



National Association of Conservation Districts

Testimony of the National Association of Conservation Districts
Submitted to the
Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests and Public Lands
House Committee on Natural Resources
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The National Association of Conservation Districts (NACD) represents the nation's 3,000 conservation districts, their 16,000 board members and 7,000 employees. Established under state law, conservation districts are local units of state government charged with carrying out programs for the protection and management of natural resources at the local level. Conservation districts work with a number of federal, state and other local agencies, as well as the private sector to provide technical and other assistance to millions of landowners and other partners to achieve this end. They provide the critical linkage for delivering conservation programs on nearly 70 percent of the private land in the United States.

In carrying their mission, districts work closely with the USDA's Forest Service and Natural Resources Conservation Service and the Interior Department's Bureau of Land Management to provide the technical and other help private landowners need to plan and apply complex conservation treatments on forest, range and other working lands.

Conservation Districts play an important role in the areas of hazardous fuels reduction, woody biomass utilization and forest planning.

As evidenced by the recent wildfires in South Lake Tahoe, hazardous fuels buildup is a serious threat. That threat is not limited to Lake Tahoe and the West. It threatens the viability of public and private forests—industrial and non-industrial forestlands - and property in the wildland-urban interface - across the nation. This threat is exacerbated by the long-term drought plaguing much of the country and ensuing insect infestations, which in turn raises the danger of devastating wildfires that destroy wildlife habitat, communities and human life. Conservation districts strongly support efforts to reduce hazardous fuels buildup, work on the development of new and innovative technologies to use woody biomass, and educate the public about proper forest management.

The decline of the forest industry in many parts of the nation and particularly in the West contributes to the problem by removing many business options for utilizing woody biomass. Distances from markets and the high costs of transportation make utilizing woody biomass even more difficult.

Conservation districts applaud the Congress for passing the Healthy Forests Restoration Act (HFRA) in 2003. The funding for HFRA and implementation through the National Fire Plan provide opportunities for local communities and organizations, including conservation districts, to become engaged in community wildfire protection projects, fuels reduction projects, and state and local Firewise education

National Headquarters
509 Capitol Court, NE, Washington, DC 20002
Phone: (202) 547-6223 Fax: (202) 547-6450
www.nacdnet.org

efforts. Continued commitment from Congress and the administration to this end is crucial to if we are to make our forests more healthy and our communities safer places to live and work.

Conservation districts and resource conservation and development councils (RC&Ds) already have in place a number of cooperative agreements with federal land management agencies to promote, and improve the utilization of woody biomass in order to reduce the build-up of hazardous fuels, lessen the threat of catastrophic wildland fires and restore forest, woodland, and rangeland health.

Conservation districts efforts offer tremendous opportunities to reduce catastrophic wildland fires and restore forest, woodland, and rangeland health. In recognition of these opportunities NACD entered into a cooperative agreement with the Bureau of Land Management and Forest Service to develop, promote, and improve woody biomass utilization.

Other partners in this effort include the Interior Department's Bureau of Indian Affairs, National Park Service, Fish and Wildlife Service, the National Association of Resource Conservation & Development Councils, and State Forestry Agencies.

Under this agreement, NACD is providing resource materials and information to local conservation districts to educate landowners and others on the issue. The goal of this initiative is to help increase public understanding of the social, economic, environmental and aesthetic benefits gained by using woody biomass as a means of reducing the buildup of hazardous fuels.

We believe more cooperative efforts such as this are needed. Involving local communities and landowners is the ideal way to ensure the success of the Healthy Forests Restoration Act, the National Fire Plan and other efforts in wildland fire management.

Conservation districts also support other collaborative efforts of the Interior and Agriculture Departments in conducting fuel reduction treatments in the urban wildland interface on federal lands that are at risk from wildfire. To maximize their effectiveness, we believe these collaborative hazardous fuel reduction efforts should include:

- A landscape scale approach with the support and involvement of local constituents;
- Cross boundary mitigation;
- Coordination of Federal, state and local government priorities, project design and implementation strategies to maximize effectiveness and minimize costs; and
- Project designs that consider restoration of ecosystem structure, native composition and natural fire regimes.

The drought, which is expected to continue unabated for several more years—especially in the West—adds to the wildland fire issue by contributing to insect and disease problems on our Nation's National Forests, BLM lands and private woodlands, as well. Not only is the damage costly to timber, but it also adds to the

fuel load and endangers lives, homes, and entire communities as we have recently seen in South Lake Tahoe.

The nation's conservation districts believe that there are many more opportunities to develop the potential to use woody biomass and turn hazardous fuels into useful and valuable products such as renewable energy. We look forward to continuing our partnerships with the various federal agencies that are responsible for managing the nation's public forests and rangelands.

We appreciate the opportunity to provide the subcommittee with our views.