

**Chairman Doug Ose**  
**Opening Statement**  
**“Wildfires in the West – Is the Bush Administration’s Response Adequate?”**  
**May 5, 2004**

After 100 years of well intentioned but misguided land management policy, Federal lands that were once healthy and productive are now unnaturally dense and diseased. Due to these unhealthy conditions, our national lands have become increasingly vulnerable to catastrophic wildfires.

In 2000 and 2002, the U.S. suffered its worst two wildland fire seasons in 50 years. Combined, the fires of 2000 and 2002 burned over 15 million acres of land and cost the Federal government nearly \$3 billion to suppress. The 2002 fire season was particularly severe in the West, with Arizona, Colorado, New Mexico and Oregon reporting their worst fires in modern history. Similarly, in 2003, California experienced its worst fire season when 13 wildfires claimed 24 lives, destroyed 3,600 homes, charred 739,000 acres, and cost \$250 million to contain.

Faced with escalating economic and ecological losses, in August 2002, President Bush announced his Healthy Forests Initiative (HFI). This plan sought to reduce the statutory, regulatory, and administrative obstacles to effective fire prevention and rehabilitation on Federal lands. As part of this plan, in December 2002, the Bush Administration proposed a series of administrative actions that facilitated timely reviews of forest projects, amended the project appeals process, improved the consultation process required by the Endangered Species Act, and created a more effective environmental assessment process under the National Environmental Policy Act. As shown in the chart on display, in 2003 and 2004, the Departments of Agriculture and Interior (USDA and DOI) promulgated three final rules, one interim final rule, and one notice to implement these changes.

In addition to regulatory reform, the Bush Administration also sought new statutory authority from Congress to adequately protect Federal lands from wildfires. The resulting legislation, the Healthy Forests Restoration Act (HFRA), was signed into law in December 2003 (P.L. 108-148).

Despite the new tools available to Federal land managers, it is likely that the West will once again experience a severe fire season this year. This problem was not created overnight and will not be solved overnight.

Nonetheless, it is still important that we expeditiously begin the long process of removing hazardous fuels and returning our national lands to their former glory. To that end, we are here today to assess whether the reforms realized under HFI and HFRA are sufficient to eliminate the barriers to effective land management policy in the long-term.

Additionally, we are here today to discuss ways to enhance cooperation and coordination among Federal, State, local, and private entities. Fires are equal opportunists – they will consume privately-owned land in the same way they consume adjacent Federal land. The best way to prevent catastrophic wildfires is to forge alliances among the various stakeholders.

Lastly, we are here today to remind the public of the very real fire danger that exists and of the need to vigilantly address the issue. All too often, support for wildfire prevention and suppression is forgotten as soon as the flames are extinguished. In March, four ballot measures to improve fire protection failed in San Diego County. Think about that — the voters who were most affected by the 2003 wildfires refused to support actions to increase the ability of the community to prepare and respond to wildfires. For land managers and fire professionals to reduce the wildfire threat, they must have public support.

Wildfires are a significant threat to many communities and habitats throughout the West. As we examine this issue, key questions will include: (a) is the Federal government doing enough to mitigate wildfire risks, (b) how can stakeholder relationships be improved, and (c) are additional measures needed to address wildfires in the short or long-term?

I look forward to the testimony of our witnesses. They include: P. Lynn Scarlett, Assistant Secretary for Policy, Management, and Budget, DOI; Mark Rey, Under Secretary for Natural Resources and Environment, USDA; Montana Governor Judy Martz on behalf of Western Governors' Association; William Campbell, Chairman, California Governor's Blue Ribbon Fire Commission; Bruce Tuberville, Chairman, The Fire Safe Council; William J. McCammon, President, California Fire Chiefs Association; and, Amy Mall, Senior Forest Policy Analyst, Natural Resources Defense Council.