

Opening Statement
The Honorable Cathy McMorris Rodgers
Ranking Member
Joint House Water and Power Subcommittee and
National Parks Forests and Public Lands Subcommittee on
“The Mountain Pine Beetle: Strategies for Protecting the West”
June 16, 2009

Thank you for holding this hearing on the growing Mountain Pine Beetle Problem in the West.

Like many areas of the Rocky Mountain West, forests in my district have been hit hard by the Mountain Pine Beetle. The impacts have been devastating. More than half of the land base in the four northern counties of my district is forest. This is not a small area considering Okanogan County -- the largest of the four counties -- is larger than the State of Connecticut. Much of this area is managed by the U.S. Forest Service.

I grew up in Stevens County, one of the four northern counties. I know it well and I lived with forest management issues for ten years as a state legislator representing the area before coming to Congress. During that time, I was also a member of the Western States Legislative Forest Taskforce.

Damage from the pine beetle can be spotted throughout these northern forests with the heaviest infestations on the south side of the Methow Valley, which is close to a populated area.

In 2006, 175,000 acres burned in the Okanogan National Forest on the north side of the Methow Valley. Lightning found fertile ground in beetle killed trees that couldn't be harvested because conservation organizations assured the Forest Service they would sue to block the sale.

As a result of these and other lawsuits, the Avista cogeneration plant at Kettle Falls, Washington is hauling most of its fuel out of Canada because it is not available from the forest it operates next to. This is a sad commentary when Congress is in pursuit of alternative energy but continues to leave a wealth of energy to burn in wildfires.

In addition, we waste valuable taxpayer dollars fighting wildfires when we could have prevented them in the first place. In fact, over half of our Forest service budget goes to fighting wildfires and that will only get worse if we don't address the root of the problem – overcrowded forest and diseased and dying trees. We can't continue to grow over 20 billion board feet of timber annually and only harvest two billion board feet and expect to have healthy forests.

The lack of management also impacts water supplies and the humans and species that depend on water. An unhealthy and over-crowded forest can literally drain our creeks and much of our rural watersheds, which will substantially decrease the water

available for human use and can have serious impacts on the needs of endangered species. There is much talk about removing four Snake River dams in the name of endangered salmon protection, yet few focus on managing our forests as a key way to help protect the species.

This hearing is an important first step in managing our forests for the future. We cannot afford to wait any longer. In closing, I want to thank the Chairwoman again and thank the witnesses for their testimony and dedication. I look forward to working with everyone on this important issue.