

Today, the committee is having a hearing to review the "Healthy Forests Restoration Act of 2003," H.R. 1904, which has been passed by the other body.

There are nearly 747 million acres of forest land in the United States. In 1996, the value of forest production was \$22.5 billion.

In my state of Mississippi, forestry is one of the state's leading industries, employing more than 60,000 people and contributing over \$11 billion dollars a year to the state's economy. Sixty-nine percent of Mississippi's 18.6 million acres of timberland is owned by 310,000 private, nonindustrial landowners. Throughout the United States, forest lands face serious damage from a host of forest pests, including sudden oak death syndrome on the west coast, southern pine beetle in the southeast, and gypsy moth in the northeast and elsewhere, among others.

About 190 million acres of federal forest land are in declining health due to overgrowth, disease, insect infestation, and weather-related damage. As a result, forests and rangelands face a high risk of catastrophic wildfires. Very large fires are now burning in Arizona and New Mexico. More than 8 million acres of forests burned in 2000.

Last year's fire season was among the worst in the past four decades. Major blazes burned in 15 states, scorching over 7 million acres. Hundreds of homes were destroyed, 23 firefighters lost their lives, and rural economies were seriously impacted.

The Administration has worked to increase the resources available for fire fighting and fire preventive fuels treatment work. Last year, the federal government spent \$1.6 billion for fire suppression.

Recognizing the urgent need to protect our forests, President Bush proposed a Healthy Forests Initiative in August 2002 to improve wildfire protection and to provide real solutions to some of the problems facing our forests and the communities surrounding them. Since then, the Administration has implemented major reforms in the wildfire program. In September 2002, the Administration sent a legislative proposal to Congress that would implement key elements of the President's Healthy Forests Initiative. The legislation provides new management tools to help overcome the crisis we face.

The House-passed bill empowers federal land managers to implement scientifically supported management practices on federal forests, while establishing new conservation programs focused on improving water quality and regenerating private forest lands.

In addition, the bill recognizes that forest health does not end with fire prevention. The nation's forests, both public and private, face serious problems from fire, pest, and disease that are degrading thousands of acres every year. The House bill provides incentives for clean water, habitat for fish and wildlife, as well as support for small communities dependent on local forests for recreation and tourism.

In the Senate, we should act expeditiously to help restore the forests of our nation to good health.

We appreciate the attendance and assistance of the witnesses who are here today. I have asked the distinguished Senator from Idaho, Mike Crapo, who is Chairman of the Forestry Subcommittee, to chair this hearing.