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Opening Statement of
Chairman Doc Hastings
Subcommittee on Public Lands and Environmental Regulation
Oversight Hearing on "Wildfire and Forest Management"
Thursday, July 11, 2013 at 10:00 a.m.
1324 Longworth House Office Building

Today, this Subcommittee will hear testimony on an issue that is of utmost importance to communities across this nation, including those in the Central Washington state district that I have the honor to represent. Each year, wildfires in our nation's federal forests damage or destroy millions of acres across the United States.

Catastrophic wildfire is a growing problem. Last year, a senior Forest Service official testified before our Committee that 65 million acres of Forest Service lands are at "high risk of wildfire." Their response has been woefully inadequate. Already this year, we've seen record-breaking fires in Colorado, the tragic deaths of 20 firefighters, and hundreds of homes lost.

There will always be drought, there will always be heat spells, and there will always be fire that is out of our control. While our hearts are with the families and communities affected by wildfire and those who put themselves in harm's way to protect us from it, an ounce of cure is worth a pound of prevention, and what must be cured are the overgrown and unhealthy forests that are in many cases providing the fuel for these fires.

Common sense management to remove excess forest growth can be implemented effectively and responsibly, while creating jobs, protecting communities, and reducing the soaring costs of wildfire suppression. Many non-federal entities are doing just that.

For example, the Washington Department of Natural Resources already harvested more than 10 million board feet of salvage timber from lands that were burned in last year's fire season, and continues to produce timber from its state trust lands. In contrast, the U.S. Forest Service in Washington state never conducted salvage on any of the 300,000 acres of burned land that it manages.

Much of this federal inaction is caused by the Forest Service's fear of lawsuits by environmental groups, using the Endangered Species Act and the National Environmental Policy Act to block local, state and federal timber fuels reduction and thinning projects.

Our forests, communities, and species deserve better than being placed at continual and increasing risk of catastrophic wildfires and this Committee will continue working toward policies that force federal land managers to follow their statutory responsibilities to improve forest health to protect these lands and local economies.

I welcome Phil Rigdon, who is with us today to testify on behalf of the Yakama Nation and also on the recently-released, third report from the Indian Forest Management Assessment Team. The Yakama manage one of the few remaining saw mills in the State of Washington and manage over 400,000 acres of timber on their 1.3 million acre reservation. For comparison and an illustration of the current problem, the 400,000 acres under the care of the Yakama is twice the total amount of acres that the Forest Service harvests nationwide in a year.

As Deputy Director of the Yakama Department of Natural Resources, Phil Rigdon oversees responsible and sustainable management that keeps their forests healthy and reduces the risk of fire. It's a lesson that our federal land management agencies can, and should, learn from.

I thank Phil for making the long trip from Washington, as well as our other witnesses for being here today and I look forward to their testimony on how we can protect our forests from the growing threat of catastrophic wildfire.