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Committee on Natural Resources
Washington, DC 20515

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June 27, 2012

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Rob Bishop
Subcommittee Chairman
National Parks, Forests, and Public Lands Subcommittee
House Committee on Natural Resources
United States House of Representatives
123 Cannon House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Chairman Hastings and Chairman Bishop:

We are writing to request an immediate hearing on H.R. 5960, the Depleting Risk from Insect infestation, Soil erosion and Catastrophic fire Act (DRISC Act). To date, neither the full Committee nor the Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests, and Public Lands have held a legislative hearing on forest policy addressing the threat of insect infestations, disease and the increased risk of wildfires on Forest Service lands. In fact, this year, the subcommittee did not even hold a hearing on the Forest Service 2013 budget request. Democratic Committee staff requested that H.R. 5960 be added to the hearing agenda for June 28th and that request was denied. As you know, the Senate's Farm bill included new authorities related to insect and disease in our national forests that are very similar to H.R. 5960.

June's fire season has been particularly volatile with the number of large unconstrained wildfires burning in the US jumping from 9 to 16 in the past two weeks¹. Since June 1st, over 630,000

¹ <http://www.nifc.gov/nicc/sitreprt.pdf>

acres have burned across areas in the Rocky Mountains, Southwest, and Midwest². The June total is fast approaching the total number of 710,000 burned acres from the first five months of 2012, signaling a potentially awful summer fire season. Many of these fires have been driven by high winds, brittle conditions and lightning strikes.

These June fires have been expensive and devastating for thousands of businesses and home owners alike. Many people have been evacuated from their communities while hundreds of homes have been destroyed. In Northern Colorado, over \$29.6 million dollars have been spent to suppress the High Park Fire -- the second largest fire in Colorado's history -- where more than 83,205 acres have burned in the past week and a half. Currently, only approximately 45% of this fire has been contained, although more than 2,000 people have been dedicated to fighting it. In southern New Mexico, a lightning-sparked fire has burned more than 44,330 acres, damaging or destroying at least 254 homes and other structures in the mountains outside of the resort community of Ruidoso. Another New Mexico fire is now by far the largest in state history with over 297,845 acres burned. The previous record was set in 2011, when the Las Conchas fire burned more than 150,000 acres near Los Alamos National Laboratory.³

Given that the summer months have significantly more wildfires than other times of the year, the recent fire activity suggests the number of fires this year will be above average, especially in the central Rocky Mountains and Southern California. There are many additional factors that support this concern. First, many parts of the West have endured sustained droughts over the past several years. Average mountain snowpacks are much lower (e.g. Colorado's snowpack is less than 2% of normal)⁴, further exacerbating dry conditions. In addition, NOAA has predicted higher temperatures throughout much the West⁵. Another concern is the approximately 8.6 million acres of standing trees killed by beetle infestations in the West, which provides an enormous amount of fuel for any future fires. The confluence of all of these factors this summer, along with June trends, suggest that the summer 2012 fire season will be well above average.

Beyond the heavy toll of fires on communities, wildfires have a large price tag for the American taxpayer. For example, the federal cost of fighting fires (i.e. fire suppression) in the United States has averaged in excess of \$1.4 billion annually over the past four years. The 2008 fire season cost taxpayers close to \$2 billion.⁶ However, Federal funding has decreased by \$100,000 for the past two years, with this year's budget at \$1.8 billion.⁷ Given the potential of this fire season being particularly active, U.S. fire suppression resources could be underfunded.

In addition, future wildfire activity is predicted to increase in the future with climate change.⁸ Large, uncontrolled wildfires have increased worldwide and especially in the western United States during the past forty years.⁹ In the next 100 years, climate change is projected to lead to

² <http://www.nifc.gov/nicc/sitreprt.pdf>

³ http://topics.nytimes.com/top/news/science/topics/forest_and_brush_fires/index.html

⁴ <http://www.wrcc.dri.edu/snotelanom/basinswe.html>

⁵ <http://www.ncdc.noaa.gov/sotc/>

⁶ <http://www.nifc.gov>

⁷ Personal communication Joseph Reddan, Legislative Affairs, USDA Forest Service

⁸ Moritz et al. (2012). Climate change and disruptions to global fire activity. *Ecospheres*. Volume 3(49).

⁹ Pechony and Shindell (2010). Driving forces of global wildfires over the past millennium and the forthcoming century. *PNAS*.

even more large wildfires, though different regions of the United States will be affected more than others. As recognition of the potential damage future fires pose and our capacity to fight them, President Barack Obama recently signed legislation that will speed up the purchasing of seven new air tankers that will be used to fight wildfires across the country.¹⁰ Although these tankers will be unable to assist with these years' fire suppression, it is also an acknowledgement that wildfires will pose an ever-increasing threat to the safety and security of U.S. citizens.

The framework proposed in H.R. 5960 builds upon the 2003 Healthy Forest Restoration Act (HFRA) that allows for expedited consideration of projects that reduce the risk of wildfire. H.R. 5960 would encourage the Secretary of Agriculture to work with Governors to identify areas of concern in at least one national forest in each state. Projects in these areas would be evaluated under the accelerated HFRA process.

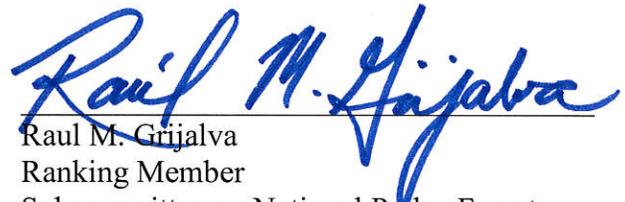
Additionally, the DRISC Act provides additional tools for forest managers by authorizing stewardship contracting and good neighbor authority. Both of these programs have been successful in accelerating thinning and restoration work in Colorado and Utah. Finally, the bill makes a minor amendment to the Emergency Watershed Protection Act to provide for priority consideration of grants to communities impacted by wildfire.

This issue is critical to the West and our Committee should act in a swift, bipartisan manner to consider this legislation.

Sincerely,



Edward J. Markey
Ranking Member
Committee on Natural Resources



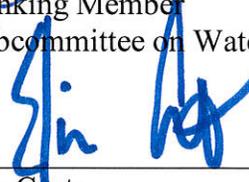
Raul M. Grijalva
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Ben Ray Lujan
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Subcommittee on Indian and Alaska Native
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Grace F. Napolitano
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Subcommittee on Water and Power



Jim Costa
Member of Congress
Committee on Natural Resources

¹⁰ <http://kdvr.com/2012/06/13/obama-orders-speed-up-of-tankers-to-fight-fires/>