

Testimony of
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on
**The National Forest System
and Active Forest Management**

**Before the
Committee on Agriculture
Subcommittee on Conservation and Forestry
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Mr. Chairman, Members of the Subcommittee, I am Becky Humphries, Chief Conservation Officer of the National Wild Turkey Federation, and I appreciate the opportunity to testify on the issue of active forest management. Founded in 1973, the National Wild Turkey Federation is a national non-profit wildlife conservation organization dedicated to the conservation of the wild turkey and preservation of our hunting heritage. The National Wild Turkey Federation is 230,000 members strong and maintains local chapters in every state. With the successful restoration of the wild turkey complete, the National Wild Turkey Federation has focused its efforts on our “Save the Habitat. Save the Hunt.” initiative, which connects both parts of our mission by recognizing the importance of quality habitat for wildlife conservation and our hunting tradition. Through this initiative, our “Save the Habitat” efforts are largely focused on creating and maintaining healthy forests through active management.

Professionally trained wildlife biologists know that forest diversity at the landscape level is the key to proper management to achieve species diversity and robustness. There are four fundamental criteria each forest species needs for survival: food, water, shelter, and space. Depending on how a forest is managed, various amounts of these criteria become available to the animals living there. Wildlife managers consider **active management** the best solution to meet the habitat requirements of the largest variety of species. Active management creates young forest habitat, which provides adequate food sources, nesting habitat, and hiding places for forest wildlife. Throughout the U.S. we are losing this diversity on a landscape-level scale, in many cases because our forests are becoming more homogenized and over-mature. The U.S. Forest Service and the Natural Resources Conservation Service have recognized the need for young forest habitat, and they provide funding and guidance to provide such habitat for threatened and endangered species such as the golden-winged warbler, New England cottontail, gopher tortoise, and red-cockaded woodpecker. These benefits extend to numerous other species of wildlife, and result in a greater diversity of plants and animals.

The National Wild Turkey Federation’s work on the Oconee National Forest and the Piedmont National Wildlife Refuge in Georgia provide an example of these benefits. From 2007 through 2012 the National Wild Turkey Federation worked with the U.S. Forest Service and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to actively manage over 21,000 acres of loblolly pine habitat on these

federal lands. The primary objective of the work was to increase pine savannah and young forest habitat to improve habitat for, and reduce wildfire risk to, the endangered red-cockaded woodpecker. This was achieved through timber harvest, the removal of invasive, exotic plant species, and an increase in the use of prescribed fire. As a result of the extensive sustainable forest management practices employed during this project, the number of potential breeding pairs of red-cockaded woodpeckers in the project area increased by nearly 27%. In addition, habitat improvement and population increases were noted for other species including the southern flying squirrel, bobwhite quail, wild turkey, and a variety of migratory songbirds. Long-term maintenance costs and threat of wildfire, forest pests, and disease were also reduced through these efforts.

The management of healthy forests is made economically viable through the harvest and sale of forest products and timber, which help offset the costs associated with other forest and wildlife management activities such as reforestation, invasive species control, prescribed fire, timber stand improvements, etc. Without the funding that sustainable forest management provides the landowner (including the federal government), we are likely to see less forest management, which, in turn, will exacerbate the problems of wildfire, decreased forest health, endangered species, and water quality. Additionally, without the revenue that active forest management provides, we are likely to see increased land conversion to non-forested uses and the loss of the basic operational capacity (i.e., loggers and mills) to accomplish on-the-ground, sustainable forest management that results in healthy, resilient forests important for a wide variety of ecological benefits.

We can't rely solely on state and private lands to continue to supply the timber industry with the fiber necessary to meet our forest product needs. Our nation's federal lands also play a vital role in maintaining healthy forests that are resilient to threats at a landscape level. In many areas of the country, federal forestland has the potential to provide a consistent and reliable source of forest products to keep the mills open. Federal lands must provide a sustainable, long-term supply of fiber in order to reduce the disproportionate pressure and reliance on other ownership types. Achieving this balance will help regulate prices, help stabilize the supply/demand markets, and provide loggers and forest product companies the assurances they need to hire

workers, maintain existing infrastructure, and reinvest in their operations. The sustainability of this industry is critical for us to economically maximize the benefits of a healthy forest and fight the threats of wildfire, insects, and disease. Furthermore, if the health and vitality of our federal forests are not addressed, devastating wildfires and insect and disease epidemics will spread to adjacent state and private forestlands, thereby undermining other efforts to maintain healthy forests. Without the forest products provided by our federal lands, the ability to manage for healthy forests across a landscape, regardless of ownership (i.e. federal, state, or private), is severely threatened.

Our current funding model for fighting catastrophic wildfires helps illustrate this point. Over the last 30 years the length of the fire season has increased by more than 2 months. In addition, the intensity of many fires has increased largely due to an increased fuel load that is a result of less timber harvested and reduced active forest management. During the same time period, the cost of wildfire suppression has increased an average of more than 22% annually and now accounts for half of the U.S. Forest Service's annual budget. Hundreds of millions of dollars are spent annually to fight forest fires. Unfortunately, these fires often result in scorched earth that all agree is not good for wildlife, water quality, recreation, or local economies and jobs. Alternatively, we could and should increase the pace of sustainable forest management. Active forest management to prevent wildfires costs less than suppression and is proven to be extremely effective at preventing wildfire, as well as helping with fire containment and suppression efforts. By reducing the obstacles to sustainable forest management on our federal lands not only can we reduce the likelihood of wildfires and the costs of fighting them, but we can also realize additional benefits of improved public safety, the protection of private and public property, quality wildlife habitat, improved water quality, fewer invasive species, enhanced recreational opportunities, and more robust local economies.

The National Wild Turkey Federation recognizes and appreciates the authorities and tools that have been granted in recent years by the Agriculture Committee to expand the ability of federal agencies to manage federal forestlands. We believe that the 2014 Farm Bill, which many on this Committee were instrumental in passing, provides important tools aimed at streamlining processes, increasing multi-party collaboration, transitioning towards landscape-

level (“all lands”) management, building capacity, improving watersheds, addressing forest health risks (e.g., fire risk and insect/disease infestations), and generally enhancing the pace and scale of management for healthy forests. The permanent authorizations of Stewardship End-Result Contracting and Good Neighbor Authority, along with the establishment of Insect and Disease Area designations in the 2014 Farm Bill are helpful additions to the existing Wyden Amendment and Cooperative Forest Landscape Restoration Programs. The specific focus of each tool varies, but all strive to increase the pace and scale of restoration on federal lands by addressing contracting and process inefficiencies; dealing with specific ecosystem/forest health concerns within designated geographical units on public lands; allowing for coordination of management activities on federal lands and adjacent private lands within a watershed; and enabling non-governmental organizations and state agency partners to provide additional resources through cooperative agreements for the mutual benefit of all parties. If utilized to their fullest extent, such programs and authorities will lead to healthier forests, which in turn will provide quality wildlife habitat, necessary economic benefits, and public recreational opportunities.

The National Wild Turkey Federation has been a leader in the successful Stewardship Contracting Program. We have partnered with the U.S Forest Service on 81 Stewardship End-Result Contracting projects in the last decade. All of these projects demonstrate the benefits of partnership and have resulted in sustainable forest management. For example, in New Mexico, the National Wild Turkey Federation is partnering with the U.S. Forest Service in the eastern Zuni Mountains of the Cibola National Forest on the Bluewater stewardship agreement. Since 2010, 5,000 acres have been treated to create a healthy, resilient forest by reducing the timber density of the stand, and in turn improving the future ability to proactively manage the forest with fire. This both decreases future fire risk in the area and creates quality habitat for the wild turkey and other wildlife. The National Wild Turkey Federation and our partners, including the sawmill Mount Taylor Machine, have provided matching funds to the project which has expanded the number of treated acres by 20 percent. Mount Taylor Machine almost exclusively receives its product from the national forest and without this project likely would have been forced to close, putting their 35 employees in the small community of Milan, NM out of work. The project is so important to both the forest

and the community that the Mount Taylor Machine has donated a portion of its hauling expenses to ensure the project can continue. The U.S. Forest Service acknowledges that without the National Wild Turkey Federation's capacity to administratively handle this project the work would not have been possible. The National Wild Turkey Federation has also participated in the Puerco Cooperative Forest Restoration Project that has collected necessary data for a landscape scale National Environmental Protection Act analysis that will allow for the expansion of similar forest management work in the western Zuni Mountains of the Cibola National Forest.

The partnership opportunities provided by Stewardship End-Result Contracting allow the U.S. Forest Service to respond more quickly to natural disasters. In 2009 a catastrophic ice storm devastated much of Land Between the Lakes National Recreation Area in Kentucky and Tennessee. Through a stewardship agreement, The National Wild Turkey Federation helped restore access to the 170,000-acre recreation area by facilitating multiple logging crews to open roads and clean up debris. Since that time, our partnership efforts have continued, focusing on forest health and wildlife habitat by reducing forest density, removing invasive plant species, restoring native grasses and trees, and improving and maintaining access for visitors. Through the stewardship agreement, the local National Wild Turkey Federation chapter provides approximately \$20,000 worth of in-kind services and nearly 600 hours of volunteer time annually, expanding the scope of work that could otherwise be accomplished using only federal money. Together we accomplish nearly 6,000 acres of treatments annually.

Despite these examples of progress, the National Wild Turkey Federation believes that many administrative policies and processes continue to slow the rate of implementation to an unacceptable pace, greatly increasing the cost of implementation. We encourage Congress and federal agencies to continue their efforts to increase the pace and scale of sustainable forest management. To that end, we offer the following suggestions:

- Expand collaborative efforts. Our experience with Stewardship indicates that when all parties are at the table early in the process, mutually determine the desired results, and understand the role that timber harvest and active management play in achieving that result, opposition to active management is minimized.

- Work at a landscape scale. Long-term benefits to healthy forests and local communities will be easier to realize at a broad scale.
- Solve the fire-funding problem. Until federal agencies are freed from the burden of fighting catastrophic wildfire through their annual budgets and the resulting “fire-borrowing,” we will be unable to make meaningful progress towards proactive forest management that will reduce the number, size and intensity of wildfires.
- Encourage federal agencies to use all the tools and authorities at their disposal to the fullest extent possible, with maximum flexibility. Federal resource managers must be empowered to apply the aforementioned tools wherever appropriate in the most efficient manner possible to achieve our collective forest restoration goals.
- Arbitration instead of litigation. Litigation increases the expense and delays the implementation of projects. The National Wild Turkey Federation supports investigating other means of dispute resolution such as arbitration for projects that fall within the approved Forest Management Plan and have been subject to National Environmental Protection Act review.
- Expand the use of categorical exclusions. We support the appropriate use of categorical exclusions under the National Environmental Policy Act for management that is routine, reoccurring, and with well-known impacts. Our federal forest managers have decades of forest management experience to implement wise, sustainable forest management practices in a much more streamlined manner.
- Understand the potential negative consequences of limiting forest management for the benefit of a single species. The National Wild Turkey Federation is concerned that the forest management restrictions contained in the Fish and Wildlife Service interim 4(d) rule for the Northern Long-eared Bat for example could have far reaching negative impacts on active forest management. Additionally, these restrictions could be in direct conflict with prescribed management for other wildlife species of concern.

As shown through its continued partnership with the U.S. Forest Service and restoration efforts through our “Save the Habitat, Save the Hunt.” Initiative, the National Wild Turkey Federation is a strong proponent of active, sustainable forest management. The benefits to numerous wildlife species, their habitats, and forest health are matched with economic

benefits that contribute to local economies. Increased active forest management on federal lands will help prevent wildfires and make it easier and less costly to fight fires when they do occur. For all of these reasons, the National Wild Turkey Federation urges Members of Congress to increase the pace and scale of sustainable forest management to ensure the health of our forestlands and the wildlife that call them home. Members of this Committee have much to be proud of. You have helped the process with past legislation but more needs to be done. Thank you for your time and consideration and your desire to address these critical issues.