

(Washington, DC) - Congressman Wally Herger today testified before the House Natural Resources Committee during a hearing on the "Evolving West." He was invited to testify by the Ranking Member of the committee, Representative Don Young. Herger stressed that responsible forest thinning is essential to protecting local communities from devastating wildfires, establishing healthier forests, and bolstering local economies by providing jobs. Herger's testimony follows:

Testimony of Honorable Wally Herger (CA-2)
Before the House Natural Resources Committee
February 28, 2007

Chairman Rahall and Ranking Member Young, thank you for holding today's hearing on the relationship between western communities and natural resources on public lands.

In my home state of California, a human and environmental tragedy of incredible proportions is brewing in our National Forests unless action is taken to restore forest health. A century of fire suppression, and now decades of legal restrictions on forest thinning, have left forests overcrowded and susceptible to catastrophic wildfire. In parts of my district, where 50 - 70 trees per acre were the historic norm, there are now 500 - 700 trees per acre - approximately ten times as many.

Modern fires are not like natural low-intensity fires, which burned close to the ground. Today's fires engulf the entire forest, from floor to canopy, destroying virtually everything in their path. For example, the 2003 Southern California fire destroyed 750,000 acres and led to 30 fatalities. We desperately need to mechanically thin these unhealthy stands if we are to protect at-risk communities and watersheds.

A "hands-off" approach to forestry has brought year after year of historic devastation. Taxpayers now pay billions of dollars to fight fires that could have been prevented through active forest thinning.

Forest management traditionally brought revenue into the Treasury and shared 25 percent of

proceeds with county schools and roads. But appeals and lawsuits have virtually halted any thinning from occurring and rural schools have been devastated as a result. Unless "Secure Rural Schools" - a temporary program designed to rescue counties from declining thinning receipts - is reauthorized, counties like Siskiyou County in my district will experience a 91 percent cut from what they receive under current law!

The good news in the face of this environmental catastrophe is that Westerners are taking matters into their own hands. In the early 1990s, a citizens group consisting of local environmentalists, forest professionals, and elected officials met at the nearby public library to seek common ground. This organization - dubbed the "Quincy Library Group" - was founded upon the realization that the environment, local communities, and forest jobs have a mutually beneficial relationship. They concluded that protecting forests and communities would be impossible without mechanically thinning unhealthy forest stands. The program they developed was designed to pay for itself by supplying wood products to local mills.

This grassroots vision was turned into bipartisan legislation, which I sponsored along with Senator Dianne Feinstein. QLG members walked the halls of Congress championing their legislation as a solution to the "Timber Wars" that had torn western communities apart. Congress responded by passing this legislation on a near unanimous vote; and the bill was signed into law by President Clinton in 1998.

It was thought that the five-year QLG pilot program could be expanded throughout the West. But regrettably, it has been to a large extent held up by a small group of forest extremists. However, the work that has been done demonstrated that the QLG concepts are beneficial for the forest and local community. Catastrophic fire that ran into QLG-type areas dropped to the forest floor to mimic a more historically consistent fire.

Mr. Chairman, thank you again for holding today's hearing and for allowing me to testify.

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