

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. 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 mission of the Forest Guild 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 Guild engages in education, training, policy analysis, research, and advocacy to foster excellence in stewardship, support practicing foresters and allied professionals, and engage a broader community in the challenges of forest conservation and management. The Forest Guild’s Southwest program is built on 20 years of experience developing and managing forestry-related programs with rural, forest-based communities and partners in the region. The Forest Guild is also a member of the Rural Voices for Conservation Coalition (RVCC). 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.

This testimony focuses on the programs and levels of assistance necessary to ensure that low-income communities at risk to wildfire have the resources to reduce their risk. This testimony presents critical information about the relationship between wildfire and poverty and three key points for Congress to consider:

1. Many rural communities at risk to wildfire are also areas with significant poverty. 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.
2. 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.
3. 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.

1. Many rural communities at risk to wildfire are also areas with significant poverty.

Each year, the increasing risk of wildfire is illustrated by the catastrophic wildfires affecting communities all across the United States. In 2006, over 96,000 wildland fires in the U.S. burned approximately 10 million acres, according to estimates from the National Interagency Fire Center. While the impacts to the general public are most often illustrated by images of large homes destroyed by wildfire, the significant and long-term effects on low-income and underserved communities often go unnoticed.

A 2005 study by Resource Innovations and the National Network for Forest Practitioners, *Mapping the Relationship between Wildfire and Poverty*, (Lynn and Gerlitz 2005) examined the relationship between wildfire and poverty. The study used socioeconomic and ecological data to investigate 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? The study resulted in a series of maps, illustrating the relationship between poverty, federal land ownership and Wildland Urban Interface (WUI) classification – the areas that federal agencies and Congress have prioritized to receive the majority of funds under the national fire plan.

The research indicated that a higher percentage of poor households are located in inhabited wildland areas, which are not considered part of the federally defined WUI. The report also showed that there is a relationship between poverty and federal land ownership, with more poor households located in close proximity to federal lands. The study indicated that the federally defined WUI is based on residential density that excludes many inhabited forest areas. Expanding the analysis to include wildland intermix, the less densely populated areas that are not included in the WUI, which we refer to from here on as “inhabited wildlands”, allowed the researchers to include significant portions of rural, inhabited land in areas vulnerable to wildfire.

Results from the *Wildfire and Poverty* study indicate that, in general, there are more households in poverty in inhabited wildland areas than there are in the WUI or in areas outside of the vegetated wildlands. The federally defined WUI is one example of how well meaning policies and programs can exclude low income communities. The map of the United States (Attachment 1) illustrates the data described above and provides a visual representation of the relationship between wildfire and poverty. The map illustrates areas where 20% of households or more are low-income households in WUI and inhabited wildland areas. The map indicates a tremendous amount of inhabited wildland, particularly in the western United States, that is not considered part of the WUI under the Federal Register definition. This inhabited wildland area also has relatively high level of poverty.

State scale analyses echo the national scale findings of the *Wildfire and Poverty* study. For example, more than half of the communities at highest risk from wildfire in Oregon are low income. The Oregon Communities at Risk assessment identified and assessed the relative risk to wildfire in over 560 communities (Oregon Dept of Forestry 2006). The assessment assigned each Oregon community at risk from wildfire with a low, moderate, or high risk rating for hazard, risk, values, protection capability and structural vulnerability. Preliminary findings from

Resource Innovations, in the University of Oregon's Institute for a Sustainable Environment, indicate that of approximately 155 communities at high risk to wildfire, 54% are communities where over half of the population are very-low income.

Not only are many rural communities at risk from wildfire and limited by poverty, but they can be excluded from the current definition of WUI. The federal government needs a broader definition for WUI to ensure that rural low-income communities are not overlooked when agencies prioritize areas for hazardous fuels reduction.

2. 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

Wildfires and the related government roles and responsibilities for federal wildland management are prominent today because of the increased severity of fires on and around public lands. In recent years, numerous laws, strategies, and implementation documents have been issued to direct federal efforts for wildfire prevention, firefighting, and recovery. Reliable national-level information and monitoring are essential to ensure good decision making, agency accountability, and to assist communities in reducing wildfire risk.

Current performance measures developed by the agencies 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 watershed or community socio-economic health. Furthermore, current measures do not gauge agency progress towards collaboration, rural wildfire protection, or other actions necessary for inclusive and integrated forest stewardship. Consequently, current measurements fall short of responding to actual performance of restoration goals. The Rural Voices for Conservation Coalition developed a performance measure issue paper in 2006 that provides recommendations for performance measures related to low-capacity communities, collaboration, and capacity building (www.sustainablenorthwest.org/pdf/policy/monitoring/perfmeasures.pdf).

In September 2006, the Office of the Inspector General issued an audit report on the implementation of the Healthy Forests Initiative. The report found that USFS lacks a consistent analytical process for assessing the level of risk that communities face from wildland fire and determining if a hazardous fuels project is cost beneficial. The report concluded that without uniform, national criteria, there is no way to allocate funds to the most critical projects. (USDA Inspector General 2006).

The findings of the OIG report hold true when analyzed at the regional scale. A recent study by the Forest Guild reviewed the legal and administrative hurdles facing fuel reduction projects on the U.S. Bureau of Land Management's Medford Oregon District and the Rogue River-Siskiyou National Forest (Evans and McKinley 2007). The report concluded that, overall, the federal government needs to improve its record keeping and increase public participation in planning fuel reduction treatments.

A crucial element of monitoring fuel reduction projects is their effect on low-income communities. However, federal agencies currently lack adequate monitoring systems and performance measures to gauge the benefits of Forest Service programs in low-income and low capacity communities. In fact, in some cases, assistance has been given to wealthier communities to the detriment of less well off communities. During the fiscal years 2001 and 2002 in New Mexico, all of the \$685,000 awarded for private land went to reduce fuels in wealthier, bedroom communities of Albuquerque rather than the predominantly economically distressed and forest-dependent communities of the Manzano Mountains (Morton 2003).

Though there are challenges to efficiently treating the fire threat in our nations forests, there are also 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. These opportunities include the annual budget allocation process for the Forest Service and BLM (tied directly to the PART process), the fire allocation process (related to LANDFIRE and Fire Program Analysis), and efforts underway by agencies and partners to address the implementation tasks and performance measures in the revised 10-year comprehensive strategy (WFLC 2006).

3. 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.

Rural Voices for Conservation Coalition recommends the establishment of a designation for low capacity communities that federal agencies can use to identify and direct appropriate resources to those communities that need the most help. A low capacity community may be defined as a community that lacks:

- the financial resources to invest in wildfire preparedness;
- the social capital, leadership, or governance structure to participate in collaborative processes;
- the experience and/or education to understand the dynamics at play in a restoration effort, the environmental factors at risk, and or the need for either restoration work or collaboration as a resolution and the human resources to dedicate to participating in a collaborative restoration effort.

Indicators to identify low capacity communities that agencies could use include poverty, population size (to ensure that rural communities are targeted), governance, and special needs (RVCC 2007, Evans et al. 2007). Creating a low-capacity designation will assist agencies in directing reduced cost-shares, set-asides in grants, technical assistance, training, or other types of help to communities that require the most assistance to protect themselves from wildfire.

In the past, federal programs such as the National Fire Plan and Economic Action programs have provided rural community assistance grants that are aimed at increasing community opportunities to engage in forest health, fire protection, and economic development opportunities. While these programs have been effective in providing community assistance, there has been no systematic effort to ensure that low-income or underserved communities benefit from these and other programs.

There are ongoing efforts to identify and provide assistance to low-capacity communities at risk to wildfire. The Federal Emergency Management Agency uses a designation for small and impoverished communities. Communities within this designation have a reduced cost-share requirement for pre-disaster mitigation grants. Several counties in Oregon have integrated poverty data within their wildfire risk assessments to illustrate high risk, high poverty areas in Community Wildfire Protection Plans. Similarly, the Forest Guild in New Mexico has used a Community Capacity Index within community fire planning efforts in two separate communities, Taos County and the greater Cuba area (Evans et al. 2007).

The low capacity designation should be used in 1) assessing low capacity communities to target financial and technical assistance, 2) wildfire risk assessments at a state and local level, and 3) 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.

Recommendations and Conclusion

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on wildfire preparedness and the relationship between wildfires and poverty. Your bi-partisan work to increase wildfire preparedness on our nation's public and private lands is commendable.

I would like to provide several recommendations for the Subcommittee as they explore alternative responses to these issues. These recommendations are based both on my own experience and on discussions with community-based forestry partners and the Rural Voices for Conservation Coalition:

- 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.
- Expand the federal definition of WUI to include the inhabited wildlands to ensure rural low-income communities are not overlooked.
- Establish a designation for low capacity communities that fire agencies can use to identify and direct appropriate resources.
- Design measurement criteria and performance measures to ensure that assistance is applied in an equitable and appropriate way.

The Forest Guild supports the work of this Subcommittee and hopes our comments will help 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.

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Attachments

1. Map: Poverty and Wildland Urban Interface / Inhabited Wildlands
http://ri.uoregon.edu/publicationspress/map_3.pdf
2. Executive Summary: Mapping the Relationship between Wildfire and Poverty.
3. Executive Summary: Measuring Community Capacity to Resist and Respond to Wildfires

Poverty and Wildland Urban Interface / Inhabited Wildlands

http://ri.uoregon.edu/publicationspress/map_3.pdf

