



National Association of Conservation Districts

Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee Hearing on Climate Change and Wildfires Comments submitted by the National Association of Conservation Districts September 24, 2007

On behalf of the nation's 3,000 conservation districts, the National Association of Conservation Districts (NACD) is pleased to provide comments to the Committee on climate change and wildfires. Established under state law, conservation districts are local units of government charged with carrying out programs for the protection and management of natural resources at the local level.

In carrying out 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.

Though changing climate may have an effect many agree that because of past management practices and fire suppression, many of our forests administered by Federal agencies have accumulated fuel loads and developed stand structures susceptible to catastrophic fires that destroy the stands and increase the risk of insect and disease attack. Silvicultural practices such as prescribed fire, density control and harvest of commercial forest products can reduce the frequency and intensity of extreme fire events, while benefiting local, regional, and national economies.

Conservation districts across the country are actively involved in implementing the National Fire Plan that was developed in 2000. Conservation Districts:

- Serve as a catalyst to assemble major stakeholders to work together to solve wildfire and any other environmental problems on a community or watershed level
- Provide education and information about critical local natural resource issues
- Play a direct role in implementing wildfire protection plans such as hazardous fuel reduction and prevent a catastrophic fire or in restoration plans to stabilize a site after a wildfire has occurred.

Conservation districts applaud 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 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.

NACD encourages support for policies and programs that prevent the buildup of hazardous fuels and rehabilitate those lands damaged by wildfire. Such efforts should be coordinated with biomass utilization projects and include criteria for enhancing watershed health. We look forward to continuing to work with the Committee on these issues and working at the state and local level to explore opportunities to partner with federal, state and local emergency response agencies to address natural resources recovery.