tribal direction and federal law, tribal forests must be sustainably managed. Indian tribes work with the Bureau of Indian Affairs and others to actively manage our forests and other resources within a holistic, integrated approach that strives to simultaneously sustain economic, ecological, and cultural values, the so-called “triple bottom line.”

We operate modern, innovative and comprehensive natural resource programs premised on connectedness among the land, resources, and people. For example, when we look at managing a piece of land, we’re not just looking at one resource. We’re thinking about the timber value, habitat resources for our deer and elk hunters, impacts to water quality where salmon live, and so forth.

In a time not so long ago, this used to be called “multiple use” management on federal lands! Unfortunately, we see too often federal land managers crippled by single-use designations, like wilderness areas, that by definition preclude management activities. This virtually eliminates the ability to respond to bugs and disease, over-stocking, climate-driven mortality...and of course wildfire.

Very rarely will you find designations like “wilderness” in Indian Country. For example, the Yakama Forest is managed under the following emphasis categories: primitive, general, recreation, traditional use, winter wildlife habitat and riparian areas. While of these designations is an emphasis, it is not an exclusive use.

Our Primitive areas generally function like wilderness areas on federal lands. However, in emergency circumstances like bug or disease outbreak, Tribal Council may approve management actions to address that crisis. No such action or flexibility is possible in federal wilderness areas.

I believe the Indian forest management approach is better balanced. It is more focused on conservation of a resource than prohibition of an activity. We protect our resources; yet we understand that utilization is essential to sustain the health of our forests and meet the “triple bottom line.” We rely on our forests to provide employment and entrepreneurial opportunities and to generate income needed to care for the land and provide services for our communities.

I have been given the honor and responsibility to manage my tribe’s natural resources. I am accountable to my tribal government as well as our membership. If we harvest too much timber, I get feedback from tribal members who are responsible for gathering medicines and foods from the forest. If we don’t harvest enough timber, I get feedback from our mill workers at Yakama Forest Products.

When I say “feedback” – I don’t mean constituent letters like Members of Congress get. I mean very personal feedback. We’re a small community and my friends, neighbors and family members all know how to find me – in the aisles of a supermarket or across the dinner table.

This direct accountability leads to the optimal balance of competing needs. I believe this ultimately leads to better conservation of all resources, whether it be wildlife habitat, traditional medicines and foods, or timber.

One element of “conservation” is to prevent wasteful use of a resource. Catastrophic wildfire is perhaps the greatest waste of our forest resources. Stand replacement fires, driven by dense forests and drier climate, kill millions of wildlife, pollute the air, sterilizes the soil and destroy timber resources. In many cases, these large, intense fires sacrifice the very values certain “protected” areas were set aside for.

Wildfire is challenging some of the old concepts and tools of conservation. In Indian Country, we are tackling that head-on. We respond quickly to forest health challenges. We fight fires aggressively when they threaten resources, but we also use prescribed fire aggressively when circumstances allow it. After fires, we prevent waste by utilizing dead trees and protecting the remaining resources from the risk of re-burn.

I am encouraged by the growing number of tribally driven forest health projects on federal lands. We are using tools like the Tribal Forest Protection Act, Good Neighbor Authority and Reserved Treaty Rights Lands funding to bring our traditional and modern knowledge to make federal lands more resilient to disturbance such as wildfire.

Many tribes continue to have treaty and other interests in the productivity of federal forest lands. My tribe, for example, exercises its right to harvest huckleberries, deer and

elk on several National Forests. It is in our interest to conserve these resources and the healthy forests that produce them. In doing so, we are improving the forests for all Americans.

We invite the members of this Committee to visit Indian Country and see for yourselves what conservation looks like on our lands.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today.