

Testimony for the U.S. Senate Field Hearing on Forest Health and Wildfire
Colorado Springs - August 15, 2012

Testimony from Jimbo Buickerood,
Public Lands Coordinator for San Juan Citizens Alliance

“Solutions Addressing Colorado’s Forest Health and Wildfire Challenges”

Good Morning Senator Udall, Members of the Panel, and fellow Coloradoans.

I’m Jimbo Buickerood and I reside with my family in the Mancos River Valley lying just to the east of Mesa Verde National Park. I appreciate and am honored by the invitation to come here today to share my perspectives on the topic of Forest Health and Wildfire, and most importantly to identify solutions to the challenges we collectively face.

First of all, I want to express my sympathy and condolences for those in the Colorado Springs area who suffered losses in the Waldo Canyon Fire, as well as those other Colorado residents who endured loss in the other wildfires this year in the state.

Our Mancos Valley community was also impacted by a wildfire earlier this summer when the 10,000 acre Weber Fire burned Bureau of Land Management and private lands immediately east of the Town of Mancos. Fortunately the fire resulted in no loss of human life and only minimal property loss. Homes and lives were saved due to incredibly fast and effective response by firefighters and the preventive efforts of homeowners who safeguarded their homes and neighborhood by effectively removing hazardous fuels.

Today I represent both the Upper San Juan Mixed-Conifer Working Group, whose collaborative work is focused on the forest lands in the Pagosa Springs area, and the San Juan Citizens Alliance at which I am the Public Lands Coordinator.

The San Juan Citizens Alliance is a 26 year-old membership organization that organizes people to protect our water and air, our lands, and the character of our rural communities in southwest Colorado and northwest New Mexico.

Our nine staff focus on four program areas, 1) the Wild San Juans, working to preserve the San Juan National Forest and Bureau of Land Management lands and adjacent areas; 2) the Dolores River Campaign, protecting the Dolores River watershed; 3) a River Protection program safeguarding river flows and water quality in the San Juan basin; and 4) the San Juan Basin Energy Reform Campaign, ensuring proper regulation and enforcement of the oil, gas and coal industry and transitioning to a renewable energy economy.

From my work on forest issues in southwest Colorado over the past few years, including involvement in the Upper San Juan Mixed-Conifer Working Group I would like to share three fundamental points related to the goal of reducing wildfire hazards in the Wildland Urban Interface, the so-called “WUI.”

First, we know that the existing structure of federal environmental regulations including the National Environmental Protection Act (NEPA) and the Healthy Forest Restoration Act (HFRA) of 2003 provide both the broad authority and sufficient flexibility to support Coloradoans in addressing the challenges we have in some of our Colorado forests. Simply said, there is no need to pass additional legislation, such as some now being examined in the House of Representatives, to create new logging authorities, or for transference of jurisdiction of our public lands from the federal government to the state government in the name of wildfire hazard reduction.

Indeed, we have a regulatory structure in place that both effectively supports us, and allows us, to address the challenges at hand. Both NEPA and HFRA include one of the most important pieces to the solution, that of public engagement which fosters public dialogue and full disclosure, elements that lead to good projects with good outcomes. It is a relief to know that when it comes to the regulatory structure to address wildfire hazard reduction in Colorado, the solution is simple: “don’t change it - it’s not broken.”

Secondly, we need continued and greater funding to address the challenges presented by a substantial increase in wildfire hazard throughout the state. While the reasons behind the increased challenges are many and include insect epidemics, climate change, settlement patterns, past forest management practices, and others – there is no doubt that funds are needed to address the current challenge. Because we know funds are always limited and must be used wisely, the primary funding question to resolve is, “How can we most effectively use the funds and resources available?,” or with a business mindset it can be framed as “What is the best return on investment?” The solution therefore relates directly to where and how we prioritize the resources available to us.

Fortunately we have sound research and findings from recent reports, such as the Four Mile Canyon Fire Study, that point the way towards the best use of funds. We know that increasing public fire awareness is important, especially for those that live and work in the Wildland Urban Interface, the WUI. Support for initiatives such as designing and implementing Community Wildfire Protection Plans (CWPP’s) for all Colorado communities potentially in harm’s way of wildfires is a very effective use of funds, as is support for the Firewise program that educates and supports homeowners to minimize wildfire hazards surrounding their homes. Coloradans living and working in the WUI should become familiar with such terms as HIZ, the Home Ignition Zone, and how to “firewise” our communities.

We also know that when we invest in fuel reduction projects, the best use of funds is reducing hazardous fuels close to structures. The solution lies in fuels reduction projects close to homes, businesses and public infrastructure rather than deep incursions into the forest hoping that extensive logging of dead or dying trees might save homes and lives. As Senator Udall noted when reviewing the findings of the Four Mile Canyon Fire, "This fire taught us that the most important yard tool you can have if you live in a wildfire-prone area is not a chainsaw; it's a rake and a weed-whacker."

One other particularly worthy use of funds is the support for long term stewardship contracts that allow communities to make a multi-year and prioritized effort towards reducing wildfire hazard in forest lands adjacent to them. The long term aspect of these contracts is particularly important because of the considerable effort and investment necessary to prepare and initiate these contract projects, therefore funding and policy to support the contracts should be focused on 5 to 10 year stewardship contracts.

Thirdly, I have come to recognize that a central piece of the solution to address wildfire hazard reduction in Colorado is the element of involving a wide spectrum of people and interests in every community to address this challenge. When wildfires burn close to, or in our communities, they affect everyone in the community and as we have seen, an effective response to a wildfire emergency necessitates a community-wide response. Similarly, effective prevention necessitates community-wide decisions and actions in anticipation of the catastrophes that can take place.

I suggest that we need to shift more of our focus and funds towards the engagement of communities in defining and preparing for their future as "Firewise community." Though the effort of Mixed Conifer Working Group in Pagosa Springs may not necessarily be a template for all Colorado communities who reside in the Wildland Urban Interface, it does effectively model the approach that the a community desiring to deal with the wildfire challenge can move forward by bringing together

as many constituencies as possible to understand, plan and implement prevention actions. Whether these actions are implementing Community Wildfire Protection Plans, initiating an active Firewise outreach program, providing recommendations to federal or state forest managers, or others; it is likely that a collaborative community effort will bring the most effective wildfire prevention to a community most quickly.

To provide more detail as to the possible substance and process of a community-wide effort working to address these issues I would like to share the story of the Upper San Juan Mixed-Conifer Working Group, a collaborative community group focused on forest and wildfire issues on both public and private lands in the Pagosa Springs area.

The Mixed-Conifer Working Group was established to provide a venue to share stakeholder perspectives and to develop science-based collaborative priorities for management and monitoring of mixed-conifer forests on the Pagosa Ranger District (RD) of the San Juan National Forest in southwestern Colorado. The group has been active since July 2010.

The groups mission statement reads, “The Upper San Juan Mixed-Conifer Working Group is committed to collaborative approaches to improving the health and long-term resilience of mixed-conifer forests and the communities located near them in southwest Colorado. The workgroup will focus on strengthening understanding, sharing knowledge and lessons learned, developing management approaches, initiating high priority projects, and monitoring results using an adaptive framework.”

The spirit of the group is summarized nicely with this quote from Kevin Khung, the District Ranger for the Pagosa District of the San Juan National Forest: “The Upper San Juan Mixed-Conifer Working Group is a diverse cross section of people interested in public lands. This group’s desire to openly share and learn from one another as well as support possible solutions is extraordinary. The fact that they want to be problem solvers rather than just problem identifiers is encouraging for all public land managers.”

The Working Group members are a varied set of people and groups representing business interests, conservation organizations, local governments, Colorado State Forest Service, U.S. Forest Service, recreation, ranching, home owner associations, fire protection district officials, scientists, utility companies, as well as many interested citizens. The diverse nature of the group insures that all interests have a place at the table, which increases the reliability that the recommendations of the groups will reflect and be supported by the community as a whole.

The Working Group meetings consist of a blend of informational presentations, field tours, forest management and policy dialog, wildfire hazard and protection discussions, and other sessions in which the group examined both the overall status of forest health and wildfire hazards, as well as the specific examination of the status of eight polygons representing about 144,000 acres of forest surrounding Pagosa Springs.

The Working Group is cognizant of the many ecological, social, and economic trade-offs within forest and community landscapes. Using this reality as guidance, the workgroup has made recommendations as a means of planning and implementing a range of high quality projects that will contribute to improvement in forest conditions on the San Juan National Forest. The themes and parameters of the recommendations are offered as a set of directions and guidelines that will serve as a framework for long-term project work. They are also intended as goal and objective statements that can guide implementation and monitoring, rather than mandates that must be achieved at every step throughout the process.

The following set of general principles and values were decided upon by the Working Group and to the extent possible, the following guidance will be utilized:

- A watershed perspective will be emphasized as a management framework, wherever possible.

- In some vegetation areas, particularly cool-moist mixed-conifer, additional field monitoring and evaluation are needed as part of an adaptive management approach.
- Management activities will emphasize forest resilience and diversity.
- Environmental assessments for proposed projects will address water quality, wildlife habitat, insect and disease trends, wildfire mitigation objectives, invasive weeds, and recreation activities, among other ecological and community needs and concerns.
- To the degree possible, management activities that mimic natural disturbances will be utilized.
- In the long-term, management actions will seek to create conditions for manageable, planned and unplanned ignitions to meet multiple objectives, such as wildland fire for resource benefit to safely occur in mid to higher elevations.
- Forest management should encourage a sustainable and appropriately scaled forest product industry, for both community and ecological benefits.
- Sustainable and healthy community life is intrinsically connected to the well being of diverse, resilient, and naturally functioning forest landscapes.
- Management activities will be designed to meet multiple objectives, coordinate with supportive and/or participative landowners or parties, and foster economic efficiency.

Thank you once again Senator Udall for the opportunity to engage in this hearing today, and I look forward to further discussion on this issue as Coloradoans work together to meet the challenges of wildfire hazard reduction in our state.

With my testimony I am submitting four exhibits that specifically relate to the focus of hearing. All of the exhibits contain information that will be helpful as we move forward with solutions to these issues.

Exhibits

Exhibit A: Structure Protection at Elk Stream Ranch, August 2012

Exhibit B: Briefing Paper from the Upper San Juan Mixed-Conifer Working Group,
May 2012

Exhibit C: Upper San Juan Mixed-Conifer Working Group Report (Phase One), July
2012¹

Exhibit D: Conservation Community Letter on Forest Legislation, July 2012