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Subject: Improving Wildland Fire Management – Senate Energy and Natural Resources Field Hearing Testimony

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Location: Campion Hall - Seattle University in Seattle, Washington

I'm honored by the invitation to testify today. My name is Nick Goulette and I've spent over a decade working locally, regionally and nationally grappling with the wicked challenges of building more fire adapted communities, resilient landscapes, and aligning safe, efficient and effective fire response and management.

I provide my testimony today serving in several capacities. First, as Project Director for the national Fire Adapted Communities Learning Network (FAC Network). The FAC Network is a cooperative project with The Nature Conservancy that is supported primarily through a national agreement with the US Forest Service with assistance from the Department of Interior Agencies. The FAC Network engages community leaders and innovators from around the country to accelerate and diffuse the adoption of best practices for growing community fire resilience before, during and after wildfires. Our team works directly with 17 communities and organizations from across the country representing the full spectrum of parties involved in fire management ranging from local fire departments, to Conservation Districts and local NGOs, to state forestry agencies. The FAC Net members, in-turn, work with other partners in their communities, regions and states to grow the movement towards fire adapted communities. I also serve as Executive Director of the Watershed Research and Training Center, a non-profit organization in Northern CA where I get to practice FAC concepts on the ground through participation in our local Trinity County Fire Safe Council, running fuels reduction and restoration crews, leading spatial fire planning, and coordinating prescribed fire training and implementation. Along with these two primary roles, I am a founding member and current Steering Committee Chair for the Northern CA Prescribed Fire Council, am a Leadership Team Member for the Rural Voices for Conservation Coalition, and serve as an Advisory Group Member for the UC Berkeley Center for Fire Research and Outreach. I'm deeply committed to helping our communities and the federal land management agencies learn to live with wildland fire.

Given this combination of national and local perspective, I'd like to share the following ideas about how best to grow and integrate fire adapted communities into the broader context of improving wildland fire management safety, efficiencies and effectiveness. I'll speak to three areas of investment: cooperative planning, direct investments in mitigation and restoration, and building local community capacity for fire management.

First off, **cooperative planning** is the cornerstone to not only building fire adapted communities, but also to achieving better outcomes before, during and after wildfires. This includes both community wildfire protection planning (CWPP) and landscape restoration planning. This premise is a cornerstone

of disaster resilience theory, and one we must incorporate into our wildfire planning framework going forward. Local communities and supporting organizations need a combination of funding and incentives to develop and implement both high quality CWPPs and landscape restoration/resilience strategies.

In regards to CWPPs, we know that everyone has a role in building fire adapted communities, from fire departments, to business owners, local government and utilities, to local landowners. Supporting the development and regular updating of CWPPs provides the forum for their collectively assessing risks and prioritizing comprehensive mitigation actions. When done cooperatively with all the right stakeholders and leaders at the table, integration and synergy are inevitable outcomes.

We're observing evidence of the benefit of these synergies across the country where, for instance, community planners and leaders are working to integrate CWPPs and Hazard Mitigation Planning. FEMA Region 10 and the state of Idaho both offer tools and assistance to local communities on how to best achieve integration. This is helping to leverage funding from FEMA, State Fire Assistance, local investments, and state grant programs to achieve better pre-fire mitigation work to prepare and protect communities.

Regarding landscape restoration/resilience strategies, programs like the Collaborative Forest Landscape Restoration Program, Two Chiefs Joint Landscape Restoration Initiative, and the many regional initiatives across the country, coupled with the proliferation of landscape collaborations across the country, speak to the merit of this model for making landscapes more resilient to wildfire.

While the success of these landscape initiatives varies, several key lessons are emerging across the spectrum. First, facilitation and coordination are essential to supporting the development of durable agreements that parlay into successful NEPA planning, contract development, implementation and adaptive management. Second, and this is evidenced across the Pacific Northwest Region where they are implementing an ambitious "Accelerated Restoration" strategy, new models of coordination, engagement and facilitation will be needed to reach across multiple communities and stakeholder groups including the incorporation of information technology and continued support for in-person convening, where participants can build the personal relationships upon which successful implementation depends.

Along with the demonstrable benefits of cooperative CWPP and landscape planning to community and landscape fire resilience, these processes also feed into and integrate with critical fire response needs. One example is that data generated during both CWPP and landscape assessments, plans and updates can and should be integrated into the Wildland Fire Decision Support System (WFDSS) to support more informed and effective fire management response and decision-making. Second, CWPP and landscape planning also sets the stage, both socially and in terms of data, for spatial fire management planning.

All said cooperative planning clearly builds the relationships necessary to get to cooperative implementation and leveraging of resources before, during and after fires. There are models of where this is working from across the country. It is incumbent upon us to draw from these successes and institutionalize their best practices through a combination of funding, incentives and direction.

Second, **direct investments in mitigation and restoration** are making a real difference for fire management safety and effectiveness, and for community and landscape outcomes. We need to invest far more through a range of existing programs.

The Firewise USA recognition program and similar programs that invest in defensible space work to reduce citizen and firefighter risks and home losses clearly work. Cost share programs, free chipper days, home inspection programs, and technical assistance to homeowners and residents all help support increased defensible space. Codes and ordinances that regulate Wildland Urban Interface (WUI) development provide essential tools for communities, residents and the fire services. Limiting further development in the WUI, combined with ensuring that future and past development incorporates the best available building materials, landscaping, and community design will help to reduce risk and losses.

Beyond the home ignition zone and the neighborhood, fuels treatments both adjacent to communities and strategically placed on the landscape to facilitate fire management have proven effective time and again. While treatments and treatment effectiveness vary across vegetation types, we know that fuels treatments are especially effective where surface fuels are treated with prescribed fire. We need to dramatically increase the pace and scale of effective fuels treatments both adjacent to communities and other assets at risk, and strategically on the landscape to restore resilience and fire management options.

Just this year where I live and work in Trinity County, CA, we've seen multiple examples where strategically placed shaded fuel breaks, coupled with larger thinning and prescribed fire treatments, facilitated successful fire management and suppression, limiting the need for high severity burnouts and other aggressive suppression tactics. These treatments limited firefighter risks and exposure while also protecting lives and property. These treatments were prioritized in our CWPP, cooperatively implemented by Watershed Center crews, property owners and contractors, and leveraged multiple funding sources including NRCS EQIP, Secure Rural Schools Title II, State Fire Assistance Grants through the CA Fire Safe Council, and appropriated WFHF funds from the USFS. I see this as a testament to the "all hand, all lands" approach.

The final mitigation and restoration investment approach that I would like to highlight is cooperative prescribed burning. Cooperative burning builds skills and reduces hazards, feeding directly into safer, more efficient, and more effective wildfire response. Scientists and managers broadly agree that it is among our best hopes of creating and maintain more resilient landscapes and fire adapted communities. Yet we lag in our application of the tool for a range of reasons including risk aversion, air quality regulation, lack of capacity, and lack of will. At the same time, successful models exist. Across the southeast, prescribed fire is used to great effect and at scales that eclipse what is happening in the west. In the west, The Nature Conservancy is hosting prescribed fire training exchanges (TREXs) that are building capacity for more and better cooperative prescribed fire. Across the FAC Network, communities are embracing prescribed fire as a critical tool. They are using cooperative agreements, working with NGOs, fire suppression contractors, tribes and fire departments to bring more capacity to implementation, bolstering that of the federal and state agencies in improving wildfire response capacity at the same time.

All said, there are many models of successful mitigation and restoration across the country that are having meaningful impacts on minimizing wildfire impacts and facilitating fire response. They are woefully underfunded given the magnitude of the problems. More and smarter federal investment with pay back many times over in resident, local and state match, and in reducing the costs and risks of wildfire response.

Finally, investment in the capacity of local institutions, what my colleagues and I call **"community capacity",** is the cornerstone of building fire adapted communities. We need programmatic funding to support community capacity to engage in FAC. This investment takes two forms. The first focuses on supporting local capacity for coordination. The second focuses on building local workforce and contracting capacity for land and fire management.

Building fire adapted communities requires sustained engagement from the relevant leaders and stakeholders in communities. The ability of community leaders and institutions to engage is predicated on effective coordination. A standing coordinating group ("Fire Safe Council", "Wildfire Coalition", committees, coordinating groups, collaboratives, choose you c-word) has emerged as the ideal model. While coordination is not sexy… it involves putting together agendas, taking notes, following up on action items, holding the group's vision, fundraising for collective priorities, etc., it is the essence of leveraged and collective action. No one wants to fund coordination, at the same time, it is a fundamental investment to building community capacity for fire resilience before, during and after wildfire. Both US Forest Service Region 5 and 6 have launched successful capacity building programs in partnership with the National Forest Foundation. Known as the "Community Capacity and Land Stewardship Program", CCLS support small grants to help keep local institutions growing and operating in support of federal fire management objectives. We need to see more programmatic investment like this at the national level.

Local workforce and contracting capacity represents another type of community capacity that is invaluable to land management, hazard mitigation and fire management. Whether housed in non-profit work crews, fire departments, or private contractors, there is no substitute for having capacity housed at the local level. Coupling local landscape and community knowledge with the ability to be responsive to land and fire management needs provides federal land and fire managers with ready workforce to implement fuels reduction, restoration, cooperative burning, and fire response. There are models emerging around the country. The City of Santa Fe and the North Lake Tahoe Fire Protection District, partners in the Ashland Forest Resiliency Project, in eastern Oregon, and many others are bridging NGO, fire department and contractor capacity through a combination of participating agreement, stewardship agreements, and contracts to implement comprehensive mitigation and restoration, all while building capacity to respond to wildfires. These models and tools need to be explored and expanded.

In closing, a modest federal investment in community capacity building, coupled with increasing investments in cooperative planning and active mitigation and restoration, will yield outcomes that not only build more fire adapted communities and landscape resilience, but also facilitate safer, more efficient and more effective wildfire response. I encourage the committee to draw on myself and my colleagues in the Fire Adapted Communities Learning Network, the Fire Learning Network, the Rural Voices for Conservation Coalition, and from the many other local leaders who are leading the way in improving fire management outcomes through local innovation and sheer determination.

Learn More:

http://facnetwork.org/

https://www.conservationgateway.org/ConservationPractices/FireLandscapes/FireLearningNetwork/Pages/fire-learning-network.aspx

http://www.fireadapted.org/meet-the-coalition.aspx

http://ewp.uoregon.edu/

http://www.firescience.gov/JFSP_exchanges.cfm