

# Dousing the Claims



## Extinguishing Republican Myths about Wildfire



**NOTE:** This report has not been officially adopted by the Committee on Natural Resources and may not necessarily reflect the views of its Members.

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## Extinguishing Republican Myths about Wildfire

Already this year, wildfire records have been broken. Hundreds of families have lost their homes. Some have lost their lives. Tens of thousands of people have been evacuated or displaced. Yet even this dangerous fire season has not tempered the overheated rhetoric from House Republicans over wildfire.

House Republicans are arguing that environmental protections, including those for endangered species, are acting as roadblocks to projects designed to reduce the risk of wildfires. There's just one problem: It isn't true. Data obtained and analyzed by the Natural Resources Committee's Democratic staff show that almost no wildfire prevention projects are stopped by environmental or endangered species protections. Nonetheless, the Committee Majority has called a hearing today to again make the false case for gutting environmental protections in the name of wildfire prevention.

**The reality is a stark contrast from the hyperbolic language based on anecdotes.**

In the last three years, the Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management (BLM) have implemented over 8000 projects to reduce hazardous fuels for over 10 million acres of federal land. Approximately 27% of these projects were on BLM lands and 73% of the projects were on Forest Service lands. Both the Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management have processes, known as administrative appeals, to allow the public to raise concerns with a project's impact on the environment.

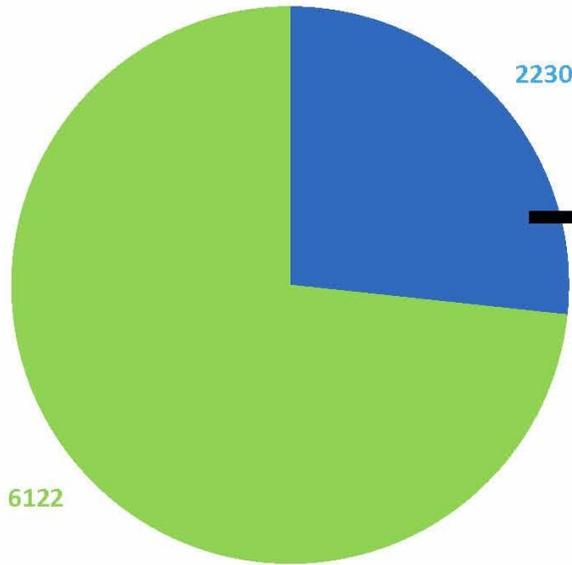
In the case of the hazardous fuels projects analyzed for this report, 70% were subject to appeal by the public. Despite being subject to appeal, over 95% of these projects moved forward without any protest. Generally, BLM projects are protested less frequently than Forest Service projects. From 2009 to 2011, 0.03% of BLM projects and 9% of Forest Service hazardous fuels projects were protested. Common concerns expressed in appeals include the project's impact on water quality, the nature of pristine forests, and overall ecosystem function. The vast majority of projects subject to appeal move forward following the appeals process. Only 7% of projects reviewed in the appeals process were withdrawn by either agency. **When put in context of all of the work undertaken by the Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management, appeals impacted less than 1% of all hazardous fuels work on over 10 million acres of land.**

### OVERHEATED GOP RHETORIC

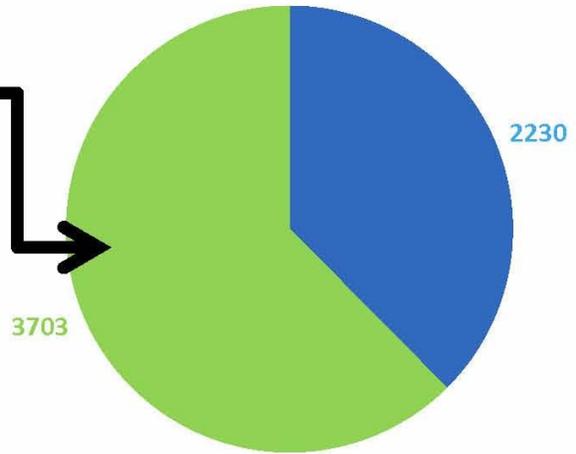
***"We've just burned down 300,000 acres of those trees in New Mexico because of the voices coming from Washington saying don't cut a single one of them. Let the fuels build up in those forests until they burn down."** Steve Pearce, House Floor, July 12, 2012*

***"It is clear that the process of planning, studying, consulting, litigating, appealing, and collaborating are failing us and our forests."** Paul Gosar, House Committee on Natural Resources, July 20, 2012*

**8,352 Forest Service & BLM  
Projects**



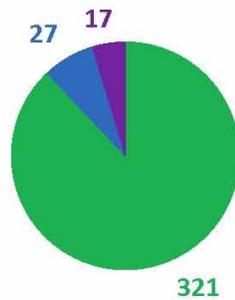
**5,933 Projects Subject to  
Appeal**



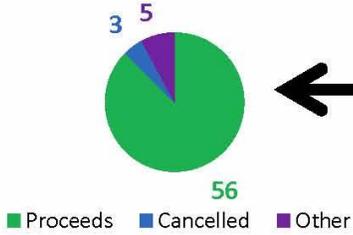
- Total Projects (BLM)    ■ Total Projects (Forest Service)
- Projects Subject to Appeal (BLM)    ■ Projects Subject to Appeal (Forest Service)

*Of 8,352 federal forest projects between 2009 and 2011, just 27 were cancelled due to appeals of which 3 were ESA related.*

**365 Appeals**



**64 ESA Appeals**



- Project Proceeds    ■ Project Cancelled
- Other

The minimal impact of the appeals process on project implementation is consistent with the 2010 report released by the Government Accountability Office. GAO's report ([GAO-10-337](#)) examined the impact of appeals and litigation on Forest Service fuel reduction activities from 2006-2008 and found that 96% of all hazardous fuels projects moved forward following the appeals process.



## Wildfire and Endangered Species

### **CASE STUDY SUCCESS:**

#### **Wagner Anderson Forest Management Project**

*Timber production and hazardous fuels reduction in spotted owl habitat*

The Medford (Oregon) District of the Bureau of Land Management is currently implementing the Wagner Anderson Forest Management Project. The goals of the project are to conduct commercial forest thinning and selection harvest to direct future stand growth, initiate new forest development, reduce the impacts of insect and diseases and increase fire resiliency, all while maintaining northern spotted owl habitat.

The wildland urban interface project is within spotted owl habitat and is producing commercial timber.

The role of endangered species concerns in project implementation is even more negligible. From 2009 to 2011, only 20% of all hazardous fuel project appeals related to threatened and endangered species concerns. Post agency review, 90% of these hazardous fuel reduction projects moved forward. Appeals related to imperiled wildlife concerns only impacted three projects. **When put in context of all of the work undertaken by the Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management, ESA impacted less than 0.05% of all hazardous fuels work on over ten million acres of land.**

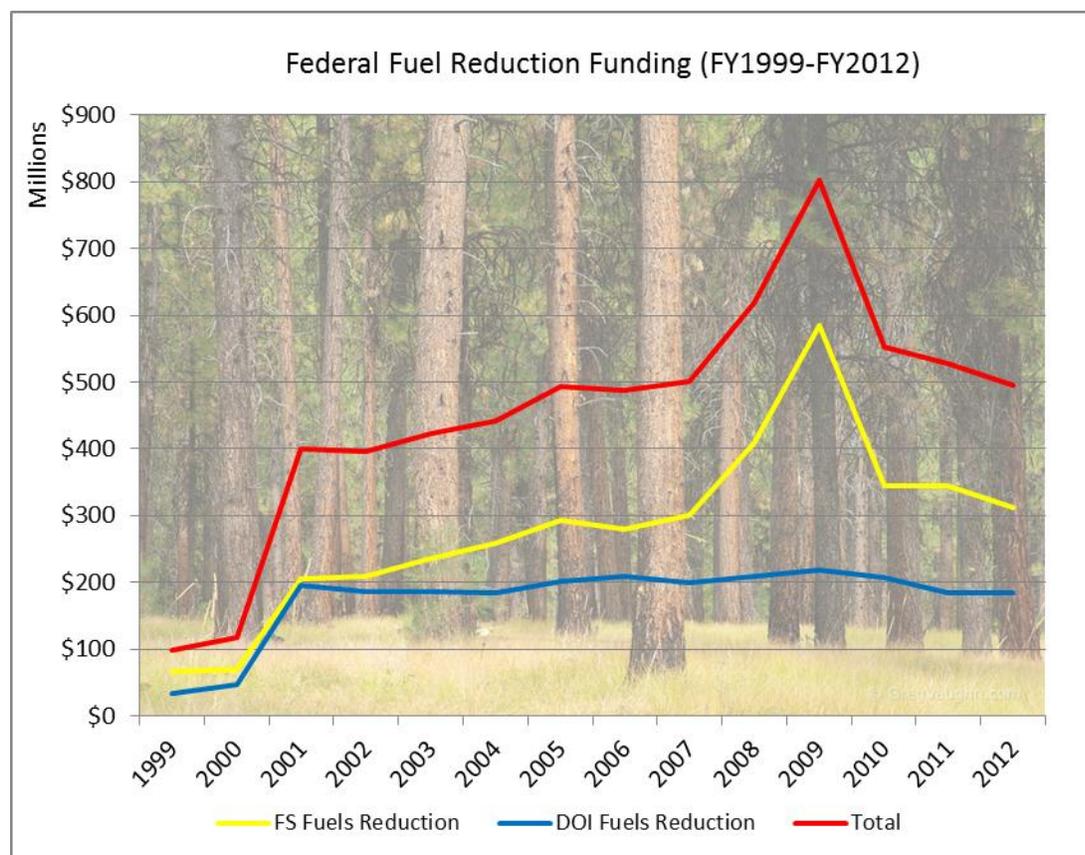
ESA critics argue that designation of critical habitat for threatened or endangered species precludes thinning work within designated habitat either outright or because of risk aversion by the Forest Service or BLM. That is not the case. The ESA only requires the Forest Service or BLM to conduct standard section 7 consultations with the U.S. Fish and

Wildlife Service (FWS) when fuel reduction or thinning projects could affect threatened or endangered species or critical habitat. These consultations allow the agencies to manage critical habitat in a way that reduces hazardous fuels while also maintaining desired habitat for imperiled wildlife.

## Real Solutions to Reduce Wildfire Risk

Instead of using environmental laws and public engagement as scapegoats for increased catastrophic wildfires, lawmakers need to focus on what is working and what else can be done.

First, Congress should prioritize hazardous fuels reduction funding. In 2001 Congress began appropriating increased funding for fuels treatment and in 2003, provided new authorities to land management agencies through the enactment of the Healthy Forest Restoration Act (HFRA). Hailed by the Bush Administration as a major conservation success, HFRA provides for expedited approval of forest thinning projects along the “wildland urban interface” (WUI) - those more populated areas adjacent to wildland vegetation. It also created a new administrative review process for Forest Service projects that allows project implementation to occur more quickly. The legislation involved Governors, local elected officials, and communities through the creation of Community Wildfire Protection Plans that prioritized areas for thinning work.



In 2006, governors and federal agencies agreed on a 10-year collaborative strategy for reducing wildfire risk. The strategy established the goal of reducing hazardous fuels. The achievement of this goal would be measured by the number and percent

of acres treated both inside the WUI and outside the WUI. In 2009, Congress enacted the Federal Land Assistance, Management, and Enhancement (FLAME) Act to provide more stable funding for wildfire suppression. The Collaborative Forest Landscape Restoration Act (CFLRA) was also enacted in 2009 to provide for long-term, large scale collaborative strategies to restore forest, reduce wildfire threats, and utilize available biomass. For the current fiscal year, funding for fuels reduction is at the lowest level since 2001.

Second, Congress should adopt the Markey bill, H.R. 5960, to provide additional authorities for the Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management without waiving environmental laws or cutting the public out of the process. H.R. 5960 includes “Good Neighbor Authority” that allows federal and state land managers to carry out projects across jurisdictional boundaries under a consolidated contract. The Forest Service currently has this authority on a pilot basis in Colorado and the Bureau of Land Management was provided authority in Utah. The language is identical to provisions sponsored by Senator Mark Udall and reported from the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee in the 111<sup>th</sup> Congress. The Western Governors’ Association Policy Statement supports Good Neighbor Authority as part of its 2012 Wildland Fire Management and Resilient Landscapes Policy Resolution.

H.R. 5960 extends stewardship contracting authority until 2017. This authority, initially provided in 2003, allows agencies the flexibility to trade timber for other activities, including thinning and restoration work instead of relying on appropriated funds. Unless extended, the authority expires in 2013.

The Markey bill makes an amendment to the Emergency Watershed Protection Program to provide for priority consideration of post-fire watershed rehabilitation on private lands impacted by catastrophic wildfire on federal lands. Currently, the Forest Service can only undertake emergency watershed restoration work following fire on federal lands. This amendment will provide needed funding for communities to protect drinking water for communities adjacent to federal forests.

**CASE STUDY SUCCESS:**

**West Vernon Project**

*Hazardous fuels reduction and sage grouse habitat improvement*

The U.S. Forest Service’s West Vernon Project is taking place in the Uinta-Wasatch-Cache National Forest, which is in Tooele County, Utah. The purpose of the project is to reduce juniper density and fuel loading, to restore sage steppe habitat, and to enhance habitat for sage grouse and mule deer.

The idea for the project began when the Northern Utah Regional Wildfire Protection Plan designated the Vernon area as being at high-risk for wildfire. In just one year, the project was proposed and approved to address fuel risk in nearly 14,000 acres of fire prone land.

**CASE STUDY SUCCESS:**

**Trout-West Hazardous Fuels  
Reduction Project  
Pike's Peak Ranger District**

The Trout and West Creek watersheds drain into the Upper South Platte River and contribute to the Denver, CO water supply. An adaptive management approach was selected from among the alternatives proposed. This included thinning about 20,000 acres of National Forest, thinning trees from 17,000 of those acres, and follow-up surface-fuels treatments.

Finally, Congress needs to recognize and address climate change. The seminal research on the link between climate change and wildfire risk in the United States suggests that large wildfire activity increased suddenly and markedly in the mid-1980s, with higher large-wildfire frequency, longer wildfire durations, and longer wildfire seasons. Researchers found that forests in the Northern Rockies were most impacted because of increased spring and summer temperatures and an earlier spring snowmelt. The frequency and severity of wildfires is predicted to increase with climate change.

The effect of climate change on wildfire is primarily driven by increases in temperature. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC)

projected that disturbances from fires will have increasing impacts on forests, with longer fire seasons and large increases in burned area due to climate change. This is because a warming climate encourages wildfire via a longer summer period that dries fuels, which promotes easier ignition and faster spread. Researchers have found that in the last three decades the wildfire season in the western United States has increased by 78 days, and burn durations of fires greater than 2,400 acres have increased from 7.5 to 37.1 days. Furthermore, between 1970 and 2003 spring and summer moisture availability declined in many forests in the West; most major wildfires occurred in these same drought-stricken areas. Finally, snowpacks are now melting 2 to 4 weeks earlier throughout much of the West, which extends the summer dry period and puts more forest area at risk of fire.

In the next 100 years, climate change is projected to lead to even more large wildfires, though some regions of the United States will be affected more than others. The southwestern United States and the Rocky Mountain region forests will likely be the most affected by climate change. The climate models evaluated by the IPCC indicate that precipitation is projected to decrease further in the southwestern United States while the frequency and intensity of drought will increase. Drought leads to increased flammability of live and dead fuels and increased susceptibility to a number of insects (in particular the bark beetle).



Insect epidemics kill trees across large regions, providing additional dead and desiccated fuels for future fires. Warm conditions have also led some beetle species to have additional mating cycles, leading to prolific increases in destructive populations. It is important to recognize that the ecosystems that emerge after fire will not be the same as before, but will instead be more arid. Thus, dry climates will get drier in the future, a pattern that is already emerging in current data.

### **Methodology**

All projects and activities undertaken by the Forest Service and BLM related to hazardous fuels reduction were provided to Committee staff by the agencies. Both the BLM and Forest Service pulled over 300,000 entries from the National Fire Plan Operations and Reporting System (NFPORS). The database, a repository of all information related to implementing the National Fire Plan, categorizes fuels reduction activities by identifying acres treated with prescribed fire, mechanical treatment, or chemical treatment. Committee staff manually aggregated activity information into project information from the BLM data. The Forest Service provided data that included both individual activity and aggregated projects. Only Forest Service projects that were noted by Planning, Appeals, and Litigation System (PALS) project names were included in total project count. The NFPORS database included an additional 1,500 projects that were not included in computations for this analysis.

Appeals information was collected from BLM staff and from the [appeals](#) and [objections](#) database maintained by the Forest Service. Committee staff cataloged and analyzed every appeal, then categorized a subset of appeals associated with vegetation management projects. Within this subset, staff reviewed whether individual appeals included concerns related to the impact of the proposal on threatened and/or endangered species. Finally, for those hazardous fuels projects that were appealed or objected, and that included concerns related to impacts on endangered species, the staff determined if the project was litigated.

### **CASE STUDY SUCCESS:**

#### **Mt. Ashland Late-Successional Reserve Habitat Restoration and Fuels Reduction Project**

*Hazardous fuels reduction in old growth area*

The Mt. Ashland project assisted in the development of late-successional habitat by reducing levels in overstocked stands that are more resilient to wildfire by reducing surface and ladder fuels and restoring the landscape to a species composition that resembles historic conditions. The project involved prescribed fire and thinning across 4,400 acres of mixed-conifer forest.